

Before George

DEBORAH ROBERTSON

TEACHER SUPPORT
MATERIALS



RECOMMENDED AGE
RANGE: 7-12

PLOT SUMMARY

In December 1953, Marnya Shepherd, an almost thirteen-year-old girl from South Africa, is on a train from Wellington to Auckland with her mother and little sister, Karen, when their train plummets over a bridge destroyed by a lahar from Mt Ruapehu. Marnya survives and is rescued by locals, but her mother and Karen cannot be found. Terrified, Marnya gives her name as George and insists she is a boy as this is what her mother told her to do – she is not sure why, only that her mother wanted to keep them from being discovered.

Due to the false identity, no one is able to find George's real family or track down her uncle, whom she and her mother and sister were going to. Not wanting to be sent back to her abusive father alone, George does not divulge any information and is declared a ward of the state. She goes to live with the matron of the local high school boarding house and begins the third form at Ohakune College, on the border of Tongariro National Park. There, she meets Mr Cletis, the hostel master who is also her English teacher.

In the small school, George struggles, initially, to make friends, partly because she continues to insist she is a boy (even though the adults are clear that she isn't) and because there are no other girls in her year. She eventually befriends Percy, a boy in the year above her who has muscular dystrophy and is in a wheelchair. Percy also struggles to fit in, but unlike George, he has a positive outlook on the world.

George's outcast fate is changed somewhat when the physical education teacher, Mr Turrell, buys some poorly broken-in horses, and George is the only student able to handle one of them. As a result of this, she befriends Will, a boy in her class who also has an interest in the horses, and the two of them practise riding and jumping on horses Pilgrim and Mrs Sprightly. George also tries to tame Hiroshima, the wildest of all the horses, which has an eyesight problem. All the while, she tries to come to terms with the position she is in, but she can't help feeling resentment towards her mother for leaving her in this predicament. She also feels fear and confusion around her identity, and she wonders whether it is safe to be a girl. As time passes, Percy's health starts to decline, which George also finds difficult to accept. She starts pushing Percy's wheelchair around the school so that he can keep coming even though his strength is failing.

Things come to a head when Mr Turrell is fired from the school for lending a rifle to a student to shoot rabbits and Mr Cletis organises for the horses to be sold at auction. With no money to buy their two favourites, Will and George enter the local A and P show competition to try and win some money. They succeed, and Mr Cletis is so impressed by how well the two horses perform that he lets Will and George keep both the money and their two horses. However, only a few days later, George learns that Percy has died. That night, she sneaks out with the rifle that Mr Turrell had left hidden in the tack shed, and after leading Hiroshima out into the wilderness, George shoots her to save her from being sold at auction for dog food.

Just before the following term starts, George and Will ride their horses up Mt Ruapehu. Will asks George why she doesn't want to be a girl, and the two get into an argument. When they get back to the hostel, Will sneaks into the matron's house to try and make peace with George, but Mrs Taylor catches them and mistakes their interaction for something more clandestine. She grabs George and threatens to send her to a girls' school, and George pushes back violently in fear. She is taken to Mr Cletis's office. While the adults discuss her fate, Mr Cletis, a former orphan himself, leaves the door to his office unlocked, allowing George to run away.

George manages to hitchhike to Whangārei, where she is able to find the address of her Uncle Ryl. When she arrives, however, she learns that he never knew that his sister (George's mother) was coming to see him and doesn't know that she and Karen are dead, which causes him a great deal of shock. George is violently ill on her first night there, after having drunk unclean water from a river, and Ryl is forced into being her caregiver. George begs him not to contact her father, and as a result, Ryl learns of the domestic violence that their family has suffered, which disturbs him even more.

George and Uncle Ryl get off to a rocky start due to the traumas and stresses in their shared history; Ryl insists that George dress and behave like a girl, but George refuses, taking refuge with the two retired racehorses that her uncle keeps in his back paddock. She makes friends with Tabitha, a girl of a similar age from a large conservative family next door, but she continues to pretend to be a boy. She also starts attending the local pony club and is immediately identified by the instructor, Mr Baldwin, as having great talent, and Mr Baldwin, lets her ride his own horse. When George gets into a fight with Tabitha's older brother, Bartholomew, when he demeans his sister in front of others, the rift between George and her uncle grows.

