

***Torn Pages* by Sally Grindley**

Lydia, Joe and Kesi are orphans, their Mama the latest victim of the African AIDS epidemic four months ago. Thirteen year old Lydia has assumed control, overwhelmed by daily living as the younger children react in their own ways; Joe becoming grumpy, Kesi now tearful, clingy and wetting the bed. Classmates make hurtful comments to Kesi and Joe intervenes with his fists. Mama's money has apparently gone, the garden is overgrown so food is in short supply and Grandma Motsie, Baba's mother, hates them. She won't care for them as many other grandparents have stepped in to do, blaming Mama for her son's death, when in fact Baba gave the AIDS to her. Grandma is nasty and mean, demanding Lydia work for her in return for meagre food rations. With never-ending nagging and scolding and an interminable daily list of tasks for Lydia, she is forced to become Grandma Motsie's 'slave', taking her away from the children at a time when they need her too. Lydia is disappointed and angry, resentful of the role left to her and of her mother's dying.

When life closes in, it is actually her mother's book, left as a legacy, written as a family history and filled with Mama's reflections on life and living, that gives Lydia the strength and the will to go on in the face of these odds. Mama's love and wisdom, bravely shared as she was dying, live on through this special book of memories and Grandma Motsie can not take that away. Indeed, Lydia will fight, standing up to her grandmother to 'climb the tallest tree (of challenge) and touch the moon'. Kindness in the form of practical help from both Grandma Shandu and Jabu Theki touches their lives, as they move on from the horrors of this hardship.

A simple, sometimes sombre but easy-to-read story, written with honesty, integrity, empathy and compassion, *Torn Pages* presents the harsh and disturbing reality of lives decimated by disease, disaster and despair, the very human face of life in AIDS-torn Africa. A powerful story, but told gently, with sensitivity and with optimism, to suit readers aged 10-14, it is a story of family love and loyalty, resilience and survival, courage and strength in the face of 'traitorous "I wish" thoughts'. These 'black thoughts, with no light behind them', niggle constantly at Lydia as she reasons things out with her mother through passages in the memory book. Mama's spirit guides her. "Face reality with your eyes wide open", Mama says. Lydia believes she can do this: "Mama, I can make you proud".

The cover design - the three children looking to the sun as source of light and healing, through its bright, glowing rays symbolic of their hope for the future - is creative and effective; the clever interweaving of Mama's inspirational writing in this engaging tale is brilliant and sets the book apart. *Torn Pages* is highly recommended for inclusion in primary and secondary school library collections. It is particularly suitable for use as a teacher read-aloud in upper primary classrooms, as a shared class reader in lower secondary English classrooms, or for background reading material to support SOSE investigations. As a heart-wrenching, thought-provoking, discussion starter and a basis for further creative writing activities, Award-winning author, Sally Grindley, has another conscience-raising 'winner' in *Torn Pages*.

Alison Cassell, Qld

Torn Pages, by Sally Grindley is an insightful and confronting novel about the struggles of an African girl Lydia, and her siblings after the death of her mother and father from the AIDS virus. The novel is hard hitting, as it focuses on the poverty and hardships that these children face, the battle that Lydia faces just to get food on the table for her brother and sister. It is an interesting book as it is rare to read a book which focuses on such themes as poverty, AIDS and hunger. This book is suitable for children from around 12 to 15 years old, as a few of the themes may be disturbing for children younger than this. I think it would be an excellent way of introducing students to the reality that life is hard for some children, even children their own age. This text is:

- A good read aloud text for teachers; there are lots of discussion opportunities on different issues throughout the book.
- A great introduction to imaginative writing, students could to imagine what they would do if they were left in a situation such as this.
- An introduction to informational text writing, students look at the themes of this book, such as poverty and hunger, and look up information, then report on it.

- An introduction to letter or diary writing, such as was left to Lydia by her mother. What would students want others to know about their lives?
- It could introduce social projects, ie. fund-raising for a cause such as AIDS orphans.
- Students could do projects where they look at other countries and how children live there.

Overall, this is a well written, thought-provoking book.

