

***A Small Free Kiss in the Dark* by Glenda Millard**

“Skip”, his “running away name” taken from the rubbish skips that he shelters in, flees yet another abusive foster home to take his chances on the streets. “A skip is somewhere you can shelter when there's nowhere else, and getting a new name is like being born all over again.” Skip roams the crowded streets of the unnamed city (with the feel of Melbourne) till he befriends Billy, a long term homeless man. When the city is bombed by soldiers from an unknown country, they take shelter in the State Library, and find abandoned six year old Max. Days later, whilst living in an empty fun fair, the ballerina Tia and her baby, join them. Through his ingenuity, Skip is able to scrounge up and create the necessities to support his “family” and keep them alive.

Glenda Millard is a genius at creating rich and complex characters that are out of the ordinary but easily identified with. Through Skip, Millard explores many ideas in her novel . . . are families always made up of people who bear blood ties or is material wealth a prerequisite for happiness amongst others? These don't interfere with the writing which is beautiful and lyrical. *A Small Free Kiss in the Dark* whilst being a quiet, thoughtful novel at times, has plenty of action to absorb, and, in the end, leaves the reader with feelings of hope despite events. This is a book that will have the reader yearning for more.

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This is an excellent novel to be studied at the Year 7 level. *A Small Free Kiss in the Dark* powerfully explores ideas a loss, hope, longing and despair as the reader ventures with 11 year old Skip, ‘old man’ Billy, tiny Max, baby Sixpence and 15 year old Tia into the ‘No Man’s Land’ of an abandoned amusement park called ‘Dreamland’. The main protagonist of the story is Skip, a runaway, who seeks out the companionship and love that he does not find at his foster home. Early in his life on the streets he meets Billy. The first part of the novel is about their life together as Skip reaches out to Billy but is rejected and alone. Skip wanders alone in the world and draws pictures as he tries to make sense of the world. Billy does not want to take care of Skip but something about him appeals to Billy and he starts to take Skip under his wing. This is until war comes to their city and they are forced to look after each other. The enemies that bring the war are never really disclosed, only the horror and destruction of war are felt on the people that are left behind. The story is effectively written from Skip’s point of view and is effective in portraying his 11 year old thought process and style of language across to the reader. Ultimately Skip and his companions try to escape to the place of hope, ‘Gulliver’s Meadows’ despite the personal tragedy they experience. This is a highly recommended novel that students are sure to engage with.

An extract from the novel as well as teaching notes can be accessed on the Allen & Unwin website.

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