

# A LITTLE SPARK

By Barry Jonsberg

## Cultural Safety

Before you begin, carefully consider the steps you can take to ensure that you are providing a culturally safe and inclusive space for everybody in your classroom and school. This may include undertaking cultural competency training, and reading widely and proactively to self-educate.

**RECOMMENDED FOR:** 10–14 years old, Years 4-7, UPPER PRIMARY to LOWER SECONDARY

**THEMES:** Family, friendship, divorce, love, grief and imagination

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**CURRICULUM LEARNING AREAS:**

- **ENGLISH:** Language, literacy and literature

**NOTES WRITTEN BY:** Anita Jonsberg

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# INTRODUCTION

Barry Jonsberg has written a novel that explores the nature of families, friendships and grief whilst showing that love persists despite the sometimes harsh realities of life.

## STORY SUMMARY

Cate spends her weekends with her father Michael who makes the very most of their time together by inventing imaginative adventures and exploring the limits of fantasy. All is well, until one adventure goes spectacularly wrong and heralds a rift in the family. Cate is forced to choose between the people she loves most, though nothing she imagines turns out as she expects.

## Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR BARRY JONSBURG

### **Did you plan *A Little Spark* or do you fly by the seat of your pants?**

Oh, I'm definitely a 'pantser'. I find that planning a book tends to take options away from the writer. You try to bend the characters to fit in with your pre-conceived ideas of how they should speak, behave and react to what's happening around them. I'm constantly surprised by the way my characters behave – it's almost like they have a life of their own and tell me what to write. Cate Carson was very much like that. She had her own ways of thinking and behaving and I just went along for the ride. It's lovely when that happens because the book becomes something that even I couldn't predict.

### **Did you draw on some of your own experiences?**

Sure. I think there's always a part of the writer's own life in every book written. When my first marriage failed, I had access to my two daughters [who were six and four at the time] every fortnight. I tried to give them the best of my time in the few hours I'd see them, but I'm not sure I did all that I could. I suppose that's partly why Cate's father is the way he is – I would have liked to have been like him, constantly surprising my girls and feeding their imagination so that not one minute of their visits would have been wasted. Mike Carson understands that Cate's childhood will not last and that it's important to cherish the time. There's a quote in the novel from the poem *Fern Hill* by Dylan Thomas, which is very much about childhood and the way time takes everything away. Mike is determined that he and Cate should sing in their chains, while there is still time. His direction of small miracles is an attempt to do just that.

### **What do you admire most about Cate Carson?**

I think it's her resilience that impresses me most. Lots of traumatic things happen to her – dramatic changes in her life that are difficult to navigate. For

much of the time, Cate feels that she isn't in control of those changes and this makes her feel powerless at times. But she is fiercely protective of those she loves and although she understands that not everyone will come out of things unscathed, she tries hard to keep her own independence while supporting those around her. She is strong and she is caring. That's impossible not to admire.

### **There aren't many, if any, villains in the book. Was that a conscious choice?**

Yes. Given that much of the book is about family trauma, it might have been easy to portray some of the characters as driven entirely by self-interest. Cate's stepfather, for instance, could easily have become the 'villain' in the story, breaking up relationships for his own selfish needs. But I didn't want that. I thought it was much more interesting to have characters trying to do their very best by those they love but understanding that pain is sometimes inevitable. There is no one in the book that doesn't try to give love to the best of their ability. And it is love that always survives, even against the odds.

### **What about the ending of the novel? Did you know that was going to happen?**

Not specifically. I'm a 'pantser' remember? But it seemed to me that Mike might have one last 'experience' that he would want to share with his daughter. And I thought that it would be the most dramatic and thrilling yet. I had so much fun writing that part of the book. It had to be funny as well as moving and I wanted it to be something that Mike would direct, almost like a movie. So, I wondered – what could someone organise, from the other side of the world, that would make for the most memorable of birthdays, the best gift that someone like Cate with her imagination could ever receive? I think Mike did well. In fact, by the end of the book, everyone did well. There can be happiness after pain. And love doesn't die.

# CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

## BEFORE READING

Ask students to:

- Consider the title and predict what the story will be about.
- Then look at the cover in detail and consider how the main and subordinate images support or challenge their predictions. Are there any images that seem unusual? What do students think they connote?
- Consider the genre of the book, based only on the information they have so far.

## ENGLISH

**Note:** Check that all resource links are current and suitable for your class before choosing which activities and links to use.

## LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND LITERACY



### Narrative point of view

- Read the initial section (up to Chapter 1) together as a class.

Work with students to explore what Cate means when she says her parents exchange 'neutral words'. Perhaps look at low vs high modality language and active vs passive phrasing and what it can show about relationships.

Refer to this useful resource for more: [Modality words](#)

- Have students think about any roles they have, but may not have chosen.

### Chapters 1–4

Cate is a first-person narrator. Explore how this affects the story overall. Looking at the first chapter:

- Does Cate seem like a reliable narrator? Find at least three quotes that suggest she is trustworthy. Collate these in a Word Cloud using PowerPoint or on the white board.
- On butcher's paper and in small groups draw character outlines of Michael, Cate, Lois, Sam and Elise. Fill with adjectives describing their initial impressions of these characters. Display these for later additions.
- On page 20, Sam, Cate's stepfather, enquires about Cate's weekend with her father. What words does Cate use to avoid the question? Have students think about their own avoidance tactics.
- At the end of Chapter 2, students work in pairs to write a prediction about what they think is going to happen next.
- Read pages 25–26. Have students describe in writing why they think Cate 'felt like crying'.
- Find three quotes that show the magic of the time Cate spends with her father. What special times can you remember?
- At the end of Chapter 3, look up the names that Cate's father refers to. Collate what you find out about each for display.

#### Language for interaction

Understand that social interactions influence the way people engage with ideas and respond to others.

#### Interpreting, Analysing, Evaluating

Use comprehension strategies such as visualising, predicting, connecting, summarising and questioning to understand and discuss texts listened to, viewed or read independently.

#### Interacting and empathising with others

Discuss perspectives related to objects, people, places and events.

**Responding to literature**

Use metalanguage to describe effects of ideas, text structures and language features of literary texts.

Discuss literary experiences with others, sharing responses and expressing a point of view.

**Examining literature**

Discuss how authors and illustrators make stories exciting, moving and absorbing and hold readers' interest by using various techniques.

**Creating literature**

Create literary texts that explore students' own experiences and imagining.

**Interacting and empathising with others**

Consider and develop multiple perspectives.

Empathise with others.

- What does Cate mean when she says her Mum and Sam had 'an agenda in their eyes'? (page 34)
- What does this metaphor mean? How do you know when your parents or guardians have something they want to talk to you about?

**Chapters 5–6**

- Elise often mentions that she hates Cate, but means the opposite. Can you have one without the other? Love and hate are both abstract nouns and form a dichotomy – find out what dichotomies are and write down three more examples.
- Elise is going through her parents' divorce and Cate makes comments that show she has been through the same. Find three quotes that show she understands Elise's feelings.
- On page 47, Cate says she did an oral presentation on the 'Fermi Paradox'. Find out what it is here: [Fermi Paradox](#). Why do you think she chose this topic?
- On page 48, Cate reads an email from the 'Book Pitch Program'. That title is fictional, but Allen & Unwin have a similar program, called the 'Friday Pitch'. You can find out about it here: <https://www.allenandunwin.com/about/submission-guidelines>
- Chapter 6 features an amazing milestone for Cate. Using a Word Cloud, note what emotions she might feel as Miss Huddlestone announces her writing prize to the assembly.

**Chapters 7–10**

- On page 66, Cate's mum tells her to go and tell her father Michael about the possibility of moving to London. Cate says that's 'not fair'. In your own words, write whether you think it is or isn't 'fair' to ask Cate to do it, with reasons for your view.
- On page 71, the reader is briefly decentred by Michael's call to Cate. What does it mean when a reader is 'decentred'? What do we think Cate's father might be doing? Write your ideas down.
- There is a sudden change in tone at the end of Chapter 7. As a class, describe how the tone changes and exactly why. Look at language as well as the events here.
- Chapter 8 details Cate's time in hospital and her mother's anger at Cate's father. Do you empathise with her anger? Why does Sam feel so awkward?
- On page 102, Elise describes how she smashed a vase her mum and dad were arguing over. What is her action a metaphor for? Write a section of dialogue that might have occurred between her parents when she went to her room.
- Read Lois's letter to Michael on pages 112–113. What is it about the words used that make it so sad?
- On page 115, we discover that Elise has harmed herself. Were there any signs that Cate could have noticed? On page 117, we learn that Cate partly blames herself because she thinks she ignored some signs. Read about how to support friends here: [How to ask a friend if they're okay](#).

If this part of the novel makes you feel sad or brings up bad experiences or anxiety, talk to a trusted friend, teacher, counsellor or family member.

