

Teachers' Notes

Written by Elizabeth Stanley



Night Without Darkness

Elizabeth Stanley

Themes

A number of themes underlie the story and these are listed below. They may not be comprehensive and each could be extended as studies in their own right, touching as they do upon areas of the school curriculum such as History, Social Studies, Human Development, etc.

Destruction and Renewal

The metaphor of the carnage of the shearwaters during the birding season is set against the destruction of war. The metaphor is personalised by Phoebe's relationship with her 'special' bird, Dusky, and her friendship with Harry. The tragedy of the thousands lost to the world – birds and men alike – is underlined by Frank's bitter comment upon learning of Harry's death: 'He was only a boy. It's a bloody waste.' Ironically, Frank fails to appreciate the connection this has with his own wholesale slaughter of immature birds on Big Dog Island each year.

Hope and the comfort of renewal, coming at the end of the story, provide the much-needed light to combat the darkness of death and loss. Text and images combine to reinforce the title's significance.

The Search for Identity

The beginning of the story introduces Phoebe's inner conflict concerning the values and lifestyle of her family, which are at odds with her love for them and her need to be part of them: 'Phoebe felt part of the, simple, predictable rhythm of their lives, and this helped to lessen her unease, about what they were doing.' Yet she has a connection with her environment that is protective and nurturing. There is no place in her heart for much of what her family assumes she will embrace: 'People call them muttonbirds as if being eaten is all they're good for.' Her friend Harry shares the same kind of reservation: 'With each bird that dies we die a little, too.'

Following the departure from the islands of Dusky and Harry, for worlds 'she could only try to imagine' Phoebe is challenged by doubts about where she belongs: 'Phoebe's own life seemed small. The freedom that Harry and Dusky had found began to shape her dreams.'

Finally, with Dusky's much-longed-for return to the warren of his birth, comes Phoebe's shedding of doubts and confusion about her own place and purpose in the world: 'She knew she belonged here. Her flesh was rock, her blood ran like the sea. The pulse of the island beat within her.' Lifting the young bird in her hands confirms for Phoebe ultimate acceptance of herself and her own place within the rhythm and pattern of life: 'All that had seemed lost was in that moment restored to her.'

Cycles and Journeys of Life

Patterns in life are made up of the predictable rhythms that lend us security and the individual differences that provide challenges and stimulation. Against the background of the constant cycles of the shearwaters' annual migrations between the two hemispheres, and the islanders' seasonal relocations between islands, are drawn the personal and contrasting journeys of two young people who are breaking away from accepted traditions in search of something more. Harry is looking to a broader horizon and feeling confined by the traditions of an older generation. This drive eclipses any sense of danger inherent in his 'journey' or criticism directed by those who would stand in his way: 'You're not old enough, Harry', snapped Frank. 'They're looking for men, not boys.' Phoebe's mum is also judgemental: 'I don't understand why you boys are always hankering to leave. We've lived here all our lives. This is your home.'

But Harry's journey to a new and bigger world is cut short by tragedy. We are brought to reflect on his prophetic words in an earlier discussion with Phoebe on Big Dog Island: 'Think how many thousands (of shearwaters) are killed here, before their lives have really begun. Death is always near them, at sea or at home.' It is Phoebe who completes Harry's journey and brings him home, through her recognition of his noble spirit embodied in the form of Dusky, the shearwater that has safely returned.

On the eve of adolescence, Phoebe undergoes a more psychological journey during the story, in which she seeks to define her own conscience and her place in the world. Whilst she does not choose physical separation in order to find her way (as Harry does) it is nonetheless forced upon her and becomes the means by which her personal odyssey is resolved.

The Sense of Place

The uniqueness of 'place' defines circumstance, character, motivation and the way in which life unfolds. A group of small, isolated islands in the middle of a wild sea has a sense of place all of its own. Influence from outside is negligible; especially so sixty years ago. Lifestyles are relatively simple and circumscribed, no doubt for some inhabitants, suffocatingly so. Yet there are also the enormous advantages of security, safety and comfort in knowing with a fair amount of certainty what the next day holds and with whom you will see it through.

Island life is bound to establish lifestyles ruled by tradition and culture. Frank and Nell find it difficult to understand how anyone could want anything different. 'Birding' is woven into the fabric of their lives because they and the birds are part of the island, almost as much as are the rocks and the sea.

The shearwaters themselves have been a part of this place for probably thousands of years. Their mysterious migratory habit takes them annually on a miraculous journey thousands of miles to the other side of the world, yet they return each year to the exact place where their lives began. A sense of place.

