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GHOST BIRD

Lisa Fuller



Teachers' Notes

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

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Synopsis	2
Themes	2
Writing Style	2
Study Notes	3
Author Motivation	7
About the Author	7

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SYNOPSIS

When her twin disappears, Stacey Thomson is haunted by dark dreams of Laney's whereabouts. Is her mirror-image sister still alive? And for how long? Conflicted by her mother's strict rules, her mob's laws and customs, and an ongoing feud between the Thomson and Miller families, Stacey is forced to deceive those she loves in order to rescue Laney.

Set in a small-minded Queensland town, Stacey relies on her own bravery and the wisdom of her elders, past and present, to lead her to Laney.

THEMES

- Aboriginal Customs and Beliefs:
 - Respect
 - Elders
 - Spirituality
 - Stories
 - Law
 - Kinship
 - Community
- Sisters, Twins
- Relationships
- Courage
- Racism

WRITING STYLE

Ghost Bird is told through the first person, present tense perspective of Stacey, a Year 12 student from the small Queensland town of Eidsvold. Intent on escaping the town as soon as she graduates, Stacey applies herself to her studies, Science in particular. When supernatural events challenge her logical and rational nature, Stacey is forced to accept the wisdom and ways of her mob, in particular her late Nan. *Ghost Bird* is a gritty and intense story, sharing very openly the strong connections that Aboriginal people have with their kin, country and culture. Lisa Fuller's use of voice and characterisation creates a genuine sense of connection and urgency. Due to some explicit language used, it is better suited to older readers.

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STUDY NOTES

- The opening pages of *Ghost Bird* introduce readers to many important pillars of the narrative. After reading pages 1–5, discuss the characters and facets of Aboriginal culture introduced. How does this opening evoke an instant sense of context and connection with readers?
- Why does Stacey say that Nan’s smell of soap, tobacco and powder ‘smells like home’ (p. 2)? Why is this so comforting to her? How would you describe the scent of your grandmother?
- Discuss the repetitious and rhythmic use of ‘Drag. Puff.’ on page 4. Why has the author chosen to use this technique?
- After reading the description of Stacey’s house and yard on pages 7–8, sketch this scene. How important is descriptive language in helping readers to visualise in order to better connect with stories?
- What role does Mad May Miller play in *Ghost Bird*? How does the inclusion of May, along with the ongoing feud between the Thomsons and Millers, help create tension?
- Discuss the author’s use of figurative language and the contribution it makes to the text. Examples include:
 - ‘Rolling out of bed is like getting a present, the morning chill a gift this time of year.’ p. 7
 - ‘Trees flow over the hills on all sides of our town, holding the sun back as long as they can.’ pp. 7–8
 - ‘Two days’ worth of no sleep is hanging from her eyes’ p. 78
 - ‘The dirt road ends at the big cement tank squatting on its own raised platform. Like an ugly king on his private little hill.’ p. 89
 - ‘only the whisper of the odd truck comes through.’ p. 89
 - ‘I sit with my back to the giant pimple of a reservoir that marring the beauty of this place’ p. 89
 - ‘I feel like I’ve been stung by a hornet’ p. 92
 - ‘Having the oven on in 40 degree heat makes the house feel like a suffocating, wet blanket you can’t shrug off.’ pp. 97–8
 - ‘all those emotions I’ve been bottling up swirl in my chest like a tornado forming.’ p. 102
 - ‘It’s so painful in here it’s like the air holds daggers that prick and stab depending on how fast you move.’ p. 111
 - ‘The air is so heavy I can drink it.’ p. 117
 - ‘she’s staring at me like I’m some stray dog that’s tumbled in through an open door.’ p. 127
 - ‘Her paper-thin skin feels like dry leaves.’ p. 135
 - ‘the trees ... rising up around us like sentries.’ p. 167

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- 'They look like hunting dogs facing prey that has suddenly turned and attacked.' p. 175
 - 'Her pain and betrayal reach across the table and suffocate me.' p. 196
 - 'My anger flies away like burnt paper' p. 206
 - 'the stinking hot day is held back by the arms of the gums.' p. 211
 - 'I feel like I'm a mouse tempting fate by gnawing at a bit of cheese that may or not be attached to something that will swing down and crush me.' p. 224
- How does Lisa Fuller use the notion of the twins being 'two sides of the mirror' (p. 12) to drive the narrative?
 - How do the girls' attitudes towards school differ? How do we know this? What is the difference between the 'white man's education' (p. 15) and that learnt through culture and tradition?
 - Create a character profile of Sam. Why does the author use him as a conduit between the Thomsons and Millers?
 - As you read *Ghost Bird*, keep a journal of the aspects of Aboriginal culture that the author shares.
 - Why did the girls' parents name the twins after themselves? Who do Stacey and Laney take after?
 - How important is the death of the twins' father to the story? How does this influence Alana's decision-making processes? Discuss.
 - How does Lisa Fuller address the theme of racism in *Ghost Bird*?
 - Use 'Hot Seat' to unpack characters such as Pop, May and Nan. How do these elders help shape their community?
 - Throughout *Ghost Bird*, Stacey is reminded that her people don't cry: 'Pop and all the oldies hate tears or any show of sadness' (p. 56). Why is this the case?
 - Lisa Fuller has used language features to create strong characterisation of women such as Nan, May and Alana. Choose one of these characters on whom to base a monologue to perform to your class.
 - How is the setting of *Ghost Bird* a crucial element of the novel?
 - The characters in *Ghost Bird* have very distinct 'voices'. Discuss the importance of 'voice' in narratives. How has the author achieved this through her language choices?
 - Reread the passage on pages 58–9 in which Pop talks to Stacey about Nan and comforts her about Laney. Discuss the characterisation of Pop and the tenderness shared in this scene.
 - What does Stacey mean when she says of Uncle Joe: 'I see pain there, when normally there's nothing but strength. All of our black men have to be a certain way too' (pp. 61–2)?

