

# **Pan Macmillan Teachers Notes**

## ***Wildlife***

**By Fiona Wood**

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## Introduction

*'The Mt Fairweather experience culminates in the solo hike. Survival, self-reliance and new life skills allow each student to take on this significant individual challenge. The 'solo' is frequently cited as the high point of the term.'* (p 351)

This hugely entertaining novel is about finding one's real and authentic self. It's about friendship, trust, love and betrayal, and about finding out what really matters in life. Life can be like being lost in the wilderness, until you find your true path and a safe way home again to those whom you care about, and most of all to yourself.

Two alternating narratives entwine in this work. The first is of sixteen-year-old Sibylla Quinn who is dreamy, boyfriendless, and never the cool one at school. But things have changed since Sibylla was selected by her godmother Bebe for a huge advertising campaign billboard, and her best friend Holly is determined to make as much social capital as she can from the instant celebrity of her 'bestie'. Holly has a dangerous streak though, and while she is encouraging Sib to take advantage of her new found popularity it becomes clear that Holly is not the best of friends. The most popular boy in the year level, Ben Capaldi, suddenly seems to have eyes only for Sibylla, and while Holly appears to promote – even stage manage – the relationship, her jealousy eventually overtakes all other intentions.

This novel is a companion to Fiona Wood's first novel, *Six Impossible Things*, for the other main protagonist and narrator, Lou, was also a minor character in that book. The event which has occurred in the narrative space between the two books provides the impetus for her story; her much loved boyfriend Fred has died in a cycling accident and she is still recovering months later. Fred's best friend Dan Cereill, his girlfriend Estelle, and friend Janie are on a French exchange, and Lou is to attend a new school, Crowthorne Grammar. To add to her aloneness they are to spend an entire term living in an isolated camp, engaging in bushwalks, solo camping treks, and other extreme forms of activity. She is assigned to Bennett House along with Sibylla, Holly, Pippa, Annie and Eliza. Meanwhile Sib's childhood friend Michael, a deep thinker and sensitive soul has been assigned to Cleveland House with Ben Capaldi, year ten's most popular guy, and Vincent, Hamish and Doug. What sets things buzzing is that just before the camp begins Ben notices Sibylla for the first time - perhaps due to her recent encounter with fame as the face of a new perfume - and kisses her at a party on the eve of their departure to camp. Michael doesn't think Ben is good enough for Sib, mostly because he is secretly in love with her himself; but Holly thinks she should 'go for it'. And so the fun begins...

## Themes

- **Rite of Passage into Adulthood and Individuality**

*'They/we go to an outdoor education campus called Mt Fairweather for a whole term to discover the real meaning of, to experience, independence and leadership.'* (p 29)

*Discussion Point:* Being an authentic person who is true to oneself is a central theme. Mt Fairweather, the school camp in the wilderness, is a perfect metaphor for a rite of passage. Because it is isolated, each student therefore confronts challenges not faced

before and has to solve them in new ways. Sibylla, Lou and Michael have to deal with various challenges (most of them posed by Holly rather than the environment) and they learn to confront their demons and to move forward in their lives in different ways.

*Activity:* ‘Unfortunately, the maps don’t go anywhere useful. Where, for instance, is my map to last year, or a map to some part of my heart, or my head, that doesn’t hurt? Just round and round the mountains.’ (p 83) Discuss this quote in relation to both Holly and Lou and how they change in the course of the novel.

*Activity:* Sibylla plans to ‘pull a sickie’ when she is finally (p 94) rostered to go on a solo hike, but by the end of the novel it is important to her to do the hike and to assert herself as an individual able to survive without the comfort and company of being a ‘pack animal’ (p 94). This is the message found in several classic, rite-of-passage works, and nature often plays a part in that new understanding of oneself. Discuss how nature and isolation can offer us guidance in the way we live our lives. [See also **Setting. 2.**]

- **Survival and Endurance**

‘Didn’t you go to the survival sessions?’ asks Lou.’ (p 85)

*Discussion Point:* The CG students are supposedly being tested by extreme conditions, and asked to endure isolation, regimented food, no social media and other horrors. Is this really an endurance test or are they just unused to living like other people? Each student is put through a gruelling round of treks and tasks and endures shared accommodation, nasty pranks and food which they become heartily tired of. Do they really have anything to complain about?