Donna Andrews, QLD

After the death of both of their parents, Lydia has to become both mother and father to her younger brother and sister. In the AIDS ravaged, African country in which they live, there is no welfare system to care for them and the three children have only their vegetable garden and the money their mother had managed to save to keep them going. Even their grandmother seems to be against them, saying that all the money has gone and there is no more for school fees. Lydia knows the value of a good education and will do anything to ensure her brother and sister continue going to school; even becoming a slave for her grandmother in exchange for payment of school fees.

Her mother had written a memory journal before she died, and Lydia draws strength from the insights and advice her mum has left her with.

Sally Grindley tells a beautiful story of overcoming adversity, and she gives interesting insights into life in another culture, and some of the myths surrounding the spread of AIDS.

I would highly recommend this book for anyone aged nine and over.

Nova Gibson, Summerland Primary School, New Zealand

This is an extraordinary book. Lydia and her brother Joe and sister Kesi find themselves orphans after both their parents die from AIDS. They should all still be at school but how can Lydia study when she has two siblings to care for? Their paternal grandmother is supposed to be their guardian but she takes the money that has been saved for the children's education and spends it on herself. She schemes to force Lydia to work for her in order to make it possible for Joe and Kesi to return to school, with no intention of keeping her word. Who can Lydia turn to when those who are supposed to look after her are actually ripping her off? How can she build a home and a life when she has no income and the villagers mostly avoid her because of her parents' illness? She finds solace in a memory book that her mother created for her before she died, and her mother's words become wisdom and hope for the child who is forced to grow up before her time.

I found this an incredibly traumatic book to read. Life was so tough for our heroes and help so hard to find I could almost not bear to look. We are very aware of the devastation that AIDS has caused in Africa but I don't think I have properly considered the feelings or the vulnerable circumstances of the children left behind to pick up the pieces. Sally Grindley is a remarkable writer and this book offers the reader much food for thought. She explores issues of trust, deception, rejection, prejudice, perseverance and endurance in the face of incredible hardship. The book would also provide good discussion material for units such as 'Crisis and Hope'.

Debbie Williams, Mountain District Christian School, VIC

Once again Sally Grindley crafts a beautiful story about sensitive, delicate and at times 'political' issues.

Torn Pages is a touching story about real issues in poverty stricken Africa.

After the tragic loss of her mother, orphaned Lydia faces an uncertain future caring for her younger siblings, brother Joe, and sister Kesi. Through the face of adversity and poverty the story unfolds through her narration and the diary left by her mother.

The diary is the '*Torn Pages*'. Encourage students to investigate the metaphoric meaning of the 'torn pages'. This diary is a dissertation of Lydia's family's history. Its advice for this fledgling group is dotted throughout the novel and offers Lydia her Mother's wisdom whenever trials and tribulations appear.

Add to her loss, the complications brought about by a menacing, selfish grandmother, who is determined to sap the little hope left in their lives and the reader becomes enveloped in a depressing and hopeless situation. However, given Lydia's strength and courage in the face of adversity, little by little she gains the courage to follow her mother's advice and struggle forward.

'There's something special about a storm in the middle of the night that gathers a family close. It's as if nothing else exists outside the huddle of love in a blacked-out room which, try as it might, the storm cannot overwhelm. Remember my child, and try to carry it with you through every dawning day' p2-3

Through these wise words and her unwavering determination Lydia holds her family together and shapes a more hopeful future.

This book deals with the real problems prevalent in Africa from the AIDS crisis and its implications. Because of the sensitive content, I would recommend *Torn Pages* to mature upper primary and lower secondary readers. I would encourage educators to discuss the delicate issues portrayed throughout the story and the themes of loss, deceit, betrayal, the legacy of the AIDS crisis, and the hope gained when reading this novel.

Sue Johnston, Vic

This book is written in language that can be easily accessed by young people of around 10 years plus, and is also a thought provoking read for those much older.

Set in AIDS-ravaged Africa, big sister Lydia along with her younger siblings Joe and Kesi must face a life as orphans after the death of their parents to AIDS, having very little support from the one person they should be able to trust—their grandmother. The children face a constant battle to get enough to eat, finish their schooling and live through the harsh realities of the judgment of others and the sanctimonious pettiness and cruelty of their grandmother. The relationship between the siblings is one most children could identify, the squabbles, the tears and the love...even though the circumstances of the characters are far removed from those of the reader.