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- Why does Stacey liken her mother to a volcano (p. 65)?
- Compare the dream sequences with the rest of the narrative. How does the storytelling differ? How do these different writing styles contribute to the successful telling of this story?
- Discuss Stacey's feeling that 'the panic from the dream creeps back in, leaking from the ceiling and dripping down the walls.' (p. 75)
- Using the passages on pages 76–7, write a reflection sharing your understanding of the unique bond that twins share. How is this similar to or different from the bond you share with your sibling/s?
- How do Nan's words help Stacey to navigate her way through life?
- On page 81, Stacey says: 'In my family we do the silent treatment like an Olympic sport.' How does your family handle stress or disagreements between various members? How does Lisa Fuller's writing help capture family behaviours?
- How is the unbreakable bond of family illustrated in *Ghost Bird*?
- Discuss how the author uses pace and plot developments to create a sense of urgency throughout *Ghost Bird*.
- Stacey uses the reservoir as her thinking spot and the river as her peaceful spot. Where do you go when you need space or peace? Share with a friend.
- When Stacey walks to the reservoir, it takes her a matter of minutes. Why does it take an hour when she is with her mother?
- After reading Stacey's description of the reservoir on pages 89–90, sketch this scene.
- Stacey listens to different music to reflect her mood – Tupac when angry, Britney Spears when she needs to feel calmer. What music do you listen to at different times? Create a soundtrack to reflect your different moods.
- Why does May want to see Stacey? Why is she so insistent? Why is Sam prepared to defy his family in order to fulfil May's wishes?
- Why does Stacey call May Aunty? How does this help their relationship to develop?
- Discuss Stacey's comment that 'I'm doing as culture dictates – respecting my elders and following their advice.' (p. 99)
- Why does the thought of visiting the Eidsvold Historical Society make Stacey squirm?
- Discuss the newspaper clipping at the Historical Society claiming that Oscar Miller was a serial killer. Discuss Stacey's comment that 'If killing black people actually counted as murder, there'd be a lot more serial killers than that, stretching back 200 years.' (p. 132)
- Discuss the analogy that Stacey uses of her mother being like a king brown snake (p. 139).

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- Why, although they're broken, do the Thomsons 'keep right on moving' (p. 143)? How does your family react during times of crisis?
- Why does Stacey keep referring to shards of glass inside her gut (e.g. pages 140 and 159)?
- Discuss Sam's courage in continuing to help May and Stacey despite the way his father treats him.
- Why does Stacey feel hurt each time she sees native trees being burnt off by white farmers? What comment is the author making about the importance of the environment?
- When confronted by Eric, Dan and Mick, why does Stacey 'hear the smile' (p. 173) before she sees it?
- How does *Ghost Bird* show that warring families like the Millers and Thomsons can put 'Community politics and infighting aside' (p. 178) to back each other? How does this reflect the themes of the text?
- Discuss Stacey's comment that when she and Pop sit 'quietly ... It isn't just habit, it's communication.' (p. 202)
- How does Pop give Stacey comfort? How is their relationship unique?
- Describe the relationship between Stacey and her mother. How does this relationship grow and change throughout the course of the novel?
- Discuss the role played by Rhi in *Ghost Bird*. Why are characters like this needed?
- How does Lisa Fuller use *Ghost Bird* to explore the themes of identity, courage and culture?
- Write a chapter of *Ghost Bird* from Rhi's or Sam's perspective.
- After completing *Ghost Bird*, reread the opening paragraph. Discuss the effectiveness of the circular narrative structure used. What role does fire play not only in *Ghost Bird*, but in Aboriginal culture?
- Create a graphic organiser that shows the different relationships that Stacey shares with her mother and grandmother. Give examples from the text to help support your ideas.
- Map the main plot points of *Ghost Bird* on a story graph, showing how the author creates tension throughout the text.

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AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Ghost Bird is a young adult book that came out of my Master's. I had spent six weeks sitting down with some aunties, going over the history of our community. My promise to them was that the work would be our community, our culture, our spiritual beliefs, but no real people or historical events. I stuck to this agreement except for one character – having lost my grandfather while writing this, I chose to write him into the story as the grandfather of the main character. I have asked for, and received, permission to do this.

While writing *Ghost Bird* I thought a lot about my own time growing up in Eidsvold, and the lack of any books, TV shows or movies that I could relate to in a personal or cultural way. I wanted to write something that the all kids back home, especially my nieces and nephews, could relate to and feel pride in. I hope I've done them all proud.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Fuller is a Wuilli Wuilli woman from Eidsvold, Queensland, and is also descended from Gooreng Gooreng and Wakka Wakka peoples. She won a 2019 black&write! Writing Fellowship, the 2017 David Unaipon Award for an Unpublished Indigenous Writer, the 2018 Varuna Eleanor Dark Flagship Fellowship, and was a joint winner of the 2018 Copyright Agency Fellowships for First Nations Writers. She has previously published poetry, blogs and short fiction. Lisa is an editor and publishing consultant, and is passionate about culturally appropriate writing and publishing.

Lisa is a member of Us Mob Writing, the Canberra Speculative Fiction Guild, the First Nations Australia Writers Network, and the Canberra Society of Editors.