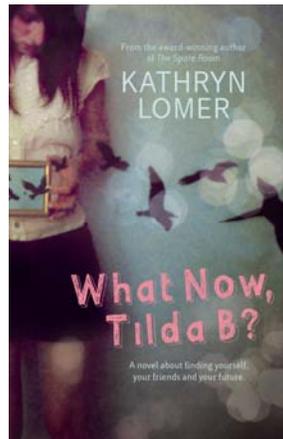


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WHAT NOW, TILDA B?

Kathryn Lomer



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising secondary teacher-librarian

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SYNOPSIS

Tilda Braint is almost sixteen and about to finish Year 10, the highest level of schooling she can complete in the small coastal town where she lives. Careers and schooling options seem limited, and because of this, Tilda is feeling confused about what her future direction should be.

When a misplaced elephant seal comes to the beach near Tilda's house to give birth to her pup, Tilda's life begins to take on a new focus; slowly, her uncertain future becomes clearer.

This is a story about growing up and facing change; the importance of family, friends, and of following your dreams; and feeling confident in the decisions you make. It is also a story about accepting help from those close to you.

THEMES**Relationships**

- In the past year, Tilda's parents trialled being separated. Everything seems to have changed.
- Tilda now lives with her grandparents. She has a very positive relationship with them.
- Tilda has a close relationship with Luke, her eleven year old brother.
- Tilda also has a very close bond with her best friend Shell, who is considered around town to be very 'easy'.
- Tilda forms a friendship with Bella, a new girl in town.
- When the elephant seal comes to give birth, wildlife ranger Meg becomes a confidant and mentor for Tilda.
- Tilda's boyfriend Jamie is ready to have a sexual relationship but Tilda is not sure.

Growing Up

- At a crossroad in her life, Tilda struggles with the decisions she has to make regarding her future.
- Tilda's mother arranges for Tilda to go on the pill, even though Tilda is unsure whether she's ready for this part of her life to begin.
- Tilda is trying to adjust to her newly-split family. She is also trying to come to terms with the fact that her mother left the family for a number of months.

Identity

- Tilda seems torn between a small town mentality and having higher aspirations.
- She tries to hide her obvious intelligence until Meg tells her to be proud that she's bright.
- Tilda can't decide if she is ready to have a sexual relationship with Jamie; she doesn't want him to think she is a tease, but she also doesn't want to be considered 'easy'.

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Environmental issues

- The elephant seals are not welcomed guests with all the locals, particularly the fishing industry.
- The forestry industry features in the text.
- Those in the town with environmental views are labelled as 'greenies'.

Contraception/teenage sex

- Her new friend Bella is a teenage mother and her best friend Shell falls pregnant at sixteen.
- Tilda is considering going on the pill as she may be close to starting a sexual relationship with her boyfriend Jamie.
- Contraception and abortion are both addressed.

WRITING STYLE

What Now, Tilda B is written in the first person. The story is told in a mixture of present and past tense. The dialogue does not use conventional punctuation marks, making for a contemporary and realistic telling of the story. The characters are well described and genuine. The narration is raw and honest.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION – WRITTEN BY KATHRYN LOMER

There were a number of motivating factors behind the writing of this book:

- The rare birth of an elephant seal on a Dover beach created a storm of media and scientific interest. That event captured my imagination. For one thing, it was extraordinary to see so much care being taken of the seals, when a century ago they'd been hunted mercilessly. For another, it was the story of a mother and her baby. That mother was torn between her own instinct for survival and her concern to give her offspring the best possible start in life. Powerful stuff!
- I imagined how such an event might affect one young person in the town. Tilda became that one young person.
- I grew up on a farm near a small country town. I am interested in the divisions and tensions in such a town (eg. old families/newcomers, conservative/alternative attitudes) and how they might be overcome, even temporarily.
- I have remained interested in how young people from rural communities fare in the world.
- It seems to me there are unlimited opportunities at that time, around Year 10, to achieve good things or to go right off the rails. It's a tough time. It helps to have friends. Mostly. Good friends help you to be the best you can be. Once I realised this book was largely about friendship I felt the story clicked in somehow and would be completed no matter how long it took. It took quite a lot of time – years – but by then I was really fond of Tilda, felt for her, and I really wanted her to have a life.
- Having left school at fifteen to start work in a bank, I sometimes allow myself to wonder how things might have been different. On the other hand, the world of work suited me in many ways, and I didn't regret leaving behind the social cliques and pressures of high school. I did eventually make it to university as a mature-age

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student. Pity we don't have that crystal ball to know how it will all work out! This story gave me an oblique opportunity to explore some of that territory.