Soon after this event, George finds a letter from Uncle Ryl to her grandparents and immediately thinks about running away again, but after reading the rest of the letter, she becomes struck with conscience over the fact that her family does not know what has become of her, Karen and her mother, and she understands that this must be awful for them. Realising this, George forgives her mother for what happened, understands that her mother's intention was to save them and comes to the conclusion that women and girls are not weak and helpless, as she had believed.

Shortly afterwards, George and Mr Baldwin head down to the national A and P show, and George is entered in the competition riding Mr Baldwin's horse. She makes it all the way to the last round, only to find that Will and Mrs Sprightly are her final competitors. Overjoyed, George has her horse jump over the trophy stand (something that Mrs Sprightly had done unintentionally in their first competition), and Will instantly recognises George. However, she is called into the judges' tent soon afterwards as, out of spite, Tabitha's older brother, Bartholomew, informs the judges that she is a girl, not a boy, which even Mr Baldwin doesn't know. When confronted, George chooses to accept her identity as a girl, no longer afraid of any danger, but she keeps the name George to honour her mother's choice.

CONTEXT AND SETTING

THE TANGIWAI DISASTER

The Tangiwai disaster was a real event that occurred on Christmas Eve in 1953. A lahar from Mt Ruapehu destroyed the structure of the rail bridge over the Whangaehu River, near the small town of Tangiwai in the central North Island. A train, carrying people to see family for Christmas, as well as many immigrants, fell into the swollen, muddy river, and 151 of the 285 passengers were killed.

Survivors pulled from the wreckage described the mud, how fast the river was churning and how suddenly everything happened. In the subsequent recovery operation, many children's toys and gifts were found in the wreckage, several bodies were found completely naked, around twenty bodies were never recovered and more were not able to be identified. It is likely that they were recent immigrants. These details made strong impressions on those rescued and those involved in the recovery efforts. The Tangiwai disaster is the worst rail disaster that has ever occurred in New Zealand.

1950s RURAL NEW ZEALAND

In Ohakune, where much of the novel is set, the main industries in the 1950s were farming (root vegetables in particular were a big part of the local economy) and saw-milling. The railway was an important means of getting produce to and from the town. The first ski lifts on Mt Ruapehu were installed in the 1950s, but Ohakune was not a tourist town at this time. Tongariro National Park had been established for many years, and people came to the area to explore it. The culture was stoic and hard-working; the Second World War had not long ended, and its effects were still being felt.

1950s SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa in the 1950s operated under an apartheid regime. This was a system of racial segregation and social, political, educational, health and economic discrimination implemented by the White minority against the indigenous African majority and people categorised as Coloured and Asian. Gender equality was also poor; it wasn't until the 1980s that all women could vote. Specific legislation on domestic violence was not passed in South Africa until the 1990s.



SYMBOLS

HIROSHIMA THE WHITE HORSE

Hiroshima, in many senses, represents George's own terror and 'blindness' – of not knowing why her mother ran away or why she told George that there was 'nothing more dangerous in the world than being a girl'. In the end, George is forced to shoot Hiroshima so that she does not go through any more suffering, and this is part of George's journey of making peace with the fact that she will never know all of the answers about why her mother did what she did.

THE TEDDY BEAR

George finds a muddy, damaged teddy bear in the ruins of the train wreck. The broken toy is a symbol of her own loss of innocence after the accident.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

GEORGE/MARNYA SHEPHERD

- George is a young girl from South Africa who is left stranded in New Zealand after her mother and sister are killed in the Tangiwai disaster.
- George comes from a dysfunctional background in South Africa, where her father physically abused her, her sister and her mother. Because of this, and the events leading up to their arrival in New Zealand, George is convinced that being a girl is not safe and that it is better to be a boy.
- Because of her background and the trauma of the train accident, George is initially reserved and suspicious of other people. She is terrified of the idea of anyone discovering her identity.
- George develops a strong relationship with the horses that Mr Turrell brings to school as she understands their wildness and their need to run away and be safe.
- For most of the novel, George insists that she is a boy, even when others don't believe her.

