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SPUD & CHARLI

Samantha Wheeler



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian
in context with the Australian curriculum
(English)

ISBN: 978 0 7022 5018 7 / AUS \$14.95

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SYNOPSIS

Charli loves horses and, after much anticipation, is attending her very first horse-riding camp. Eager to learn and compete in the gymkhana, she soon realises that there is much more to taking care of horses than she first thought. And when her imagination gets the better of her, she discovers important lessons about friendship and trust.

Spud & Charli is an action-packed adventure about horses, bats and getting carried away by your imagination.

THEMES

Friendship:

- Charli finds that not everyone wants to be friends at the camp; however that doesn't stop her from doing things her way.
- The girls at the camp become disappointed with Charli after she jeopardises the gymkhana. She makes up for this and, in doing so, learns much about herself and friendship.

Horses:

- A special bond forms between Spud and Charli.
- The joy of working with horses features in the text.

Bats and Hendra Virus:

- Charli is worried that disease-carrying bats will spread the Hendra virus throughout the camp.
- Mr Shearer teaches Charli that bats are not as much a threat as the community thinks.
- Hendra virus killed Mr Shearer's daughter; however, he does not blame the bats.
- Bats do more good than harm to our environment and are an essential part of our ecosystem.

Courage:

- It takes courage for Charli to admit her mistakes and accept the consequences of her actions.

Responsibility:

- Charli learns that working with horses comes with much responsibility. She handles the challenge beautifully.

WRITING STYLE

Spud & Charli is written in first person, past tense. The narrative voice is genuine and endearing. Younger readers will easily identify with Charli and her plight to save Spud from harm. They will also identify with the issues of friendship and the nature of competition.

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SAMANTHA WHEELER'S WRITING PROCESS

I began writing *Spud & Charli* before I wrote my first published book, *Smooch & Rose*. Several horses had died of Hendra virus around that time, and unfortunately, so had a local vet. I attended several meetings discussing the spread and prevention of Hendra, and found that people were pretty fired up about it. There was lots of misinformation and scare tactics being used. People were shouting and demanding that the bats be removed, and I decided I wanted to write a story about it. In order to develop the plot, I talked to my local vets and found they were very calm about the bats. Wildlife carers and rangers were also championing bats, and explaining the rarity of their diseases. This was in contrast to hot-headed protest meetings I'd been to.

Spud & Charli was always going to be an adventure story. I wanted it to be exciting, not a grim and scary story just about Hendra virus. I gained the inspiration for my main characters from the people around me. Charli is a mixture of me and my daughter (both of us have overactive imaginations) and Mr Shearer is based around my real neighbour, who died of emphysema. Despite looking scary as his disease progressed, he was a wonderful, intelligent man. Spud was based on a huge ex-racehorse I once owned, who, despite looking and smelling bad, was mostly well behaved. Looks can be deceiving.

STUDY NOTES

- After reading Chapter 1, discuss the way in which the author has immediately drawn the reader into the narrative. How has she achieved this? What do you already know about the protagonist, Charli?
- Speculate on the relationships that may form in *Spud & Charli*, for example between Charli and Mikaela, and Charli and the other girls.
- Charli talks about the various parts of horses. Draw and label a diagram of a horse using Charli's information as a guide. Try using a book such as *I Can Draw Animals* that teaches step-by-step how to draw horses. Add information to your labelled drawing by reading further about horses.
- It is not long into the text that Hendra virus is mentioned. Discuss this virus and why it features in *Spud & Charli*.
- Charli is immediately drawn to the beautiful palomino, Razz. Instead though, she gets stuck riding the massive retired racehorse, Spud. Discuss the adage 'you can't judge a book by its cover' in relation to Spud and the relationship Charli develops with him.
- How are Spud and Charli similar to one another?
- Why do sportsmanship and teamwork earn points for the gymkhana? What message is the author conveying through this?
- Discuss Samantha Wheeler's use of figurative language throughout *Spud & Charli*. How does it contribute to the text? Some examples include:

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- Long blonde hair hung like silk down her back (p4) ...
- ... her thick eyelashes made little verandas over her frowning blue eyes (p4).
- His wide back was so big you could practically land a helicopter on it (p12).
- His face was a giant square lump (p12).
- His feet were like saucers attached to long, knobbly legs (p12) ...
- My feet turned into blocks of cement (p13).
- My stomach sloshed like a washing machine (p15).
- He just sort of plodded along beside me, like a tall, gangly giraffe (p16).
- Spud was a Himalayan mountain (p26).
- ... the dipping sun turned the clouds coral pink (p29).
- ... clutching her torch like a laser sword (p37).
- He wheezed in and out, like a puffing steam train (p41).
- My stomach swished like a bucket of seawater (p82).
- A road ... snaked through the trees (p83).
- Bats! Hanging like cocoons wrapped in black rubbery wings (p85).
- Discuss Mikaela's character. What things do you find off-putting about her? Why? What role have her parents played in shaping some of Mikaela's attitudes?
- Discuss Mrs Bacton's comment that 'riding camp isn't about being the best. It's about looking after each other and having fun' (p58). How can this concept be related to everyday life?
- The girls watch the classic movie *Flicka* while at the camp. As a class, watch this movie, comparing it with the themes and plot of *Spud & Charli*.
- The girls learn some basic first aid, including how to treat snakebites and concussion. They also have a session, 'understanding bats'. Complete similar activities with your class.
- Charli makes some impulsive decisions that lead to adverse consequences. Discuss some of Charli's decisions, such as taking Spud from the farm. What were your thoughts when she made this decision? What would you have done?
- Charli gets to a point where she starts ignoring some of Mikaela's snide comments: for example, when Mikaela calls Spud an aardvark. Discuss the importance of ignoring such deliberately antagonising comments. Once Charli decides to ignore Mikaela, they start to get along better. Why do you think this is the case?
- Charli lets her imagination run away with her. How does this become problematic? Have you ever let your imagination run a little wild? Write a reflection that shares one such time.
- On p103, Charli lists all of the reasons why Mrs Bacton should be cross with her. The fact that Charli is aware of her mistakes tells us a lot about

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her true nature. Discuss Charli's attributes and why she makes such an endearing protagonist.

- What does Charli mean when she says silence is 'the worst kind of trouble' (p108)? Share examples of times you have been greeted with silence when you were in trouble.
- When thinking about her conversation with about bats Mr Shearer, Charli thinks 'it was easy to be afraid of what you didn't know' (p129). What does Charli mean by this? What examples can you think of that supports this idea?
- Why isn't Mr Shearer against bats even after his own daughter died from Hendra virus?
- What attributes of Alice's helped her to win the gymkhana? Why couldn't Mikaela have won?
- Create a brochure about Hendra virus, using the information and websites provided at the end of *Spud & Charli* as a guide.
- Research the life cycle, habitat, behaviours and diet of bats. Present your information in a report format of your choice.
- Read the author's notes at the end of the text that provide wonderful information and websites about the following topics:
 - Hendra virus
 - Bats in our backyards
 - Sick or injured horses and bats
 - Interesting bat facts
- Create a book trailer to promote *Spud & Charli*. Examples of book trailers can be found on the internet.
- Visit Samantha Wheeler's website www.samanthawheeler.com.au

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Samantha Wheeler felt inspired to write *Spud & Charli* as a result of the misunderstandings surrounding the transfer of the Hendra virus between bats, horses and humans. These misunderstandings have led to many horse owners, like Samantha herself, questioning the safety of their horses and themselves. 'We have three horses on our place, and a vet from the practice we use unfortunately died from the virus, sparking much speculation and fear. I wanted to capture this fear and show how misinformed rumours can cause more harm than good,' she says.

The more recent controversy surrounding bat colonies in the suburbs also planted a seed for her novel. 'Bats are largely misunderstood and, as a result, are often unfairly persecuted. No-one wants smelly, disease-ridden animals in their neighbourhood, but actually, bats are essential for the health of our environment. They do more good than harm, since they pollinate our rainforests, and very few of them carry disease. I wanted to write a story that

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would show we can live with bats, rather than being scared of them,' she comments.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Samantha Wheeler lives in Brisbane with her family and many animals. Her first story took shape during a writing course at the Queensland Writers Centre in 2009 and was accepted into the inaugural Allen and Unwin Children's Manuscript Development Program in 2010. She went on to have a short story published in the *One Book Many Brisbanes* anthology and to write *Smooch & Rose*, her first children's novel, inspired by a local strawberry farm and her concern for Queensland's koalas, followed closely by *Spud & Charli*, a story imagined while riding her horse Oscar in the bush.