## Chapters 11–15

- Why do you think Cate's mother and father are avoiding talking to her about where the court case is up to? In your opinion, is this helpful or not? Explain your point of view.
- When Cate meets Mr Lee, her dad's legal representative, he explains to her what will happen during Court and what her mother's representative will say. Cate realises the very complicated implications of her encouraging her father to fight.

Describe a time when you did something that had serious consequences that you hadn't anticipated. What did it teach you?

- How does Cate try to help Elise in Chapter 12? Does it work – if so, why? Write your answer with evidence from this chapter.
- Research what St Bernard dogs have traditionally been used for. How are the myths different from reality?
- During the court hearing, how does the author show that there is still affection and respect between Cate's mother Lois and her father Michael? Use evidence in your written answer.
- Read pages 160–162. How does Michael's representative Mr Lee, counteract Cate's mother's assertion that Michael has 'immature personality disorder'?
- After reading Cate's speech, divide a page in half. At the top of one section, write 'Michael' and then 'Lois' on the other half. Note all the positive things Cate says about each. How do the sections measure up? How are her parents different in their parenting styles?
- On page 174, Lois's representative asks if we can 'learn imagination'? In your opinion, can we? Discuss in small groups or as a class.
- Why does Cate feel ambushed by her Mum's sudden announcement that she will stay in Australia if Cate can't go to England? Why do you think Lois changed her mind? Write a stream of consciousness that shows Lois's thinking about whether she can leave if Cate stays. What would she be thinking about and what sacrifices does she realise she is prepared to make?

## Chapters 16–20

- After reading page 182, explain why Cate is angry when she realises she can have what she wanted in the first place?
- What reasons do you think Cate's father has for suddenly agreeing that Cate can go to England? Collate ideas on the whiteboard.
- How does Cate try to impress her new schoolfriends at the beginning of Chapter 17? Have you ever exaggerated facts to someone outside of Australia? What kind of things did you exaggerate?
- How does the author help readers hear a particular English accent here? Try saying the dialogue – who can do it best? Learn more here: [Exploring the differences between Standard English and Cockney](#).
- What Australian sayings would an English person struggle to understand?

### Creating texts

Plan, draft and publish imaginative, informative and persuasive texts containing key information and supporting details for a widening range of audiences.

### Literature and context

Identify aspects of literary texts that convey details or information about particular social, cultural and historical contexts.

### Interacting with others

Clarify understanding of content as it unfolds in formal and informal situations, connecting ideas to students own experiences and present and justify a point of view.

- Cate is living in Angel, London. You can see images of it here: [Angel, London](#). Learn more about Angel here: [The ultimate neighbourhood guide to Angel, London](#).
- Cate describes some of the sightseeing she does, going to Paris for example. She mentions the 'Eurostar'; find out what it is and what's different about it.
- Explore the [London Underground](#). In pairs, find Angel and which line it's on – who found it quickest? At which stations would you have to change lines if you wanted to travel from Angel to Oxford Circus? Have students imagine and write about what being on an underground, or 'tube train' would be like. Has anyone in the class been on underground trains? Have them write about when, where and what the experience was like and share with the class.
- After reading page 205, describe how Cate feels about the way she has treated her Dad since the court hearing.
- Cate makes an analogy between snowflakes and people, noting they are all different, each having a molecular pattern that has never existed before and can never come again, though the shapes can be grouped. Find out about snowflakes here: [Guide to Snowflakes](#). Here are some images of [snowflake patterns](#) to copy or trace.
- Suggest reasons why Cate can't get in touch with Elise around 23 December, Cate's birthday. What might Elise be doing? Later, check whose prediction is closest to the truth.
- Describe Cate's feelings when she sees her father on the screen in the limousine – happiness, sadness, excitement or other emotions?
- What do readers think when Cate says the Queen got out of the carriage? Do we believe her?

### Chapters 21 – end

- How does the author make the 'Queen' such a hilarious character? Write down some quotes to support your answer.
- Research members of the Royal Family. What do you already know about them? Who is the 'ginger toerag'?
- In Hyde Park, Cate watches a flash mob performance – have you ever seen one? At what point does Cate realise it's not just the band in the flash mob? You can watch some performances here:
  - [Dubai airport best flash mob](#)
  - [Sabadell orchestral flash mob](#)
  - [Liceo Musicale di Alessandria flash mob](#)
- Michael says the next stop will take Cate 'back in time' to when the light from the star Betelgeuse had begun its travels to Earth.
  - Research the star here: [The Star Betelgeuse](#)
- Her father describes the limousine as a 'time machine'. In what ways is that true?
- When Cate arrives at The Globe Theatre, the various parts of it are explained. Have a look at an image of it here: [Shakespeare's Globe](#)
- How were people segregated into tiers in the original Globe?