*Activity:* What does survival mean when none of us can hope to survive forever? Why do we pit ourselves against obstacles when life throws enough curve balls already?

*Discussion Point:* The novel deliberately refers to narratives of endurance and survival such as *Lord of the Flies* (p 217). This is half serious, because of course they are really being well-cared for. What does this novel have in common with other novels about surviving in the wilderness? Choose a favourite and compare the two.

- **Friendship and Peer Group Pressure**

‘It was jealousy/hatred vs admiration/envy, and lucky for me admiration/envy won the day. She’s a good friend, but a mean enemy.’ (p 2)

*Question:* At the heart of the novel lies the question of friendship. It is clear from the outset that although Sibylla is aware of her friend Holly’s capacity for hurt/hate, she has tolerated it since childhood for some reason only long-term friends can explain. When Sib kisses Ben at the party, a text from Holly (p 23) later that night assumes the right to share every detail of Sibylla’s life and because that’s what friends do, Sib

accepts it. When Holly suggests that she might like a visit to babe-land, Sib is doubtful – the notion jars with her feminist ideals, but Holly assures her that she will cope because ‘Your best friend is me.’ (p 33) Sib continues to tolerate Holly’s interference wondering, ‘What would I do without my teenage-behaviour touchstone?’ (p 113). Holly suggests Sibylla acknowledges Ben’s romantic gesture of putting roses on her pillow and suggests that clinkers are his favourite thing, again in a creepy, over-invested way. Holly has also registered the ‘anniversary’ of Sib and Ben’s first kiss (p 137). Sib recalls an incident from childhood (pp 142-3) which reveals the type of friend Holly has been. Holly is also with Ben when he buys condoms, pre-empting (p 276) the later sex between Sibylla and Ben. When does friendship become an exercise in power and how does one control or reject that tendency?

*Discussion Point:* Sibylla has a burst of enlightenment (pp 321-2) and realises who her friends really are. Later she sees Holly kissing Ben and knows: ‘It’s time to stop calling this girl a friend.’ (p 350) How hard is it to end a longstanding friendship like this?

*Activity:* Holly betrays Sibylla all the time but when Sib feels she has betrayed Michael it is far worse: ‘He was afraid I cared so little. I betrayed him. He has run away thinking I don’t care at all. I care very much. How have I managed to treat him so ill?’ (p 316) She has always protected him but when she is distracted by her new romance and image she loses sight of that briefly. How easy it is to be swayed by peers to hurt a friend?

*Discussion Point:* ‘And I don’t like drinking, but I have to pretend to drink, so I at least appear to be ‘fun’, and to be having ‘fun’.’(p 20) Holly forces Sib to go to Beeso’s party at Snow Gum Flat. (p 162-163) She also encourages her relationship with Ben. How much of teenage social behaviour is influenced by what others think is good for us?

- **Grief**

‘We understood perfectly well that each other’s positions sprang from the same place. The place where the floor falls out from under you and nothing can ever be the same.’ (p 29)

*Activity:* Read the following passage which is a meditation on Lou’s grief over Fred’s death and the response made to it by those around her including a psychiatrist named Esther and a counsellor called Merrill. ‘There is so much too much written about grief. Grief counselling is a thriving industry as well as a personal little hell to get through. It is probably immune from global financial vicissitudes. Like the food industry, maybe ... You’d laugh.’ (pp 38-40) Discuss what it reveals about her feelings.

*Activity:* ‘Yes, I am smally interested in spite of myself.’ (p 109) Lou’s personal first step in recovering from grief is becoming interested in those around her again. The second step is opening up to someone she trusts, as she does to Michael (p 156). The third is moving on: ‘Don’t hang out somewhere that isn’t anymore.’ (p 234) The final

stage for Lou is when she hikes with Michael: 'On this day, I will remember, the future woke up.' (p 334). Discuss.

- **Sex and Love**

'My virginity does not feel like some wondrous thing I will one day bestow on a lucky boy; it's more in the realm of something I need to get rid of, like braces, before my real life can begin.' (p 26)

*Activity:* Sibylla's mum is a doctor who runs the Sexually Transmitted Infections Clinic in Fitzroy, and humorous references to the embarrassment this causes her daughter undercut the serious implications of teenage sex and the issue of love. Discuss the use of humour in conveying important points about this theme.

