



Celapene Press

In the Dark

by

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Teachers' Notes

by

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Recommended for ages 12+

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INTRODUCTION

One ill-begotten moment of disobedience and a foray into an old cellar leads 13-year-old Ish to unearth a startling discovery. When he opens a letter from his late Grandpa to Mum, Ish is sucked into a vortex of secrets and lies – and one unexpected truth: Ish’s father is Lenny, Dad’s brother. And Ish has never heard of him. Feeling dispossessed, confused and angry, Ish determines to rediscover who he is – and to find Lenny.

All this happens just before Ish is to go to Sydney with his sister, Molly, to spend time with Dad who has promised to take them on the Harbour Bridge Climb. But with help from Anana, the girl next door who worms her way into Ish’s life, and the elements conspiring to lead Ish to Lenny, things start looking up – before they spiral out of control. Lenny tricks Ish into helping with a burglary to fund his gambling addiction and when the two of them encounter a brush with death it brings the family to crisis point.

A story about a boy who writes poetry to make sense of his world – and learns that in the face of loss, treachery and deceit, love is what matters.

Whether this novel is studied as a class text, as part of a literature circle or independently by students, *In the Dark* provides a rich resource of true-to-life characters who deal with the adventures and challenges of everyday life in a way readers are positioned to engage with and relate to through an alluring story arc. A wealth of opportunity presents for discussion, reflection and engagement.

In the Dark explores themes such as identity, loss, truth/deceit, consequences, family and friendship. It brushes up against gambling, adoption and bullying.

AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM FOCUS

‘The English curriculum is built around the three interrelated strands of language, literature and literacy. Teaching and learning programs should balance and integrate all three strands. Together, the strands focus on developing students’ knowledge, understanding and skills in listening, reading, viewing, speaking, writing and creating.’ (Australian Curriculum)

All questions, discussion points and activities for *In the Dark* have been referenced to The Australian Curriculum v8.2: English Years 7 and 8. (<http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/>)

Activities and questions in these notes incorporating the three strands – language, literature and literacy – have been organised conveniently into two sections: Reading Focus and Writing Focus.

READING FOCUS

See Australian Curriculum v8.2 English: (ACELA 1529), (ACELA 1541), (ACELA 1542), (ACELT 1620), (ACELT 1621), (ACELT 1803), (ACELT 1622), (ACELT 1623), (ACELT 1629), (ACELY 1722), (ACELY 1733), (ACELY 1723), (ACELY 1734).

Reading Prompts

Use the following question prompts to construct meaning from the text

Chapter 1

- 'I'd just wrecked all my holidays plans in one stupid move.' Describe the events that led to Mum's grounding of Ish and Molly.
- Ish wanted to take photos of *the fire hydrant incident*. What do you think of this idea?

Chapter 2

- What emotion does Molly display? How does the author show this?
- 'What I miss about Grandpa' is Ish's first poem. What do you learn about Ish's relationship with Grandpa from this poem?
- The author finishes this chapter with a question. Did that writing device make you want to keep reading? What ideas did you have starting to form?

Chapter 3

- Many graves have an epitaph. Can you recall the one on Grandpa's? Write it down for future reference.
- How does the epitaph influences Ish's decision about going to Sydney?
- What is Ish's secret cellar mission?
- Speculate about the significance of the Mongolian Death Worm book to the plot.

Chapter 4

- Lucky has an important role in this chapter. What does he do that forces Ish's hand? Speculate how the story would develop if Lucky had not gone down into the cellar?
- Use the information given in this chapter to do a quick sketch of the cellar.
- What do you think of Mum's obsession with Mongolia? Do you think the Mongolian Death Worm has been made up by the author? Google it and find out.

Chapter 5

- How does Lucky direct Ish's actions in this chapter?
- Brody and Ish have some history together. Not all positive. What do you make of this character?

Chapter 6

- 'Lucky gave my arm a reassuring lick.' Do you think Lucky knew about the letter?
- Ish should have given the never posted letter to Mum. It had her name on it. It was hers. Why didn't he?
- Can you describe a situation where you have faced a dilemma like Ish?