- There is an awful lot going on by the time you reach Year 10. How do young people meet all the challenges they face? I enjoyed looking for opportunities to talk with young people I know in order to find out.
- That threshold between adolescence and the adult world is exciting but scary. It's easy to feel stuck and uncertain. It won't be the last time in life! The book was a chance to explore that feeling through storytelling.
- I remember the tension between wanting to feel independent but needing advice. Unfortunately advice is not always forthcoming from those you expect to give it. How do you learn who to listen to? How do you work out what you really want?
- The buzz around the Year 10 formal is phenomenal here. I've always thought there is a need for more ritual in our lives; perhaps that's what the formal is all about. Of course, it's also fun!
- The environmental issues in the story grew of their own accord since they are inherent in the fabric of life in this part of Tasmania.
- It was serendipitous that the real seals' stay in Dover coincided neatly with the final weeks of the Year 10 year. This gave me the structure for the book.

STUDY NOTES

- After reading the first couple of pages, describe your first impressions of Tilda. How does your opinion of Tilda change during the course of the book? Can you relate to any of her feelings of uncertainty? How does the author develop Tilda's character?
- A very clear and concise picture of Dover is painted throughout the novel. How might your life be different if you lived somewhere similar to Dover? How might decisions about your future be influenced by living in a small town?
- Towards the end of the novel, Tilda wonders, 'how can you make a decision about where you want to go from here, if you haven't truly recognised what *here* is?' (p185). What does she mean by this? Use examples from the novel to support your response.
- Compare the advantages and disadvantages of living in a city as opposed to a small township.
- Tilda seems to wish someone could tell her what to do with her life. Instead, key characters such as Nan, Meg and Mr Hensley give her advice of a more philosophical nature. Why do they give her this type of guidance? How does this ultimately help her to decide on her future?
- Why do you think that Tilda's parents play a relatively small role in her decision making process?

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- How do you make important decisions? Discuss as a class the different ways in which teenagers make their choices. What role do family, friends, peers and mentors play in such decisions? Are some decisions made on impulse, or as a reaction against someone or something?
 - This discussion topic could be used as an important pastoral care lesson. School counsellors could be asked to speak with students about decision making strategies and tools, especially when decisions have to be made 'on the spot'.
 - A mentor program could be introduced with senior students mentoring younger students.
- Currently, strong emphasis is placed on the virtues of completing secondary education and gaining high academic results, yet many successful adults did not achieve well at school. A lot of pressure can be felt by teenage students about their job prospects.
 - Investigate the options that exist for students in terms of tertiary, vocational and work placement options.
 - Interview some members of the school community. What were their experiences? Did any complete school or university as mature age students?
 - Career guidance – have a careers counsellor speak with students about their options and interest areas.
 - Complete a survey that analyses students' interests, strengths and vocational aptitudes.
 - Coordinate the reading of this novel with work experience placements or visits to university open days.
 - For those students with part-time jobs, discuss whether their job affects their decisions about their working/studying future?
- Discuss the importance of Meg's character. What role does she play in Tilda's life?
- Tilda has to juggle her part-time job with her study, spending time with her family and friends, and volunteering with the seals. Time management is an important skill for everyone to learn. It does not always come naturally and sometimes people feel guilty that some aspects of their life are suffering. Discuss and implement some effective time management strategies. For example:
 - Using a timetable to factor in study, sport, work, etc.
 - Prioritising
 - Work first, play second vs play first, work second (depends on personality type)
 - Setting manageable goals
 - Breaking larger tasks into smaller chunks
 - Working backwards from a deadline.
- How important is it that Meg and Mr Hensley seem to be setting higher goals and expectations for Tilda than she is for herself? Why have they done this? In relation to setting goals, discuss the following issues:

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- What are your goals?
 - Are they realistic? Too low? Too high?
 - How important are these goals to your future?
 - Can/should goals change?
 - Should others be able to have goals for you? Why?
- Since her parents' trial separation, Tilda has sensed that something has been missing from her life. How has the arrival of the elephant seals changed that feeling?
 - There are a lot of parallels drawn between the story of the mother seal and her pup and the relationships between the people in the text. Explore these parallels:
 - The mother seal is drained of her energy and strength as she allows the seal pup to feed and grow. In what way is Tilda's mother like the mother seal? Has this similarity contributed to her need to find herself by studying and learning new skills? Discuss.
 - Tilda seems distressed that the mother seal will abandon her pup. Compare this with Tilda's own experience with her mother.
 - The bully, Eddie, lost his own mother as a young child. He eventually goes to visit the pup after Tilda sends the fishing boat to rescue him. Why was he so against the pup? Why now does he want to see it?
 - Tilda sees a young toddler with his father on the beach. She yearns for their tenderness, feeling that her own relationship with her father has changed forever. How does the child/parent relationship change throughout one's life? How does it stay the same? Use examples from the novel to help explain your answer.
 - What does Nan mean when she says, 'you need to be a team' (p166)?
 - While Tilda's nuclear family structure has changed, she still has a strong network of extended family and friends. How have these other relationships helped her? Discuss what defines a nuclear family and if this is changing from traditional notions of family.
 - Tilda is faced with the pressure of making choices about her sexual activity. Discuss the pressures that she is faced with from:
 - Jamie
 - Shell
 - Herself
 - Bella, Shell and Tilda are all faced with difficult decisions as a result of teenage sex. The issues range from contraception to abortion to teenage pregnancy. Responsibility of males is also an important issue.
 - Organise a series of family planning sessions about these topics.
 - Discuss/debate the moral and ethical questions surrounding these issues.
 - Discuss the emotional, social and physical consequences of choices about sex.

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- Tilda and Shell visit a cemetery with Toby and Linc. After this visit Tilda realises how good it feels to be alive. Arrange a visit to your local cemetery. What stories are there? How does it make you feel?
- Choose one of the following quotes from the novel to discuss:
 - 'Every major move is a leap in the dark.' (p88)
 - 'What other people think is their business.' (p94)
 - 'Wherever you go, there you are.' (p99)
 - 'It's not so much about needing to *get* a life. You need to *make* a life.' (p99)
 - 'Just *be*.' (p131)
 - 'People see attractiveness differently.' (p166)
 - 'You don't have to hide your light under a bushel...be proud you're smart.' (p167)
 - 'Change is *difficult*.' (p207)
- In *What Now, Tilda B?* the circle of life is clearly evident. Discuss how various events and characters illustrate the circular nature of life.
- Rituals are an important component of all societies and cultures. In Australia for instance, a rite of passage is often recognised with a special occasion such as a school formal, a graduation ceremony or a celebration such as Schoolies' Week. Different milestones are recognised in different ways.
 - What factors may influence such differences?
 - What role do rituals play in our lives?
 - To what extent might these rituals become blurred by preconceptions of such celebrations?
 - Beyond high school, what 'coming of age' rituals are you anticipating? What do you think these celebrations will entail?
 - Discuss some rituals you have been a part of, either as a bystander or as the main focus.
 - In *What Now, Tilda B?* explain the role the Year 10 formal plays in the narrative.

RESEARCH TASK

Tilda chooses to research the elephant seal, an animal that has played a major role in her journey, as part of her end of year project. This project includes a Powerpoint presentation.

In small groups, choose an environmental or social issue that is important and of interest to you. Some possible ideas for research topics include:

- an endangered species – plant or animal – that is of local significance
- the life of a 'wildlife warrior' such as Dianne Fossey or Steve Irwin. What obstacles have they faced? How were these overcome? What contribution has this person made to the protection or preservation of their cause?
- A global environmental issue – eg. The Copenhagen Climate Change Summit

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- The Federal Government's decision to stop the damming of the Mary River in Queensland (or similar instances of local importance)
 - Contraception and the associated responsibilities of both males and females involved in sexual relationships
 - Abortion laws in Australia – only 2 states currently allow abortions legally
1. Your group will need to research all aspects of the topic, whether positive or negative. You may wish to use De Bono's 6 Thinking Hats to help investigate the issue from all perspectives. Present your notes, with references to a variety of sources. Use journal articles and databases to help find the most current and relevant information on the topic.
 2. Once your research has been completed, create a Powerpoint presentation that outlines the issue and the various viewpoints and facts that you discovered during your research process.
 3. Create a campaign communicating your perspective on the topic, involving a selection of some of the following text types:
 - A print advertisement
 - A television commercial
 - A newspaper interview with an expert in the field
 - A protest song
 - A blog
 - A website
 - A piece of artwork
 - A letter to the editor

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kathryn Lomer grew up on a farm in northwest Tasmania. She left school at fifteen and began the first of many and varied jobs in Tasmania and then overseas. She eventually went to university as a mature-age student, but never did do Grades 11 and 12. She became a teacher of English as a Second Language and taught for many years in Australia and Japan. Kathryn has published two collections of poetry: the second, *Two Kinds of Silence*, won the 2008 NSW Premier's Kenneth Slessor Prize. Her collection of short fiction, *Camera Obscura*, was shortlisted in the 2008 Queensland Premier's Steele Rudd Award. Her young adult novel, *The Spare Room*, was a 2004 CBCA Notable book.