*Discussion Point:* 'If you read the statistics – our house is full of them – heaps of kids have sex super early, like early secondary school, but in my little middle-class world there are plenty of kids, a lot more than half, who haven't done the deed at sixteen or even seventeen.' (p 25) Discuss the implications of this statement.

*Activity:* The class is asked to generate some images about fire in relation to love and passion (pp 125-7). Discuss how the word 'fire' relates to love. Then write a poem using some of the images, or others you can think of.

*Discussion Point:* 'And, in her book, something ideally to be shared with the right person at the right time.' (p 128) How do we know who the right person is at the right time?

*Discussion Point:* Sibylla has sex for the first time during this term. What are some of the factors that go into her deciding to embark on a sexual relationship? Why does she change her mind about what sort of relationship she wants with Ben? What does it signify about sex and friendship?

*Discussion Point:* Paris is the city of love, and the footbridge called the Passerelle des Arts contains hundreds of padlocks placed there by lovers to symbolise their love. Dan puts a lock there for Lou (p 146) and sends her the key. How does such romantic symbolism work in a sex-obsessed world? Do you believe in romantic symbols? How is romance compatible with sex?

*Activity:* Michael suffers unrequited love for Sibylla, his oldest friend. Lou tells Michael (p 166) to write an unsent letter to Sibylla as a private outlet for his feelings. How successful would such a strategy be, do you think?

*Activity:* Write an unsent letter to someone about whom you have feelings that need expressing, but for some reason are best not expressed to the person concerned.

*Activity:* Sib repeats the sex guidance that her mother would give to a class (pp 257-8). You may wish to choose points from this list to discuss with students.

*Activity:* When Sib and Ben finally ‘do it’ (pp 273-4), Sib reveals how uncertain she is about her first time and her ambivalent feelings towards Ben. Compare this to how Lou described her first sex with Fred (pp 9-10).

*Discussion Point:* ‘I feel as though I have leapfrogged into the sexual bit before the boyfriend bit, or even the friend bit, is right. It’s as though the relationship has a limp.’ (p 280) This may be how many teenagers feel about sex. Discuss.

- **Body Image and Fashion**

‘He smiled, said goodbye and left, so it was just me on the screen holding up my goodbye hand and contemplating the most immediate essential fact of life: what to wear.’ (p 19)

*Activity:* To make Bebe’s advertisement, Sibylla’s hair is dyed and she has professional make-up applied, so that she looks like a heightened version of herself. ‘I looked nothing at all like myself. It was me with a work of art stuck right onto my face.’ (p 14) Others are impressed but it makes her feel uncomfortable and ‘not’ herself. It also makes others (like Ben) behave differently towards her. Discuss how make-up and fashion can have a detrimental as well as a beneficial effect on one socially.

*Activity:* ‘Hey, did you hear Falkner House is doing bulimia for fun?’ says Holly.’ (p 91) Discuss the dangerous effects of such dares and how one might challenge peer group pressure to participate in them.

- **Advertising Images & Social Media**

‘Things will change for you now.’ ‘Because of the billboard?’ He nods, worried. ‘The consequences of the billboard.’ (p 60)

*Discussion Point:* Sibylla doesn’t think the campaign will change her but by the end of the novel she realises not only that others have responded in a shallow way, but that she too has been influenced: ‘I used to be that person. But this term I got transplanted into the zone where you just talk to Annie to laugh at her.’ (p 342) Does hanging with the ‘cool’ group mean forsaking your principles? How might a little taste of fame potentially threaten one’s individuality or integrity?

*Activity:* Sib is fed up with the fake pimp/ho’ language being used by the boys at her school (p 151). They mimic American rappers and treat girls dismissively with faux-bravado. Is this something you notice among your peers as well? Does its ubiquity make us less sensitive to/critical of the misogynistic nature of much of this music? Is this dangerous? By ignoring or failing to critique the content/meaning of lyrics do we tacitly ‘accept’ it?

*Activity:* ‘As soon as the billboard went up, it was all over Facebook. Holly was posting it before the paste was dry. In one keystroke I went from being a year ten

‘nobody’ to a year ten ‘unknown quantity’.’ (p 15) How dangerous is social media in terms of spreading rumour and how much does it threaten one’s privacy? How can some of the more destructive uses of social media such as so-called ‘slut’-shaming be countered?