- Cate plays Juliet in Act II, scene ii scene from *Romeo and Juliet*. If you haven't seen or studied it, find out about it. Why do you think her father chose this play?
- On a map of London, mark each place Cate stops: the statue of Queen Victoria, Hyde Park (and search an image of the sculpture 'Serenity'), The (new) Globe Theatre and Islington Green, plus other landmarks, like Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament. A zoomable map can be found here: [Maps of London](#)
- Did George Bernard Shaw say it was important to play? Find his exact quote and make a poster of it for the classroom.
- Michael's last 'gift' to Cate is a visit from Elise. After class discussion, and in your own words, describe why this is so wonderful.

#### Y6 Expressing and developing ideas

Investigate how complex sentences can be used in a variety of ways to elaborate, extend and explain ideas.

Investigate how vocabulary choices, including evaluative language can express shades of meaning, feeling and opinion.

## ASSESSMENT

### Creative:

1. Read pages 41-42 and rewrite the restaurant scene from Lois's point of view. This is a chance to really imagine yourself as a character. What is she thinking and feeling? Is there anything physical happening to her?
2. Write a detailed review of the novel for a local or national newspaper or website and add a star rating.
3. Plan a day of surprises for someone close to you, using local experiences and amenities.

### Analytical:

1. In what sense can this novel be considered a *bildungsroman*? Include quotes and examples from the text.
2. In what ways does the author make Cate such a likeable character?

## ABOUT THE WRITER OF THESE NOTES

Anita Jonsberg lives in Darwin with her husband Barry and Blue Heeler Zorro and loves teaching English to Years 10, 11 and 12. She has written teachers' notes for all of her husband's books. She has also written notes for books by Scot Gardner and many titles for Scholastic.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barry Jonsberg has won numerous awards for his books, both nationally and internationally. He has been published in eighteen countries and translated into many languages. His bestselling novel, *My Life As An Alphabet*, was recently made into an award-winning film, *H is For Happiness*, released throughout the world to great critical acclaim. The same production company is now working on television and film adaptations of his last two novels, *A Song Only I Can Hear* and *Catch Me If I Fall*.

Barry lives in Darwin, in the Top End of Australia, with his wife Anita and his crazy dog, Zorro.

## A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

'As a teacher, I witnessed many examples of children going through the process of coming to terms with their parents' break up and the emotional fallout from what is often a traumatic experience. In unfortunately many cases, adults behave badly, sometimes using their children as bargaining chips in an emotional and financial battle. But I didn't want there to be villains in this story – rather two parents who attempt to be civilised and have the best interests of the child at heart. But there is fallout, anyway. What happens when the parent with custody wants to start a new life abroad with a new partner and must get the agreement of the other parent to take her child with her? Does the child, a minor, have much say in what will happen to her? Can she give up one parent to placate the other? Cate is an intelligent and imaginative child who tries desperately to protect her parents in a messy court battle – she wants to have a say in what happens to her, but understands that unhappiness is guaranteed whatever the outcome.

'I wanted to find out what price must be paid when a child loves and needs both parents but is placed in a situation where she is forced to choose.'

– Barry Jonsberg

## NOVELS BY BARRY JONSBURG

### MIDDLE FICTION

*A Little Spark*

*Catch me if I Fall*

*A Song Only I can Hear*

*My Life as an Alphabet* (there is now a film based on this book: *H is for Happiness*)

### YOUNG ADULT

*Game Theory*

*Pandora Jones (BK 1) Admission*

*Pandora Jones (BK 2) Deception*

*Pandora Jones (BK 3 Reckoning)*

*Being Here*

*Cassie*

*Ironbark*

*Dreamrider*

*It's Not All About You, Calma!*

*The Whole Business with Kiffo and the Pitbull*

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

School Library Association of Victoria (SLAV) Book review prompts, writing tips and assessment sample sheets: <https://www.shelftalkers.slav.vic.edu.au/resources/>

More information and resources regarding Barry's books can be found here: [Barry Jonsberg - Allen & Unwin - Australia \(allenandunwin.com\)](http://BarryJonsberg-Allen&Unwin-Australia.allenandunwin.com)