

## ***Cicada Summer* by Kate Constable**

*Cicada Summer* explores the intricate nature of a family dealing with grief and how hope comes from inside and manifests itself in different way. Eloise has closed down emotionally since her mother's death 2 years earlier. Her father throws himself into moneymaking scheme after scheme. Mo, her grandmother, has locked herself into a small contained world, her own house. With truly delightful prose Kate Constable takes you on a journey of exploration between fantasy and reality. The vision and the art works created by Eloise and her friend Anna become real and the house takes on an ethereal character. I read the book from start to finish in one sitting having first asked my 11 year old daughter to read it for me. We both agree, it is beautifully written and is a wonderful illustration of the true nature of family, friendship and hope.

**Cate Alder, NSW**

*Their eyes met. The girl in the blue top backed away, one step, then another. And suddenly the foyer was empty. The girl was gone.*

*Cicada Summer*, by Kate Constable, is an enthralling tale about family, friendship, grief and hope. Having lost her mother to a tragic car accident, Eloise struggles as her father moves from one disdaining girlfriend to another. Absorbed in his plans to establish a convention centre on the grounds of the decrepit family home, Eloise's father leaves her with his reclusive mother, Mo. Mute in her grief and afraid of the kindly neighbours, Eloise seeks solace in the old house, meeting there her only friend, to whom she finally gives the gift of her first words. When her father returns, indicating his plans to destroy the run-down building, Eloise is thrown into a tumult of emotions. Racing to her sanctuary, she is followed by the neighbours' son, Tommy, who suffers a serious accident. Eloise's father is forced to reconsider his priorities, and agrees to modify his plans for the property so that the house can be retained and restored. In the final chapter, Eloise is filled with joy as she dances through the residence. A ghostly encounter takes her back to her first visit, before she moves, lighthearted and hopeful, out into the summer day where Tommy and her future await. The book is well-written, with an engaging and poetic narrative style. Constable uses vivid, expressive language which engages the senses and draws the reader in to the action, and ensures the book's coherence through effectively linking the conclusion with the depiction of Eloise's first visit to the house.

*Cicada Summer* would be the perfect book for a novel study, providing students with a model for quality descriptive writing and narrative structure. The experiences of Eloise provide an excellent platform from which students could explore highly relevant themes including notions of family, friendship and personal identity; cultural differences and inclusion; grief and loss; values and giving voice to important issues; and the significance of personal and community heritage.

A captivating book which, once begun, can only be put down at its finale.

**Alison Henderson, NSW**

*Cicada Summer* is a wonderfully *Australian* book! In these days of globalised publishing, it is refreshing to read a book that is unashamedly set in Australia, complete with drought, cicadas, damp bathers, bushfire (not wildfire!) and a broiling sun.

It is a coming-of-age story, about coming to terms with bereavement. Eloise is an elective mute who has blocked out all thoughts of her mother who died in a car accident. Her father is a hopeless dreamer, full of ideas and plans that never come to fruition. Distracted by an obviously doomed romance and his plans to develop his mother's old house, it is not until he thinks he has lost Eloise that he realises just how much she means to him.

The plot acknowledges a debt to *The Secret Garden* but not to *Tom's Midnight Garden* which uses the same idea of shifts-of-time and a ghostly friend as solace to a lonely child. It is a little bit predictable for experienced adult readers, but the resolution is satisfying.

The characterisation is interesting. A central character who doesn't talk could have been a limitation, but Eloise communicates using art, and the omniscient narrator provides her point-of-view. Poor at reading and writing, she has a gift for painting and drawing, and I like the way this character is not portrayed as deficient, just different.

The novel has a contemporary feel to it, with Afghani neighbours living next door, and there are tilts at 'helicopter parents' hampering children's need for freedom to explore and have a life of their own. Art Deco has been in the news a bit due to the recent exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria but it's still not very likely that many children will recognise its significance to the house threatened with development as a conference centre. For a class reading of this novel, it could be interesting to

look at architectural styles in Australia, and the conservation work of National Trusts – but of course kids in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can always Google to find out more if they are puzzled!

**Lisa Hill, Mossiel Park Primary School, Vic**

*Cicada Summer* is about twelve-year-old Eloise, foisted onto a grandmother she has never met so that her father can chase his latest moneymaking scheme. Since her mother's death, Eloise has stopped speaking, preferring to express herself through drawing. Her grandmother, Mo, is reluctant to look after Eloise for Mo has her own problems. She is afraid to go out of the house and must rely on her young neighbour, Tommy Durrani, to perform errands for her.