Story Structure

- There are a number of dramatic highpoints in the story. Discuss the purpose of these in relation to the development of the main character:
 - a) Phoebe farewelling Dusky on Big Dog Island
 - b) Harry farewelling Phoebe on Flinders Island
 - c) The return of the shearwaters
 - d) The arrival of the letter
 - e) The final scene or climax

- The Climax. Phoebe holds the bird in her hands and whispers, 'Yolla, Yolla, you've brought him home to me.' What do you think Phoebe means? Why does she call the bird 'Yolla?' Explore the meaning of transmutation.
- Discuss the metaphors of darkness and light as devices in both the text and visual images of the story.
- In three illustrations Phoebe figures as a small part of the picture, yet she is the main character. Scale is a visual device that can emphasise the emotional state of a character in the picture, albeit at a subconscious level. Discuss Phoebe's emotional state with respect to these particular pictures. Try to find more examples of the use of scale in other picture books.
- Discuss the author's choice of title, *Night Without Darkness*. Why are titles a very important part of a book? What do you think defines a good title? Try to think of another title for this story.
- The book opens to a quotation from the American poet, Theodore Roethke, which reads: 'In a dark time, the eye begins to see.' What do you think this means? What relevance has it to the story?

Research

Stories unfold within a context of place and time and culture. These must be thoroughly researched and authentically developed in order that a story maintain its integrity for the reader. This is true for both text and pictures. Under these headings, discuss the research that had to be done to create a story and illustrations that communicate credibly.

The Short-tailed Shearwater.

- Habitat, nesting behaviour, care of young, migration patterns, threats to survival, current numbers, future viability, etc.
- The birding industry of Tasmania; history, cultural significance, past and current economic importance.
- There is presently an upsurge of interest on these islands in developing the birding industry, especially for the indigenous people of Cape Baron Island, as both economic support and the preservation of indigenous practices. Other people (especially those on the mainland) perhaps find birding all too primitive and rather unpalatable or environmentally insensitive. What do you think? Is there a compromise?

World War, 1939-1945

The war memorial at Emita on Flinders Island lists an alarming number of young men who were killed in the two great wars of the last century. What effect would this have had on the island's economy and its social structure?

The Cape Baron Islanders

- Though it is not stated in the story, Harry would be from Cape Baron Island, which has long been a reserve for indigenous Tasmanians. The indigenous histories of Cape Baron and Flinders Island are very different from each other and in fact few indigenous people live on Flinders any longer because the past is a bitter memory. This is likely to change in the area known as Emita, where many aboriginal people were buried without ceremony or headstones 170 years ago.

Explore the history of settlement on these two islands, especially the role of early convict sealers and of the English philanthropist, George Augustus Robinson.

Matthew Flinders

- Navigating around the Bass Strait Islands in 1789, Flinders described in his log book the marvellous sight of the arrival of the shearwaters in September. He described the gigantic flock of petrels as one solid, dark cloud, many yards wide and many yards deep, (about 150 million birds altogether) flying so close together their long wings almost touched. They threw the ship and surrounding ocean into shadow for a period of about an hour and a half. Flinders kept detailed and engaging diaries of his travels.

Find out more about the important contributions he made to the new land, which he named 'Australia.'

The Medium is the Message

The illustrator has used dry, hard pastels by Faber Castell, which come in a set of 80 colours. For finer work she uses a set of 60 Carb-Othello pastel pencils. She loves the rich, dramatic colours and enjoys working with a 'drawn' medium (though the end product is still called a 'painting'). The illustrations for *Night Without Darkness* have been made on Canson pastel paper of various colours.

- Students interested in illustration might investigate the range of pastel papers available and their respective qualities. Why must special paper be used for this medium?
- Find out about other kinds of pastels (soft, oil, conte, etc.) and the different effects they produce. Also, how well they combine with other mediums (charcoal, gouache, pencil, etc.)
- Pastellists use specialised tools to help them work. What are torchons, kneadable rubbers and fixative used for?
- Different artists use different techniques with pastels and their styles vary significantly. Crosshatching, blending, scumbling, feathering and dry-wash are a few of these techniques. Find out about what these terms mean and experiment with some pastels yourself!
- Look in picture books, art books and in art galleries for examples of the pastel medium. Look up close at the coloured marks the artists have made in their pictures, then step back. Can you work out how pastel colours are 'mixed' even though they are not squeezed out of a tube?

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