*Activity:* Write a tip sheet for a younger version of yourself on ‘safe use of social media for beginners’.

## Plot & Structure

**1. The novel is structured by weaving together the two alternate narrative voices** of Sibylla, written in **first person, present tense**, and Lou whose point of view is written as first person journal entries in the past tense.

*Activity:* How did you feel the two voices worked together? Who else might have told this story and how might that have changed the action?

**2. Pacing, Tension and Suspense are** integral to a novel’s structure. Each chapter begins with a tempting statement, for example, Ch 1 begins: ‘In the holidays before the dreaded term at my school’s outdoor education campus two things out of the ordinary happened. A picture of me was plastered all over a twenty-metre billboard at St Kilda junction. And I kissed Ben Capaldi.’ (p 1) Many end with cliff hangers, for example, Ch 5: ‘What was I *thinking*? We’re going to be in the wilderness together for nine weeks.’ (p 27)

*Activity:* Consider the ways in which the pacing is determined by these structural exclamation points.

**3. The novel works as a series of narrative arcs, with small climaxes and then a major turning point** with Michael’s run, and the fear that he might endanger himself.

*Activity:* Draw a narrative map or chart showing the key points at which the narrative rises, falls, and then rises again to this major turning point.

**4. The events that comprise the plot** of a novel are designed by the writer to investigate characters and themes.

*Activity:* Which were the key events in terms of the theme of finding oneself in the wilderness? What were the key events which described each major character? What were the turning points in Sibylla’s story?

## Characters

**1. Action in this novel revolves around five central characters and several minor ones.**

*Activity:* Discuss the following quotations in relation to each of the major characters.

Major Characters	Quotation
Sibylla	‘And I know you’re off the planet at least half the time,’

	he says.’(p 76)
<b>Lou</b>	‘She is madam of the even keel.’ (p 86)
<b>Michael</b>	‘Only Michael could be disappointed at not getting a prime number. He has whole books about prime numbers.’ (p 42)
<b>Holly</b>	‘She often observed that Holly seemed ‘unhappy’. I knew my mother well enough to know that this was health-professional code for ‘evil’.’ (p 130)
<b>Ben</b>	‘It is a nauseating portrayal of “head boy in the making”. He’s too keen to be popular.’(p 56)

## 2. Other Minor Characters:

**Quinn Family:** Charlotte Quinn, Sibylla’s sister; Sibylla’s parents; Bebe, Sibylla’s godmother.

**Bennett Housemates (of Sibylla, Lou and Holly):** Pippa, Annie, Eliza.

**Cleveland Housemates (of Michael and Ben):** Hamish, Doug, Vincent, Hugo.

**Other:** Maggie and Biff, Lou’s parents; ‘The Gorgon’, Holly’s mother, Michael’s parents.

**School Staff:** Dr Kim Kwong, Principal; counsellor, Merrill, Ms Ladislaw; Ms McInerney; Mr Oxley; Priscilla, the cook, and Brian, her boyfriend, and the camp’s much-maligned bus driver; Jerry Epstein.

**Other Campmates:** Kevin Trung, Beeso, Billy Gardiner, Tiff, Van Uoc, Hugo.

**Lou’s friends overseas:** Dan, Estelle and Janie [See SIX IMPOSSIBLE THINGS].

*Activity:* Select a quotation which accurately describes any of the characters above.

*Discussion Point:* Were there any ‘minor’ characters you would have liked to have seen feature more in the action?

**3. Characters are often described in terms which relate them metaphorically to someone or something else.** For example, Sibylla thinks: ‘I’m a go-with-the-flow girl. A girl who prefers not to rock the boat, unless absolutely necessary. Definitely not a rule-breaker. Not much of a funhaver. Or a risk-taker. Too careful. More like a killjoy, if we’re getting technical. A bit of an approval-seeker. And a massive scaredy cat, as well.’ (p 78)

*Activity:* Write a description of yourself using metaphorical language such as this.

**4. They are also described in contrast to each other.** For example, ‘If Michael has a worried look on his face, he is likely to be thinking about the complexities of the two-state solution, or the nature of existence. If I look worried it’s usually because I’ve got an awful feeling that I’ve forgotten something very important, or I’ve lost my phone



or keys or glasses (again), or I'm hungry and not sure when my next food intake is happening.' (p 43)

*Activity:* Invite students to describe two characters in a similar way.