Chapter 7

- Describe Molly's emotional outburst after going to counselling. Is it appropriate? How does it impact on the emotional atmosphere of the home?

Chapter 8

- Why did Ish think he couldn't be adopted?
- What do think of Grandpa's ideas about poems?
- How did Ish get this name given his real name is Michael?

Chapter 9

- Explain the importance of Lucky chasing the ball and upsetting Mum's handbag to the plot of the story.

Chapter 10

- What do you understand about the term *Parselmouth*? What is the name of the well-known text in which it is mentioned? (Here is a Youtube link to give you a clue: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9SflqPzVak>). When one text makes reference to another one, this is referred to as *intertextuality*. Does the context of the story help with your understanding of the *Parselmouth* intertextual reference?
- What do you think of Anana's full name? Why do you think her name is important to the story? Do you recollect her nickname?

Chapter 11

- In this chapter the characters experience some strong emotions. What are they?
- At the end of the chapter Ish asks, 'Who was I anymore? And who was my real mother?' Can you relate to the idea that Ish feels his whole world has turned upside down? Have you ever felt like this?
- What evidence is there that Molly is benefiting from going to counselling?

Chapter 12

- Can you speculate why Ish's mum and dad didn't tell him he was adopted?
- Would you describe Anana as a good organiser? Give evidence from the text.
- Can you recall Anana's two commands when the trio were confronted by the fierce German shepherd?

Chapter 13

- Based on photographic evidence Ish concludes that Lenny is his father and must have been sixteen when Ish was born. Do you agree with his conclusion?

Chapter 14

- There are three unanswered questions in this chapter. Make a note of them and check if they are answered as the story unfolds.

Chapter 15

- Can you find a mention of the title in this chapter? Who uses the expression? Make a list of other ways this is a fitting title for the book.
- What do we learn about Brody's dad?

Chapter 16

- Ish makes a life changing decision. What is it? What would you have done in his situation?
- Do you have a feeling for who would have taken the letter?

Chapter 17

- How do Molly's actions at Central Station give an insight into her character?
- What are your first impressions of Dad?
- Who was to blame for Ish being hit by a taxi?

Chapter 18

- How did Dad find out Ish knew about Lenny?
- Read the last paragraph out loud portraying emotions you think Ish would have displayed.

Chapter 19

- The author is dealing out small pieces of information about Lenny. What have you learnt so far?
- Molly can either go to Luna Park with Ish or to the zoo by herself. She has two choices. How does Ish influence her decision? What would you have done?

Chapter 20

- Reread the last sentence in this chapter: 'Until I glanced over to the man at the controls.'
- Why do you think the author set a page break here?

Chapter 21

- More information is revealed about Lenny. Add this to your list of character traits.

Chapter 22

- 'I knew I shouldn't go. But how could I not?' Expand these two sentences into a paragraph explaining Ish's dilemma.

Chapter 23

- List three dishonest things Ish has done on this day.
- Ish is introduced as Lenny's 'Facebook friend'. If this was you how would you feel about this introduction?

Chapter 24

- Reread this chapter and trace the build-up of the bad feelings Ish is experiencing.
- Ish's body gives him early warning signs that Lenny might be up to no good. Did you notice them? List them.

Chapter 25

- Events that occur in this chapter prove to be a turning point for Ish. What truths does he discover about his biological father? How do you think this makes him feel? How might you feel in similar circumstances?
- Ish tries to stand up to Lenny and Budgie. Find a line of dialogue that shows this.
- Who holds the power in this series of scenes? How do they achieve it? Have you ever felt disadvantaged by someone holding power over you?

Chapter 26

- Think of an inventive adjective to describe Scarecrow's driving.
- Why can't Ish go to the police and tell them Lenny tricked him into helping in a burglary?

Chapter 27

- Ish has a glimpse of what life would have been like to live with Lenny if Mum and Dad had not adopted him. Write a small descriptive paragraph outlining your idea of Ish's life if he had grown up with Lenny and Alice.
- 'One lie had multiplied exponentially.' What do you understand by this expression?

