

Dreamcatcher

Jen McVeity

Teacher's Notes

by Nancy Mortimer

This book will engage young secondary students - both boys and girls alike. It deals with many subjects and issues of interest to them and has a moving plot peppered with adventure and action. There are numerous issues to be dealt with in the classroom, using *Dreamcatcher* as a catalyst.

The main character, Tess, has been a successful student and swimmer up until recently. She has lost interest in school and sport. As the story unfolds, the reader is able to ascertain why this has happened. She lives with her step-mother, step-sister and father, and spends weekends with her mother at her house by the beach. She has a good relationship with her step-mother and adores her little sister, but her father, now a successful politician, has little time to be with his family. Many of the problems that the two girls face are to do with this.

*These notes can be photocopied for class use.
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LANGUAGE AND LITERACY.

- **Characters**
 - Write a *biography* of each member of Tess's family. Include what the author reveals about them - their occupation, habits, interests, characteristics, personalities, strengths, weaknesses, fears and anything else you know about them, including their appearance.
 - Who is Gloria? Why didn't the family welcome a visit from her?
- **Protagonist**
 - Write a more detailed pen-picture of Tess, particularly trying to ascertain what she is like as a person. Support your findings with examples from the story.
 - What are some of the difficulties in Tess's life?
 - Make a list of the good things in her life.
 - What are some of Tess's wishes or dreams that come true? Write about your dreams and aspirations.
 - Why does the policewoman say to Tess how lucky she is to have two mothers?
 - Do you think she is lucky? Give reasons for your answer.
 - Are Tess's perceptions always correct? Give reasons to support your answer.
- **Title.**
 - Where does the title of the book come from?
 - Give a description of the dreamcatcher. How important is it? To whom? What purpose does it serve in the story?
- **Themes.**
 - Look at recurring themes such as - *silence, dreams /nightmares, flying, love, breathing* and the impact they have on the reading of the story.
- **Style.**
 - The main character, Tess, tells the story in her own words: that is, the story is a first person narrative. Examine other stories you have read and determine in what *voice* they were written. Try and say why authors choose different ways to write.
 - Write a short piece about something in your life in the first person. What is the effect of writing like this?
 - Look at some of the descriptive passages in the book and the way in which they were written, concentrating on the use of words and images.
 - There are dramatic passages in the story. Find one and read it.

- Write a dramatic piece of your own.
 - There are instances where Tess says things which surprise her. Find examples of two such cases and say what we learned.
 - Look at the effect of using different *type* to convey something - as when Tess is looking back at how things used to be with her father - that is her memories are in italics.
- **Setting**
 - Where is the story set?
 - Why is the beach near Tess's Mothers place called Whale Bay?
- **Plot.**
 - In the story there are several *turning points*. Look to see what you think these were and say how they altered events. For example the incident of the whale stranding is a significant one in the plot. Describe what happens.
 - Look for what you think is another *turning point* and say why these events are important to the story as a whole.
- **Names**
 - Tess tells Laura what her name means. Why does she do this?
 - Try and determine the meaning and origin of your name if you don't already know it.
 - Do you have a nickname? Why do we use nicknames? Look at the way Tess describes some of her compatriots in the *Green Guerillas*

ENVIRONMENT.

- Who were the *Green Guerillas*.
- What did they hope to achieve?
- What were some of their causes?
- How did they go about trying to make people aware of things?
- What mistakes did they make?
- Look at the project which went horribly wrong.
- Describe, in your own words, what happened. What was the outcome of effort?
- How did you feel as you read this segment?

MEDIA STUDIES.

- Examine what Tess knows about publicity and the use of the media and how she uses this knowledge.
- Where did she learn these things?

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Do many characters in this novel grow and develop? Which ones? Choose one of these and look at how this growth comes about. Look for example at the wisdom of Laura and how, in places, Tess describes her stature.

Feelings.

- In several passages in the book, the author describes physical reactions to traumatic situations. Read over some such pieces.
- Describe a traumatic event you have been in - what it was like and how you felt.
- Find instances in *Dreamcatcher* where people's feelings are referred to in the story, for a reason. Look, for example, at page 194 where Tess asks herself 'Would my whole life be like this? Always having to decide trying not to hurt - or be hurt.'
- Look at some of the things that Tess and Laura shared. What are some things that Laura kept to herself? Why do you think she did this?
- Do you share most things with someone?

Relationships.

This story tells us a great deal about relationships and their importance. There is a very close bond between Tess and her little step-sister, Laura; between Tess and her Mother; Tess has a good relationship with her step-mother, Margot.

- What is her relationship with her father?
- What is Laura's relationship with her Dad?
- Write a short passage on one particular relationship as told in the story.

- What are some of the positive attributes of belonging to a group? Look at page 84 when Tess is with her peers, and later when the families work together to save the whale. Laura's sporting group is another instance of support.

Step Families.

- Students can write about their own experiences of step-families or ones they have read about or seen on TV.

Writing

In *Dreamcatcher* we are given glimpses of different worlds -the world of fashion, the world of politics, the world of competitive sport, the world of crusaders.

- Choose one such world and look in more detail at what you learned.
- Write about what you have found out.

- **Change.**

There are several instances where *change* is referred to.

- Look at the importance of these to the story.
- Write about change in your life.

- **Humour**

Look at where this is used in the story.

- What purpose does it serve?
- Write a piece that contains humour of some kind.

- **Ending.**

- Make a comment about the ending of the story.

About the author:

Melbourne-based author Jen McVeity has been a teacher of Mathematics and English and a freelance journalist. Her first Young Adult novel was *The Fifty Dollar Fall*, published in 1991. Since then she has published several educational and trade junior fiction books: *Achoo!*, *Hairy Thoughts*, *Wild Horses* and *The Big Feet Thief* and two further YA novels. *Dreamcatcher* was first published by Orchard Books in the US in 1998 with the title *On Different Shores*.

For more information about the author, go to the author's website:

www.jenmcveity.com