**5. The detail used to create a character often includes aspects of their setting which 'echo' their characteristics.**

*Activity:* Find an example of this in the novel.

**6. Dialogue** can also add to the characterisation established by a description. For example, this complex dialogue is like a game of tennis in which Holly pretends to be conciliatory but is really baiting Sibylla: 'You're not mad are you?' Holly knows me well enough to know that I am fuming. 'I mean, poor guy – he deserves one night off the leash.' 'He's not on a leash.' 'No, he didn't act like he was.' (p 296)

*Discussion Point:* Discuss what this dialogue reveals about Holly and Ben? And what does it say about the dynamic between Sibylla and Holly?

**7. Writers generally create a mixture of characters, some intended to invoke sympathy in the reader, and others not to.** There are also some characters who defy categorisation — whose motives remain obscure.

*Discussion Point:* Which characters did you have sympathy for and why? Which ones were unattractive, annoyed you, or were puzzling?

**8. Characters can also be described by each other.** For example, Sibylla's feelings for Michael describe her as well: 'I've been stomping along next to Michael like this for so long ... don't leave everyone behind?' (p 59)

*Discussion Point:* What does this tell you about Sibylla and Michael?

## **Style and Use of Language**

**1. The prose narrative voice** of Sibylla is written in **first person**, and in **present tense**. Lou's voice is written as a series of **journal entries** in **first person, past tense**.

*Activity:* Compare the punctuation schemes used for each character. What hints do they give us about the respective character's states of mind?

*Activity:* Locate the point late in the narrative at which Lou's entries change from the past tense to the present tense. 'Time to enter the fray, and speak some sense to Sibylla.' (p. 306 ) What is the prompt for this? (Holly's public humiliation of Michael.) (p 303-304 )

*Activity:* This narrative could also have been written in another voice. For example, re-write one section as if written by Michael. How does this change the narrative?

**2. Voice is created by a range of devices including syntax, choice of words, literary devices such as metaphor and simile.** For example, Lou's analysis of the

line from *Romeo and Juliet* ‘*Cut him out in little stars*’ (p 9) is a beautiful example of how language works to make meaning.

*Activity:* Discuss some quotes from the novel such as ‘my heart flipped like a hooked fish’ (p 21). Speak with students about the need to use language which is uniquely phrased, and informed by original insights.

**3. Word play is used to explore the contradictory nature of both language and feelings.** For example, Lou writes: ‘The internal, external . . . infernal, diurnal, eternal journal.’ (p 8) Ben says to Sibylla: ‘*your pulchritude defies belief*’ (p 21) This phrase sounds like an insult but pulchritude actually means beauty.

*Activity:* Michael and Sib ‘play some *sounds-like, doesn’t-sound-like.*’ (p 211) This is a game which you might also play in class.

**4. Humour** is a device used by both narrators to deal with their feelings and with serious issues. For example, Lou writes: ‘If you don’t want to write about your Feelings, you can simply write about the Physical World, what you see, what you hear . . . facts, things, stuff. Jeez, so it’s not compulsory to eviscerate myself? To slash myself to a slow death with a million small paper cuts? Thank you kindly.’ (p 8)

*Activity:* What other examples of humour did you notice in this book?

**5. Literary Reference is used throughout this novel as a frame of reference.**

Students might be encouraged to analyse and discuss any one of the following references and to engage in related writing tasks:

*Activity:* Shakespeare’s *Othello* is the set text which Sibylla’s class is studying, and becomes a sort of parallel to the action in the novel. It is frequently quoted as a response to key moments in the novel for example when Bebe suddenly realises how beautiful Sib has become she responds: ‘Maybe because you see my visage in my mind,’ I said, mangling a bit of *Othello.*’ (p 4) or when Lou is writing in her mind to Fred about the camp she writes: But if you could just see these jackanapes, Fred, the creamfaced loons that *Othello* is wasted on.’ (p 105) Trace the references to this play and how they relate to the action and themes in this novel.