Chapter 28

- Ish is an active problem solver. How does he prepare for his visit to Lenny?
- Ish must go with Lenny in the boat if he has any chance to get the caddy back. What would you have done in this situation?

Chapter 29

- The tea caddy has got Ish into trouble again. In what way/s is it so valuable? Google ten-sided tea caddies.
- What can you say about the importance of plotting in a novel in relation to Ish sending the cryptic message to Molly?
- How did you feel about Ish setting off to investigate when he'd heard a gunshot?

Chapter 30

- There is a fair bit of 'bad' language used by Lenny and Scarecrow in this chapter. How does their reported speech work to make them into believable characters? How do you think these characters' backgrounds have affected the way they speak?
- Can you recall the advice Anana had given Ish about German Shepherds?

Chapter 31

- What was the main thing Lenny had given Ish?
- What would you have done to stop the blood flow from Lenny's wound?
- Why can't Lenny go to hospital?
- Do you think Ish could, as Lenny says, 'end up in a slammer for kids?' Do you think Lenny has spent time in one? Justify your answer by referring to the text.

Chapter 32

- In Ish's poem he says he's starting to like the taste of pineapple. What do you think that really means?
- Why did Dad go to Sydney? What do we find out about Dad's character from this information?
- Lenny seems to soften in this chapter. Why is that?

Chapter 33

- Outline all the factors that led to Ish being able to hot wire the ute?
- How did Ish effectively save Lenny's life?
- Add to your list of Lenny's character traits.

Chapter 34

- Dad had been fixing the machine needed for Lenny's emergency surgery. What do you think of that coincidence?
- Lenny seems a more likeable character after nearly losing his life. Why do you think this is? Do you think it will be a permanent change?

Chapter 35

- Can you guess what the perfect end to Ish's Sydney holiday will be?

- Why did Ish liken Grandpa to ‘a static line?’

Chapter 36

- What is the significance of the ten-sided caddy containing the gold medals to the story?
- How do you think Brody really feels about himself? Do you think his bullying of Ish has anything to do with how he sees himself? What does Brody try to achieve by bullying?
- Can you identify with the statement, ‘We are all champions in our own lives?’

Discussion Questions

1. How did ‘The fire Hydrant Incident’ set Ish up for rescuing Lenny?
2. What does it mean to be ‘in the dark’?
3. Is it ever desirable or okay to lie? Can you give an example to prove your point?
4. How does this book add to our knowledge of how families operate?
5. How do you think Mum and Lenny will get on when Lenny comes to live in Victoria?
6. Do you understand the factors that were at work to prevent Mum and Dad from telling Ish about Lenny?
7. Should people keep secrets?
8. Can you make a list of the ethical dilemmas presented in this book? How do the characters deal with them?
9. How does coincidence have a role in this story?
10. What do you think Ish feels about the consequences of his action?

WRITING FOCUS

See Australian Curriculum v8.2: (ACELA 1532), (ACLEA 1544), (ACELA 1529), (ACELA 1534), (ACELA 1545,) (ACELA 1539).

Writing Prompts

Use the following prompts to gain insights into some of the writing devices used by the author and apply them to your own writing.

Chapter 1

- Who is the narrator in this story? From whose viewpoint is it written?
- It is often said that the first chapter sells a book. Did the author hook you with the story opening? How?
- How does the author's use of hyperbole (exaggeration) in the opening paragraph help to build Ish's characterisation?

Chapter 2

- 'What I miss about you, Grandpa' is Ish's first poem. What do we learn about Ish's relationship with Grandpa from this poem?
- The author uses a metaphor and two similes in the poem. Can you find them? Write a sentence about a member of your family using a metaphor or simile.

Chapter 3

- Ish writes a performance poem. He usually writes in free form but this one was an experiment. Examine his rhyming combinations and his use of words to reflect his emotions.
- Present Ish's performance poem or one that you have sourced yourself. Perhaps you could write one.

Chapter 4

- Review Ish's limerick. He 'just couldn't get the last line right.' Are you able to help him here? Have a go at writing one of your own.
- This chapter ends with two very short sentences. Great. Sprung. Why do you think the author used this device to bring this chapter to an end?

