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THE SKY SO HEAVY

Claire Zorn



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising Teacher Librarian in context with
the Australian Curriculum (English)

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SYNOPSIS

Fin has no idea that his world is about to change as he tries to win Lucy's affection and complete Year 12 at the same time. But a nuclear disaster on the other side of the world changes everything and a dust cloud swallows up the sky, bringing with it a nuclear winter.

With his parents missing and food supplies running low, Fin is left to care for his younger brother, Max. Together, they must confront the unimaginable hardships of a world facing crisis and chaos.

The Sky So Heavy is a starkly sobering story that exposes the horrors of nuclear warfare and the enduring power of love, family and friendship.

THEMES

Family and Friendship:

- Fin will go to any lengths to protect his brother Max.
- Friendships, old and new, are put to the test under the most trying of circumstances.
- Fin and Max are on a quest to be reunited with their mother; this reunion does not go according to plan.
- Sacrifices are made to ensure the survival of others.

Nuclear Winter and Warfare:

- The world is suffering the catastrophic after-effects of a nuclear test gone wrong.
- A nuclear winter imposes itself on Australia, bringing with it utter destruction and despair.

Courage and perseverance:

- Under extreme hardship, Fin and his friends show enormous courage and perseverance.

Belonging:

- Arnold feels he belongs for the first time.

Death and Grief:

- Fin, Max, Lucy and Arnold, along with the rest of the world, face the prospect of the death and that of loved ones and possibly themselves. They grieve for a world gone wrong.

Survival:

- Fin uses his resourcefulness and strength of character to help survive.

Ethics:

- What is acceptable and what is not when the world has lost all sense of law and order?

Spirituality:

- The question of faith and spirituality features in the text.

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WRITING STYLE

The Sky So Heavy is written in first person, using a combination of present and past tense as the story drifts between Fin's current situation and a recount of his life. The narrative style is perfectly nuanced with the circumstances in which Fin finds himself. It is at times gentle yet raw, confronting while tender.

STUDY NOTES

- The opening page of *The Sky So Heavy* is very direct. It takes the reader straight to the heart of the narrative before recounting how the narrator came to be in this situation. Discuss this structural style and the way in which readers are immediately drawn into the text.
- Fin's 'voice' is felt from the very first page. Discuss how the author has given him such a vivid and three-dimensional persona. What techniques has she used? Why is it important that readers care about the protagonist? How has the author ensured this?
- Read up until the phrase, 'three months ago...' on page 2. Write your own narrative that follows on from this point. What do you think has caused such a scenario? How might you be feeling as the protagonist? What issues might you be about to encounter?
- Why does Fin describe his father's relationship with Kara as being, 'like a feel-goodcereal commercial'? (p2) What does this comment tell the reader about Fin's true feelings about his dad's new partner?
- Re-read the description of the family dynamics in Fin's household on page 2. Analyse the descriptive techniques used to help set this scene. Write your own scene that describes the dynamics in your family.
- How does the author describe Fin's township in the Blue Mountains? (p3) How does mentioning things such as McDonald's and kangaroo key rings appeal to a young adult audience?
- Early in the novel, readers meet Arnold Wong. Keep a journal of your reactions to Arnold's character as you read *The Sky So Heavy*. Reflect on his circumstances, his emotions and principles. Discuss Arnold's character in small groups as you learn more about him.
- Why does Fin say that it was dangerous not to pelt spitballs at Arnold? (p8) What does this reveal about Fin's character? What does it reveal about the nature of schools and bullying in general?
- Lucy speaks about apathy on page 11. What is apathy and why does she make such a comment to Fin?
- Fin draws many of the scenes and characters in *The Sky So Heavy*. He often chooses to draw large objects that represent the people in the drawing. Choose a character from the novel on which to base a drawing of your own. What object best represents this character? Alternatively, create a table that shows which characters would be represented by which objects. Discuss the use of creative arts to process emotions.

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- On page 27, the thick orange dust is described as ‘beautiful – and wrong’. Why has the author chosen to describe the dust in this way?
- Why is the government keeping information from the general public? Discuss whether or not you think the Australian Government would withhold information in such a situation. You may wish to examine the way in which the bombing of Darwin during World War II was censored.
- The pace of the narrative slows down as the endless wait for information, power and food drops sets in. It then quickens dramatically from Chapter 7 onwards. How has this change of pace been achieved? What can you learn from Claire Zorn’s techniques for your own writing?
- Discuss Claire Zorn’s use of figurative language throughout *The Sky So Heavy*. Some examples include:
 - ‘The cold hit my cheeks with a wet slap.’ (p38)
 - ‘He had a trail of dried snot over his cheeks like a slug had wandered over his face.’ (p39)
 - ‘The sky was like a shadow.’ (p48)
 - ‘The knock at the door startled us, like a teacher shouting from the front of the classroom.’ (p55)
 - ‘I didn’t expect to feel the claustrophobia of a world faded to grey.’ (p60)
 - ‘The sound of the engine rumbled down the street like the low groan of a tired animal.’ (p75)
 - ‘Thick stubble ... swallowed up half his face.’ (p77)
 - ‘He was slighter, somehow smaller, like a building with its foundations sinking into the ground.’ (p106)
 - ‘His tears came in a silent stream.’ (p108)
 - ‘Silence found a new space in our house.’ (p109)
 - ‘Orange, like rust, smudged on the ice.’ (p117)
 - ‘I could feel the xylophone bumps of his rib cage.’ (p118)
- Re-read and discuss the way in which Claire Zorn describes the slow passing of time in the early days of the disaster on page 49.
- Keep a journal of the increasing difficulties that this society is facing, such as increasing prices, food scarcity, violence etc.
- Max and Fin find their values compromised by the nuclear winter. Write a reflection about the position they find themselves in. Is it ok for them to steal? Support your opinions with sound reasoning.
- Fin finds a letter written by his mother to his father. We never find out why she left. Speculate on the contents of that letter. What clues are we given about the breakdown of this relationship?
- What relationship do Fin and Max share with each of their parents? How do we know this? In your response, make explicit what is implicit in the text.