MR CLETIS

- Mr Cletis, George's English teacher and the hostel master, manages the day-to-day running of the boarding hostel, which is part of the high school.
- Mr Cletis is, in many ways, a host of contradictions – he feels strongly about a lot of educational issues, frequently lectures the students and is far more safety-conscious than Mr Turrell. However, he also admires ingenuity and kindness, and he has a tendency to turn a blind eye to rule-breaking when it is done for these reasons.
- Mr Cletis is also an orphan, his father having gone to jail and his mother having died when he was young, although he keeps this quiet. He was raised by Mrs Taylor. For this reason, he is able to empathise with George.

PERCY WOODROW

- Percy is a boy in the fourth form who befriends George when she first comes to school. He is a foil to George; in many ways, he is worse off than she is, but he's much more optimistic about life.
- Percy's health deteriorates as the novel progresses, and he is the first person to whom George confesses the truth about herself.

WILL BRASH

- Unlike George and Percy, Will is a popular boy in the third form and is one of the boarders in the hostel run by Mr Cletis. He is confident and outspoken.
- Will and George's relationship develops slowly. George has difficulty trusting Will with her secret, but she eventually does so.
- Will looks out for his little brother when he is at home because they lost their mother when they were young.

DENNIS GREY

- A friend of George and Will, Dennis is often caught for his badly executed pranks. He is one of the first boys to accept George into the group.

MRS TAYLOR

- The hostel matron, Mrs Taylor, is a grumpy no-nonsense woman who clashes frequently with George, especially about George's decision to wear boys' clothing.
- Mrs Taylor has raised several orphans, including Mr Cletis, as she needs the money from the government stipend, but she doesn't have much motherly concern for the children.

RYLAND TIERSON

- George's uncle, her mother's brother, emigrated from South Africa when George was young.
- He feels guilt over leaving South Africa when he learns what happened to his sister and her family.
- Ryl is from a conservative background where men have authority over women, but he is not violent or aggressive like George's father.

THEMES

FAMILY VIOLENCE AND IDENTITY

Much of the novel is concerned with George trying to understand the situation with her violent father and the actions her mother took in running away with them to New Zealand. As part of this, George has an unhealthy understanding of what it means to be a girl – girls are weak and ought to be blamed for everything, and it is not safe to be a girl. By the end of the novel, she comes to see that her mother's actions in running away were actually very brave and that being a girl is not something that makes you weak.

DEATH

There are several major deaths in the novel. The first are when Marnya's mother and sister are killed in the train disaster. Then later, Percy dies from muscular dystrophy, and George feels forced to shoot Hiroshima. George struggles to come to terms with her mother's and sister's deaths, and, later, with the knowledge that Percy is going to die, and this often comes out as anger. She is angry at her mother for 'leaving her' in the position she is in, and she is angry that nothing can be done for Percy. Learning to accept that these things are outside her control is part of George's journey.