*Activity:* Holly can be seen as an ‘Iago’ who heartlessly uses Sib’s friendship with Michael Cassidy (so named to recall ‘Michael Cassio’) to try to make Ben doubt Sib’s affection for him and feel jealous. Imagine some other famous characters from literature and reverse their gender. Would we still find their actions plausible as an opposite gender character? What does this tell us about our own gender assumptions?

*Activity:* Because Michael loves nine-letter word puzzles (p 34), Sibylla decides that her letter of apology to him has to be ‘fairly bristling with nine-letter words.’ (p 336) How many nine-letter-words are there in her playful ‘nonsense’ letter? Google some lists of ten or eleven-letter words and write a couple of sentences using as many of them as you can. Note that your language will immediately look as though it comes from an earlier era. Does modern language favour a simpler vocabulary?

*Activity:* The repetition of the word ‘Jolly’ (p 10) echoes Enid Blyton and the ‘jolly hockeysticks’ type of novels of British boarding school antics and ‘scrapes’ such as Blyton’s Malory Towers series. This seems odd given the Australian landscape and modern setting, and yet there is the same hothouse atmosphere in this private boarding school camp; there are ‘pranks’, they have ‘Elevensies’ and there is bad food, and there is nasty bullying! Sib and Holly regularly engage in secret ‘feasts’ too in the laundry/drying room where they toast stolen sandwiches and discuss their problems away from prying eyes. And Lou refers to Enid Blyton’s ‘gorse bushes’ (p 121). They even tell scary stories of the ‘Charcoal Man’ (pp 119-20). ‘House selection happens next. This is what everybody’s waiting for. It’s just like Harry Potter, but with brighter lighting and no hat.’ (p 41) Discuss the links between the ‘Harry Potter’ series and the traditional boarding school story and how both relate to this novel.

*Activity:* When they set off on camp Michael is reading *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau in preparation. A classic work about living with nature, he quotes from it: ‘*I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.*’ (p 19) This quote is intentionally ironic but of course it summarises what the characters learn in the course of the action. Have students discuss this quote in relation to this novel.

*Activity:* The novel is peppered, too, with unremarked upon or unexplained literary references such as: ‘trees were drowning not waving’ (p 37). This is a reference to British poet Stevie Smith’s most famous poem ‘Not Waving but Drowning’. Invite students to read this poem and discuss why Lou would refer to it.

*Activity:* Other references include: Michael and Sibylla discussing DH Lawrence (p 55); Dylan Thomas’s poem, ‘The force that through the green fuse drives the flower’ (p 93); Christina Rossetti’s ‘Song’ (pp 117-8); Agatha Christie (p 130); William Wordsworth’s ‘A Slumber Did My Spirit Steal’ (p 175); Lou sings ‘Blackbird’ (p 243); ‘Changes’ by David Bowie (p 246); Wilfrid Owen’s WWI poem ‘Futility’ (p 68); ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ by John Keats (p 291); William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (p 317). Discuss any one of these references and how they relate to the novel thematically.

*Activity:* Look up Romanticism and discuss how this movement might relate to the setting and themes of the book. Which of the abovelisted poets are from the Romantic movement?

**6. This novel is entertainingly peppered with media references, too, which are often very funny.** For example, Sib coaches Michael in pop-culture, setting him TV show ‘Friday Night Lights’ to watch on his long haul flight from Rome. Holly uses media contexts for Sib’s romance (p 32) in Hannah Montana, Daria etc. Sibylla uses a reference to Star Trek: ‘It’s pesto, Jim, but not as we know it.’ (p 95) *Melancholia* the film (p 339) is also referred to.

*Discussion Point:* What other media references did you notice particularly? What might Sibylla’s motivation be in coaching Michael in popular culture? Discuss the accretion or layering of meaning that can occur when already resonant references are included in a new text. Do they act as a useful shorthand? Could they

exclude readers who are not familiar with the reference? Could they act as a prompt to further reading/listening/watching?

## Setting

**1. A vivid and convincing setting depends on description which makes it visually come alive for the reader, by investing it with human detail and observation, rather than describing a static picture.**

*Activity:* This novel is set largely at the camp which Lou describes as: ‘Architect-designed faux-utilitarian; probably truly utilitarian as well. What I mean is: functional, but also concerned with appearing to be functional, or in other words, show-off functional. Smells like heartbreak. Lemon-scented gums and eucalyptus.’ (p 37) This juxtaposes the natural and the man-made environment in a real picture of the place. Write a similar description of a building in a landscape you know well.