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- How and why does Fin's relationship with Max deepen as the narrative progresses? Give examples from the text to support your response.
- What does Fin mean when he says, 'my anger formed a nice protective cushion'? (p76)
- Compare the difference between Fin and Max in terms of their willingness to share resources with others in their community. Why does Max get angry when Fin gives Mick some rice? Why does Fin give away some of their precious food? What would you have done in Fin's situation?
- What clues do we get that the 'CSI' police officer is crooked?
- Keep a record of how minor characters such as Mr White and Mr Starvos change as a result of the disaster.
- Why is Arnold so willing to help Fin? Does this surprise you? As you get to know Arnold better, can you see his motivation any more clearly?
- What does Fin mean when he says, 'I saw death come and sit in the room with us'? (p124)
- How does Arnold asking Max to call him Noll change the direction of the narrative? How does Fin feel about this?
- After stealing from Mr Starvos, Fin ponders whether he is any different from the 'CSI' cop trying to steal food from them. Discuss Fin's dilemma.
- Why does Lucy's mother want her to leave with Fin? Discuss how difficult this decision must have been for both Lucy and her family.
- When Max cries on page 170, Fin tells him that he'll 'hold the ball'. What does Fin mean? Discuss this tender moment of *The Sky So Heavy*. How do such moments help anchor the text?
- Claire Zorn uses the flashback technique very effectively. Try using this technique in a piece of your own writing.
- What regrets does Fin have now that his family and life have been destroyed? If something like this happened to you, what regrets would you have? How does a novel such as *The Sky So Heavy* affect you personally as a reader? Does it prompt you to make some changes to your current approach to life? Discuss.
- What qualities does Fin have as a character? What are his strengths and weaknesses? Give examples from the text to support your ideas.
- The topic of spirituality and religion is raised in *The Sky So Heavy*. How has this issue been raised through the lens of Arnold's Christianity and Lucy's and Fin's uncertainties? How does Arnold's Christianity help him to cope in such a situation as this?
- Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is mentioned in the novel, both as a text Fin is reading for English and again when Fin meets Alan. Consider comparing *The Sky So Heavy* with *Heart of Darkness*.
- How does *The Sky So Heavy* reflect the theme from *Heart of Darkness* mentioned by Alan – what we are when nobody's watching? (p218)

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- Discuss Noll's comment that, 'we are all flawed'. (pp224-225) How is this explored in the text? How is this reflected in your own life?
- Alan tells Fin that Noll, 'makes you see yourself a little clearer'. (p232) Explain what Alan means and how this is the case.
- Why do many of Fin's drawings include water?
- When Fin is finally reunited with his mother, he is very disappointed in her. Why?
- Explain how the final sentence of *The Sky So Heavy* leaves the reader with a sense of hope. Why is this so important?
- Write an epilogue for *The Sky So Heavy*.
- Compare *The Sky So Heavy* with picture books such as John Marsden's *Home and Away* and Colin Thompson's *Dust*. How have the authors addressed similar themes in different ways?
- Research the effects of a nuclear disaster. Consult records of previous accidents or disasters. Present your findings in a multi-modal presentation.
- Create a soundtrack for a movie version of *The Sky So Heavy*, giving brief annotations to explain the choice of each song.
- Debate whether nuclear power stations should be permitted in Australia. Explore all sides of this topic. Can accidents at nuclear power plants contribute to a nuclear winter?
- What is a nuclear winter? Create a Photostory combining images and information about nuclear winters.
- Create a Fakebook page for one of the characters in *The Sky So Heavy*, being sure to show your full understanding of that character and the posts their friends would make on their wall.
<http://www.classtools.net/fb/home/page>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Claire Zorn lives on the south coast of New South Wales with her husband and two small children. She has a Bachelor of Fine Arts and a post graduate diploma in writing. She is a music lover, retro furniture collector and amateur swim-club enthusiast.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

I was first introduced to the concept of a nuclear winter by another novel, *Children of the Dust* by Louise Lawrence. I must have been thirteen at the time; it was a set text for my English class and it terrified me. I think I have carried the possibility of something like that happening in the back of my mind ever since.

The initial idea for *The Sky So Heavy* came to me gradually. It started with a scene: a teenager, somewhere dark, trying to protect a group of people and feeling way out of his depth. I also got the first line of the story in my head very

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early on. At the same time, the asylum-seeker debate flared up in Australia and I was struck by the concept that an individual's safety and quality of life are decided, to a degree, by a line on a map – be born on one side and you might have food, shelter, healthcare and an education, be born on the other and you may have nothing.

When it came to creating the setting for the story, the biggest help was an article from *Scientific American*. It detailed some data modelling done by a group of scientists who investigated what sort of dust clouds could be expected from the detonation of nuclear weapons, including how these clouds would behave in the atmosphere, what sort of temperature drop could be expected and the percentage of sunlight that would be blocked. They also looked at how this scenario would affect long term crop growth and food production.

That information was the seed. I pretty much let my imagination run wild from there. I also took the small-scale effects of things like the 2010/11 Queensland floods and made them large-scale, and looked at things like what happens to food supply and infrastructure when roads become unusable. It was my dad who told me that the carbon released by nuclear weapons could cripple power stations, so I also took that seed and let it grow. Without electricity, our society would essentially fail as we rely so heavily on it, and the story developed from there.