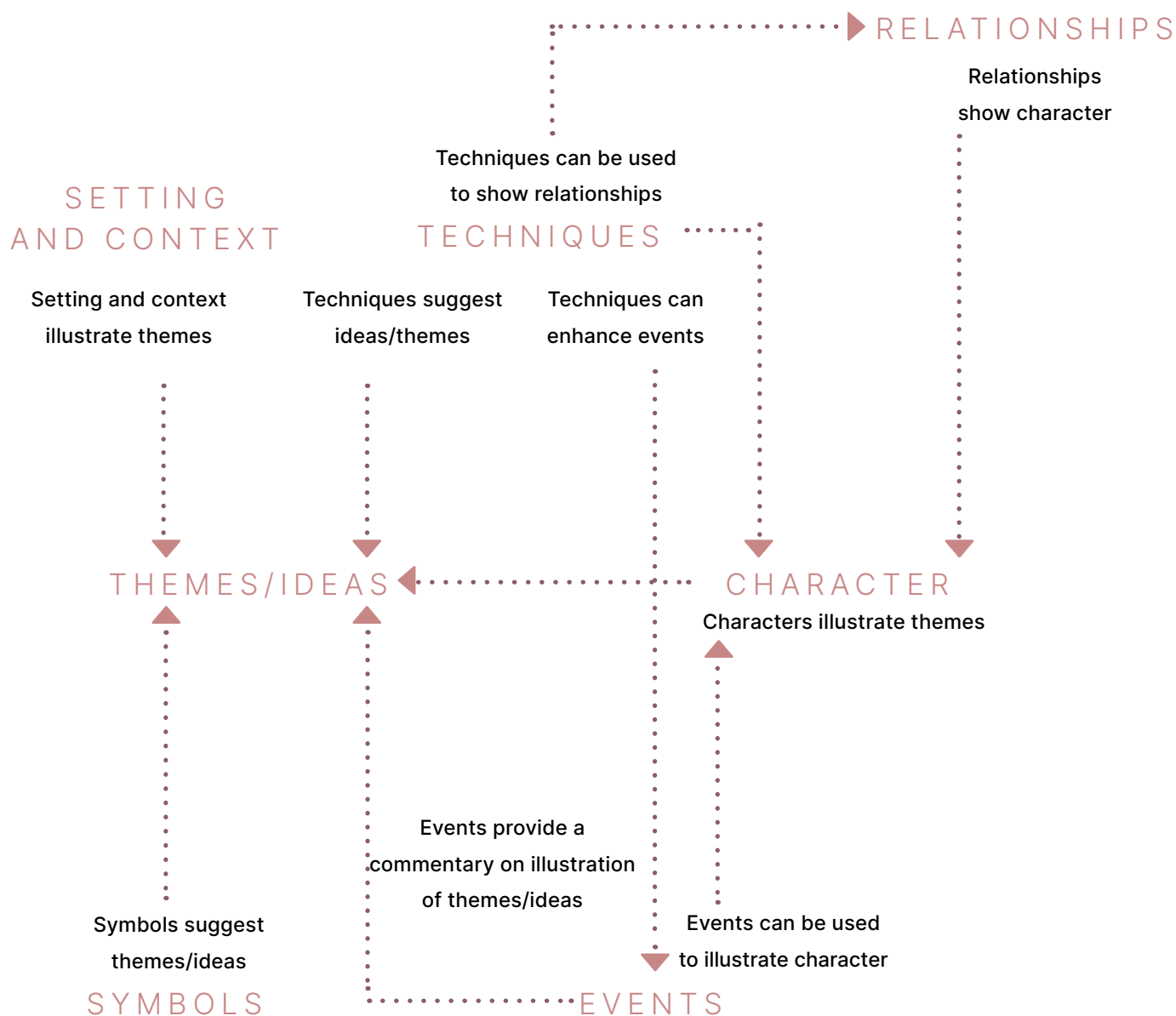
PEOPLE ARE COMPLEX

At the start of the novel, George's reading of the people around her is often overly simple. Her perspective on her mother's actions, in particular, are quite one-dimensional. She also takes some time to understand the hidden depths of other characters, such as Mr Cletis, Percy and Will.

THE EFFECTS OF TRAUMA

Many of the characters have complicated and painful pasts. George suffers from a past full of family violence and the trauma of the train crash. Mr Cletis doesn't speak openly about being raised by Mrs Taylor. Percy and his family struggle with the reality of his illness, and this pain is particularly evident in his parents. Will lost his mother when he was young. The trauma faced by characters often creates a dichotomy: George is suspicious and afraid, but also caring and sympathetic towards the horses; Percy chooses to be an optimist in spite of his daily struggles; Mr Cletis reads between the lines of George's comments and behaviour to deduce her real story and meets it with understanding; Will takes pity on George because he also lost his mother. In all cases, characters are able to do positive things for others often because of, not in spite of, the things they have suffered.

ASPECTS OF TEXTS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIPS



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. At the start of the novel, George thinks that having a new name is the same as becoming a new person. How is this true and how is it false?
2. Why does George think that girls are weak at the start of the novel? What things give her this idea? What causes her to change her mind?
3. What causes the boys to change their minds about letting George play rugby? Why do you think this is?
4. Why do you think George finds it easier to be comfortable around horses than around people?
5. Why does George feel uncomfortable about the idea of Will knowing who she really is and what really happened to her?
6. Why does George struggle to become Marnya again after she runs away from the school? What things make it harder for her?
7. George seems to miss her mother and be really angry at her at the same time. Why does she feel this? Have you ever had contradictory feelings about someone you care about?