**2. The influence of nature on the characters is a significant thematic aspect of this novel.** Despite their scepticism about the experimental nature of living at camp, the **dichotomy between country and city** plays a large part in the changes involved in their ‘rite of passage’. Sibylla thinks on their first trek: ‘I feel so much smaller here than I do in the city.’ (p 90) and ‘All this time it is as though I’ve been in a tight urban hug without properly realising it, and now it’s like someone’s let me go. Everything here feels too big, too open.’ (p 93) and ‘Good smells: lemon-scented gums and peppermint eucalypts with which the grounds are artfully ‘natively’ landscaped. The air in general – out hiking or running – is crystal clean. It makes me realise how happily complacent I have been with breathing in toxic city air.’ (p 110) and ‘But used as I am to the sounds of helicopters, traffic, breaking glass, the bass pulse of a party a couple of blocks away, car doors, drunken arguments and loud farewells, I can’t settle into this new repertoire of going-to-sleep sounds. Twig snaps, wind shaking leaves and branches, trees creaking together, rock rumbles, the war cry of the possums, nocturnal hunting stampedes, owls screeching. Oh, it is hideous.’ (p 98)

*Activity:* Compare this latter quote to how Sibylla feels about nature when she goes on her solo trek at the end of the novel (Ch 92). How does she allay her fears? What has changed for her?

**3. Place is evoked by beautiful and evocative description, employing a range of literary devices.**

*Activity:* ‘The light falls from the sky like a sigh, deepening it from blue to lavender spiked with stars. The air is so cold and clean and eucalyptus-loaded it feels like a health treatment.’ (p 54) Analyse how this passage works to create a sense of the place. Find and discuss other passages like this one.

*Activity:* The place where they camp at Snow Gum Flat is also described beautifully. (p 168) What devices does the writer employ in this passage?

*Discussion Point:* When they are waiting for the lunar eclipse, Sibylla thinks: ‘The huge silver moon, opening and closing the fragile anemones as water rises and falls.’ (p 279) Such startling juxtaposition of moon and sea arrests the reader’s attention and make a description come alive for a reader.

**4. Description should be informed by all the senses – sounds, tastes, smell as well as vision.**

*Activity:* Read Sibylla’s description (pp 110-1) of all the smells in the camp. Think about the smells in your own school or in another place you frequent. Use that to inform writing a description of that place. Add to the description of smells the sounds, the feelings, the taste of things in that place. What sort of picture have you evoked?

**5. Descriptions evoke different images in the mind of the reader.**

*Activity:* Draw or paint the camp scene based on how it is described in the novel. Compare your various images.

## **Writing Exercises**

**1. Diary Writing** is a form of therapy for Lou. Use the form of a fictional diary to write about an issue which has been bothering you. (Other literary examples include John Marsden’s *So Much to Tell You* or *Secret Scribbled Notebooks* by Joanne Horniman.)

**2. The Packaging of a Book includes the Blurb and Cover** which must offer the reader an insight into the contents, and the emotional impact of a novel without giving the ending away. It must also market the book to its readers. Examine the cover of this book, assessing how the words and images on the front cover interact and are descriptive of the novel after you’ve read it. Design your own cover. Read the back cover blurb. Then make up your own back cover blurb summarising the themes of the novel in a few hundred words.

**3. Write an argument for the affirmative:** ‘Holly is the worst kind of friend.’

**4. Sibylla, like Lou and Michael, loves words.** On pp 34-5 she writes a list of nine letter words referencing Michael’s fondness for the nine-letter word puzzle. Invite students to create a similar list in a ‘free’ response to a challenge.

**5. Write the lyrics for a song detailing the exploits of the camp.** Use the ballad or rap form and write it as if the whole camp has put it together as a record of the highs and lows of the three months.

**6. Lou writes a list of ‘Ifs’ (pp 99-100) about how Fred’s death might have been avoided, which is akin to a free verse poem.** Invite students to consider an event in their lives and to write a poem entitled ‘If’.