Chapter 7

- In the poem, *Well Timed*, Ish writes: 'The evening was as silent/as a midnight library'. Think of three other ways to describe a silent library.
- Can you invent three descriptive sentences where the final part reads, 'then we laughed our eyebrows off?'

- Comment on Grandpa’s thinking about poems. (‘Poems are for going back to. They’re magical; they speak to you in a secret language that lights you up inside.’)
- Notice Ish’s use of the semi colon and review your understanding of this punctuation. Are you confident about correct usage? If not, look up a good explanation. Then use one every day for the next week.

Chapter 8

- Anana introduces the nonet as a poetry form. What is your understanding of a nonet?
- This is Anana’s definition: ‘A nonet has nine lines and the first line starts with nine syllables. Each line drops off one syllable until you end up with only one syllable for the last line.’ Try writing one.
- Note the simile in ‘the peppercorn tree looked like a charcoal drawing.’ This is one of several similes the author will use in this book. Perhaps you could make a list of them.

Chapter 13

- Poems come quickly and easily to Ish. Putting ideas into written form seems to help him clarify his feelings. Can you identify with this way of thinking?
- What does the poem ‘Adrift’ tell you about Ish’s feelings?
- Why do you think ‘Remembering’ is a poignant poem given Ish’s discovery?

Chapter 14

- Notice Ish’s use of the semi colon in the last stanza of the poem ‘Unseeing’. Why has the author used it?

Chapter 16

- ‘Hot wind slices through the gum trees –’ What do you think of Ish’s use of the verb ‘sliced’ to describe the movement of the wind? Can you come up with other verbs to describe the motion of the wind?

Chapter 18

- Reread Anana’s text message to Ish. How do you think she would write words such as terrible or impossible?
- Check Dictionary.com for today’s Word of the Day.
- Note the author’s use of metaphor in ‘Suddenly I was a boiling kettle.’
- Read the last paragraph in this chapter out loud portraying the emotions you think Ish would have displayed.

Chapter 19

- Why does the author spell out the word, S-H-I-T using capital letters? Does it tell you something about Molly’s character?

- Are there any other techniques authors use to make a swear-word presentable in written text? Hint: check newspaper articles that quote risky dialogue.

Chapter 20

- Reread the last chapter in this paragraph. Why do you think the author set a paragraph break here?

Chapter 21

- 'I ran.' is a simple sentence consisting only of a subject and a verb. Contrast this sentence with one from the first chapter: 'I have to say this benefit significantly outweighed the substantial pain of co-existing in such close proximity to my sister for a whole week.' Investigate complex sentences and the use of clauses in a sentence, recognising that subordinate clauses embedded within noun groups/phrases are a common feature of written sentence structures and increase the density of information.
- Find some examples of complex sentences from within the text.

Chapter 22

- Examine Ish's nonet and check if it follows the 9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1 form. Review your nonet and double-check the syllable count.

Chapter 23

- 'Lenny made quote signs for *hang out*.' Notice the author's use of italics.

Chapter 24

- The author has used a compact dialogue sentence to give us a succinct picture of Lenny's character. Can you locate it? 'Shut your trap and do as I tell you.'

Chapter 26

- Think of three good adjectives to describe Scarecrow's driving.
- The author has used different character 'voices' to develop the characters of Dad and Lenny. Choose three different dialogue pieces to illustrate this device.

Chapter 30

- 'A window smashed. One shot. Another shot. No more barking.' Comment on the author's sparse description of the death of the dogs.

Chapter 32

- What do you think of the description, 'and ran like a chook on steroids?' to describe Ish's mad dash. Hint: mad dash is a cliché.

Chapter 35

- Check out the word play used by Dad and Ish.

Chapter 36

- In this closing chapter, Anana says to Gran, 'Thanks for all the chats we had when I missed Mum and Dad.' What does this tell you about Gran's character?
- What role do you think Gran plays in the book?
- Write a scene describing what happens when Lenny and Molly meet for the first time.

Writing activities

Scan through the following word list. Identify any words new to you. Look them up. Now write a quick definition of each word and get a partner to check you can spell them.