APPENDIX: KEY QUOTES

1. *I wondered how easy it was going to be, having a new name. Did a new name make me a new person? For the past twelve, almost thirteen years – all my life – I was Marnya.*
2. *‘Remember this.’ My mother held my face close to hers. ‘There is nothing more dangerous in the world than being a girl. Nothing at all. I want you to promise me, right now, that you’ll never walk out of that room in your nightdress again.’*
3. *The mountains never seemed to get closer or farther away, no matter where you went. They towered over everything else. To me, it was like they were from another time. New Zealand was an old place, I thought, much older than South Africa. In South Africa, everything was alive. Bugs crawled out of every crevice; animals lurked in the damp shadows of trees. Here, everything was cold and silent. The wind howled, full of icy bite. Cloud hung low, moving so quickly you could watch it make its way across the park. The trees were a dark primordial green, their trunks as wide as cars. Even the birds were cautious. They hung in the eaves of trees and bushes, hiding from the wind.*
4. *It was all a story. The story of George Shepherd. It was something that I could make up. Who’s to say George Shepherd had never seen a lion in the wild? That he wasn’t scared of snakes? George Shepherd could be anyone in the world.*
5. **George:**
‘You must promise that if I go and stay with you that you won’t treat me like a girl. Not ever. You have to pretend that I’m a boy, okay?’
6. *He [Percy] kept crying. ‘I don’t want to have to have your help,’ he sobbed. ‘That’s what’s the matter.’*

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7. **Will:**
*'He asked me how much I paid for my horse. I told him half of ten pounds.'
He looked at me and his eyes refocused. 'He told me that if I ever sold her
on for so little, he'd jolly well come and shoot me.'*
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8. *He [Mr Cletis] stood up to walk me to the door, his gaze solemn. 'I want you
to remember this,' he said. 'You made those horses what they are.'*
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9. *'Death's not what happens to people who do bad things,' said Percy. 'It's
what happens to all people.'*
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10. *Beneath my hands, Hiroshima's coat was unbelievably soft. I lifted my
head from her neck and stared across the water. For a moment I thought
someone was standing there, watching me. But as my eyes adjusted, I
saw it was just the skeleton of a dead mānuka. Heaven surely doesn't ever
quite touch earth, I thought, staring at it. But there is a space inbetween. A
hollow, where the orphans live, brushing fingers with their ghosts.*
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11. *He'd never hugged me before. Not like this. His arms went right around me,
fingers digging into my arm. It should have been nice but it wasn't. It was
too sudden, too forceful. My heart hammered. I didn't want to be touching
him. We weren't safe here.*
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12. **Mr Cletis:**
*'I didn't save you, George. Only you can save you. And that is just as true
now as it was then.'*
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13. **George:**
*'Why you're here. Why Mama ran away and didn't tell anyone, not even you,
and you were her only brother. And now she's dead, and I don't know why,
and you don't know why, and I'm scared I'll never know the real reason and
I'll just be wondering forever.'*
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14. *They say best friends live in each other's shoes, but I lived in Will's socks too, his coats, his trousers. Everything I still had, had been his at some point or another. The shirt I was wearing now. I took a handful of it and held it to my face, using it to sponge my eyes.*
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15. *I was so distracted that I accidentally pulled out one of the small lettuces. Bright green leaves nestled in my palm. I yelped and quickly dug it back into the ground, hoping I had not damaged the roots. Looking at it there, sad and covered in dirt, I thought I was looking at myself. My roots had been yanked out too. They'd gone back into the ground and grown me into something else. Some other plant, scrawny and weed-like.*
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16. *'You can't run forever,' my uncle said. 'You think you can when you're young. Believe me, I did, but it doesn't work. Because then you're always running, for the rest of your life. You can never stop, and then one day it all catches up with you.' At this he looked at me, and I understood that I was his past catching up with him.*
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17. *Again, I saw myself in her shoes. What I might have been. Percy's sister as Cinderella, twirling in her blue dress. My mother on the dock. 'You'll be a boy in New Zealand, for a little while at least.' Was this what she had saved me from? Saved me from needing to be saved?*
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18. *I loved my mother for the first time in many years that night. It was an awful, awful feeling, loving her again. 'I'm sorry,' I whispered into the night. 'I'm sorry.' I wished she could hear me. But she was still with me. I did not let go of my mother's strength but held it close to me, over me, around me.*
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