Something quite beautiful, uplifting, but by the same token almost a little chilling, are the diary entries scattered quite frequently throughout the novel from Lydia's mother. Prior to her death, their loving mother created a diary leaving within it, many words of wisdom and love for Lydia and guidance to help Lydia with her life alone with her siblings, explaining the love a family has for one another and how not to live life bitterly. As an articulate caring mother, speaking to her daughter, these entries make the story all the poignant. This book appeals to children because of the sense of injustice the characters experience and children seem to naturally relate and empathise with the pain and angst the characters must suffer, even if the topic is one of unfamiliarity. This book proves an amazing starting point for discussing family loyalties and world wide issues in health, along with natural justice and a myriad other topics to do with relationships and community.

Francesca Massey, Exeter Primary School, Tas

Set in Africa, this story is sensitively written and begins with a letter full of a mother's love and pleasant family memories. By the end of the letter, however, we know there is something wrong. We are introduced to Lydia, and the helplessness she feels, as she struggles to raise her younger brother and sister alone after losing both parents to AIDS. The book addresses with compassion the difficult subject of AIDS, and the consequences of infidelity.

The children's grandmother is their only surviving relative, but instead of assisting, she makes their lives a misery. Their grandmother is grieving the loss of her son, and cannot come to terms with the fact that he died of AIDS and then spread it to his wife. Instead, the grandmother blames her dead daughter-in-law and seeks her own form of justice by thwarting the children's progress in every direction. Lydia feels helpless and uses the memory book left by her mother to console herself. Through the book, Lydia finds her inner strength and learns to deal with her grandmother by facing her fears head on. Lydia also discovers she has friends where she didn't expect them.

Torn Pages introduces a world many of us may be unaware of, opening the way to a variety of themes for classroom use, such as: letter and journal writing, research on the continent of Africa, AIDS, bullying, families and relationships, superstitions, life cycles, friendship, life challenges, survival, health, maths and statistics, culture and music.

Daisy Antoniou, Vic

Torn Pages is one of those books that, once you start reading, it is difficult to put down. The author, Sally Grindley has, yet again, produced a powerful, well written novel which is perfect for debating and discussing

human rights or even conducting a 'Community of Inquiry'. This book evokes passion, anger, fear, hope, sadness, happiness and of course a sense of righteousness. *Torn Pages* is the story of how a young adolescent girl, Lydia, becomes a mother figure for her two younger siblings (both their mother and father died of AIDS). The young family also lives with the fear that the youngest sibling, Kesi, may also have contracted the AIDS virus. Lydia overcomes many obstacles in her quest to save the family from a life of poverty and starvation. They are ostracised by school and community members. The grandmother, who has her own vendetta against the children and who takes what little money Lydia's mother had set aside for the family, does everything in her power to destroy the family. There is an element of fear that Lydia may also become a victim of sexual abuse and there are many other emotive twists in this book that engages the reader and inspires one to read on. A well written novel I would recommend for grades 7 and upwards.

Bernadette Dean, Franklin Primary School, Tas

The issue of AIDS is never an easy topic to discuss, especially with children. In her novel *Torn Pages* Sally Grindley creates a heartbreaking, yet heartwarming story of the prejudice faced by children who suffer from this dreadful disease.

Lydia has been left alone to care for her brother Joe and sister Kesi, in their African village following the death of first her father, then her mother. Whilst the term AIDS isn't openly mentioned in the story until quite late there are indications throughout of a disease that kills people, ostracizes them and their family, leaves them open to condemnation and accusations of witchcraft and sorcery. However there are some who support the children.

The only support Lydia has is the book her mother wrote in before she died giving Lydia words of advice, hope and strength. However words aren't always enough when you and your brother and sister are hungry, when you can't pay school fees or buy uniforms, when you have no money and a grandmother who does her utmost to destroy your life.

When her little sister becomes ill Lydia realises they have to get her to hospital but it is two hours walk away and they can't possibly carry Kezi that far. Who comes to their rescue? Certainly the last person Lydia would expect and his kindness doesn't end there.

This is story of courage, hope and the kindness of people, even those we sometimes misjudge. It would be suitable for middle to upper primary age children and young teenagers.

Raelene Hall, WA