- Tenuous
- Eureka
- Tsunami
- Parselmouth
- Mesmerising
- Exponentially
- Adjudicator
- Axolotl
- Manoeuvre
- Quay
- Epitaph
- Gullible
- Extraordinaire
- Kayak

In literary circles, *In the Dark* could be classified as a *Bildungsroman* – a 'coming-of-age' story. In other words, the story shows the psychological and moral growth of the main protagonist (the main character) throughout the book.

- In what ways do you think Ish changed throughout the course of the novel?
- What do you think he learned?
- In a good book, for a character to have room to grow, they need to start off with at least one *character flaw*. What do you think Ish's main character flaw is?
- Write character profiles for three of the other characters in *In the Dark*. Do they have flaws? Quirks? (For instance Mum's obsession with Mongolia) What, in the text, sets them apart from the other characters? (Think: voice [not only the sound of their voice, but the words they use, how they think, their logic or 'take' on the world, educational standard], background, age, physical description, attitudes ...)

- Create your own protagonist for a book you might write in the future. Produce a comprehensive character profile for them (physical appearance; likes; hates; fears; dreams and plans; relationship with other family members; experiences that shaped them when they were very young; and their CHARACTER FLAW).
- Now introduce your character into one of the scenes in *In the Dark* and include them in a dialogue you invent.

Setting plays an important role in *In the Dark*. The two main settings are Mount Selview – a fictional place on the Murray River – and inner Sydney.

- How does the setting impact the narrative?
- Ish’s favourite place in the whole world is on the log that he and Grandpa used to fish from on the bank of the Murray River. Or anywhere near water. Reread some of the water scenes in this book. Using as much concrete detail as you can, describe a place where you love to spend time. Try to use all your senses: what you can see, hear, smell, taste and feel.

Figurative language is another important aspect of the *In the Dark* text. Figurative language refers to all the elements that come together in a piece of writing (very often in a poem, especially) to make it ‘sing’. That is, the sound of the words as well as the meaning, the imagery (helping us to form images in our minds as readers), and the tone or ‘feel’ of a piece of writing that creates an emotional response in the reader. Reread ‘Well-timed’:

Well-timed

*Once
we sat on the verandah –
you and I, Grandpa –
in the cool moonlight;
the evening was as silent
as a midnight library.
I remember
when a plover called out
from up near the cemetery
we both jumped –
then we laughed
our eyebrows off.*

See if you can locate instances of:

- Assonance
- Consonance

- Metaphor
- Simile
- Inner rhythm
- Specific concrete detail (of character or setting)

Try to incorporate some of these elements into a poem of your own about the favourite place you described earlier.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Carole is a prize-winning poet with work published in literary journals and anthologies. Her first children's novel, *Dog Gone*, was launched at the 2010 Melbourne Writers Festival. She reviews for *Magpies* magazine and is the convener of the spoken word event 'Stopping all Stations'. For most of her career Carole has been a primary school performing arts teacher but she now spends her time teaching adults professional and creative writing.

Carole has performed as a singer/songwriter and when she is not teaching or writing, works part-time in a listening role for the WellSpring Centre.

Carole's formal qualifications include: Master of Arts (Writing and Literature) with specialisations in professional writing and children's literature; Diploma of Professional Writing and Editing; Graduate Diploma in Music Education; Diploma of Teaching (Primary); and Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (TAE40110).

Pat is a retired primary school teacher with a continuing interest in the fostering of students' reading and writing skills and interests. She continues to be an active reader and writer.

Pat's formal qualifications include: Diploma of Teaching (Primary) and Graduate Diploma in Reading Education. She is a trained Reading Recovery Teacher.

LINKS

Carole Poustie's website:

<http://www.carolepoustie.com.au>

***Dog Gone* (Prequel to *In the Dark*):**

<http://www.carolepoustie.com.au>

All about words:

<https://blog.oxforddictionaries.com>

<https://www.vocabulary.com>

<http://www.dictionary.com>

Bullying:

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/bullystoppers/Pages/students.aspx>

<https://bullyingnoway.gov.au/TeachingAboutBullying/WorkingInTheClassroom/Pages/The-curriculum-and-bullying.aspx>