## **Quotes for Discussion after Reading the Novel**

1. 'It's compulsory to be a good sport, not to show if your feelings are hurt.' (p 106) Discuss in relation to the characters in this novel and to school behaviour generally.
2. Discuss the following quote: 'He says it's all about how quickly you read, because we skate and slide over letters all the time and read many words, whole matrices of letters in a blink. But I think it's also about how much you read, and what sort of vocabulary you have in the first place, because, honestly, how many people in the entire world do you know who will ever need to use the word jugulated in their entire lives?' (pp 35-6)
3. 'What upsets you when death has been on the agenda is when it doesn't get mentioned.' (p 265) Lou is impatient with the counsellor who speaks euphemistically of Fred's 'passing' instead of using the word death. Are most of us too careful when discussing death? What are the benefits of maintaining an awareness of our mortality, and speaking frankly about death and dying?
4. 'If Sibylla would ever take him on, she would not regret it.'(p 268) Is Sibylla ever likely to fall in love with Michael? Discuss.
5. 'They have to survive such harsh conditions, such extremes of weather, bits of them die. And they are able to grow new wood around the old dead wood.' (pp 333-4) Discuss this quote in relation to the adaptability of people as well as plants.

### **Further Reading Ideas for Class Discussion**

1. Read and compare this novel to other examples of the 'rite of passage' novel. eg *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee; *Night Train* by Judith Clarke; *Stony Heart Country* by David Metzenthien; *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger; *Good Oil* by Laura Buzo.
2. Where might Michael, Lou and Sibylla be in five years time? Write your predictions for each of them.
3. Create a *Crowthorne Grammar School Newsletter* about Mt Fairweather designed to reflect some of the highlights of the characters' term there. Be creative, and use images which reflect the people in the novel, and how they might look.
4. Create a Book Trailer about this book.
5. Are there questions unanswered in this novel? What are they? Might they possibly lead to a sequel? Discuss.

### **Further Ideas Using Technology**

1. Find out as much as you can about the author. For example:  
<http://suebursztynski.blogspot.com.au/2012/07/interview-with-fiona-wood.html>  
<http://www.kids-bookreview.com/2013/07/12-curly-questions-with-author-fiona.html#more>

<http://alphareader.blogspot.com.au/2013/05/interview-with-fiona-wood-author-of.html>

2. Find some of the online reviews of the book, then have the class write their own. (One good place to look is at Insideadog, the site managed by the Centre for Youth Literature.)

<http://www.insideadog.com.au/books/wildlife>

<http://www.kids-bookreview.com/2013/07/review-wildlife.html>

<http://www.wordchasing.com/review-wildlife-by-fiona-wood/>

<http://inkcrush.blogspot.com.au/2013/06/wildlife-by-fiona-wood.html>

3. Listen to music by David Bowie, or to 'Blackbird' by Sarah McLachlan to inform your students' reading of the novel.

4. Here's a 'novel' idea ... over at the *Bookish Manicurist*, the blogger paints her nails to reflect the cover of the book she is reading. This month it is *Wildlife!*

<http://thebookishmanicurist.blogspot.com.au/2013/05/wildlife-by-fiona-wood.html>

Perhaps your students might like to do something similar.

5. Design a poster on screen to advertise this book. Use a simple computer drawing program to create your design.

## Conclusion

*Wildlife* is a funny serious novel about finding out who you are and being true to yourself. It is a warm funny/sad account of how friends are made and lost; how we cope with grief, and how we learn to recognise the nature of true friendship and real love.

## Author Note

**Fiona Wood** has been writing television scripts for more than ten years. Her first YA novel *Six Impossible Things* was shortlisted for the 2011 CBCA Book of the Year, Older Readers. *Wildlife* is her second novel. She lives in Melbourne with her family. [www.fionawood.com](http://www.fionawood.com)

## Further Reading

Buzo, Laura *Good Oil* Allen & Unwin, 2010.

Clarke, Judith *Night Train*, Penguin, 1998.

Earls, Nick, *After January*, UQP, 1994.

Horniman, Joanne *Secret Scribbled Notebooks* Allen & Unwin, 2004.

Lee, Harper *To Kill a Mockingbird* HarperCollins, 1960.

Marchetta, Melina *Looking for Alibrandi*, Puffin, 1992.

Metzenthen, David *Stony Heart Country*, Penguin, 1999.

Salinger, JD *The Catcher in the Rye* Little, Brown and Co., 1951.