In order to avoid Tommy, Eloise escapes to the abandoned property her father plans to turn into a convention centre. While there, she slips into a time when the house and its surrounds are full of people, music and laughter. Eloise befriends Anna whom she soon believes is her own mother as a child. The two play in the summerhouse and decorate its walls with paintings. But one day, Anna's father finds her with Eloise and refuses to let Anna play in the summerhouse anymore. Meanwhile, Eloise's father returns with plans that could mean she may never see Anna again.

'Eloise floated on a sea of red and orange swirls.' From the first sentence, *Cicada Summer* is full of colour and contrast. Its author, Kate Constable, has used her fantasy-writing talents to make this story utterly believable.

Big themes delicately interconnect in this book as Eloise tries to cope with the loss of her mother and her father's abandonment. Family estrangement, friendship, cultural diversity, identity, growing up, resilience—there is much here to stimulate discussion in a Year Six or Seven English lesson.

However, this story would probably appeal more to girls than to boys. The clues to the surprise ending are all there yet not so obvious they shout 'plot'.

I loved this story and recommend it for young readers.

**Sharon Hammad, NSW**

This is a lovely story of a girl, Eloise, who's mother has died and her father takes her to the town where he grew up to stay with the grandmother she doesn't remember, while he organises his own life.

She spends a lot of the time visiting an alternative world at the family home which is no longer lived in, but which her father plans to make into a resort for conferences as it is only 2 hours from the city. She has become mute since the death of her mother and throughout the summer where she interacts with an 'imaginary' friend at the house she rediscovers her voice and her artistic ability. Her grandmother is housebound due to agoraphobia and throughout the summer their various problems are overcome as they develop their relationship and the one with the immigrant family next door. The neighbour's son follows her to the house and discovers she 'disappears', he becomes injured and she needs to seek help. Her voice is found and a deeper level of both relationships develop as Tommy helps her to understand who she 'visits' at the house.

Both the grandmother Mo and Eloise start to overcome their problems, Eloise finds not only her voice but her ability to tell her father what it is she really wants and to communicate effectively with all around her.

This is suitable for 10-12 year olds.

This book could be used in the classroom to give children the idea that they can set their minds to things and get them done and also that people have different ways of expressing their intelligences, as well as dealing with death. It could also fit into a unit on insects looking at life cycles, particularly the cicada.

**Jane Cusick, Lindisfarne North Primary School, Tas**

*Cicada Summer* is written by Kate Constable. The story is about a nice girl, Eloise who has to move to Turner with her father so her grandmother can help look after her. One day, while Eloise is listening to the cicadas she closes her eyes... and something amazing happens. Eloise is a nice girl with a bright imagination. Her Dad is kind but is often very serious. Her grandmother is generally calm, but sometimes gets annoyed. There is also someone else but you'll need to read it to find out who! This book is great to read for its mysterious twists and turns. We recommend it for children aged from 10-13 who like using their imaginations. It is a fabulous book (probably more suited to girls though!)

**Keeley, Zoe and Sophie, Year 4, NSW**

“This is a fresh start, a fresh start for both of us. You can’t move forward if you’re always looking back.”

So, still grieving for her mother, tragically killed in a car accident, Eloise McCredie and her father move back to Turner, Dad’s ‘dry and dusty’ home town. Since Anna’s death, both had been ‘searching’ - Dad through moving, changing jobs and ex-girlfriend, Bree, while Eloise has retreated to her own world and gone quiet, using her sketching to ease her tension. Under these circumstances, and seemingly ‘abandoned’ by her father to live with his mother, Mo, under her set of rules, life isn’t going to be easy. Stern and joyless, Grandma Mo suffers panic attacks and doesn’t leave the house. She tends to avoid Eloise as well, locked in the study, working on her book, not to be disturbed. It’s neighbouring Afghani lad, Tommy (Osman) Durrani, and his family who offer the hand of friendship and practical help to them both.

The story takes an unusual, mysterious twist as Eloise escapes each day to an imaginary world where time runs differently. At the Art Deco house, she meets Anna, the ghostly ‘summerhouse girl’, and a friendship develops between them, ‘their loneliness wrapped around them like a dark mist’. Time spent in this ‘alternate reality’, painting the summerhouse, proves an enjoyable project and gives Eloise a sense of peace, until Tommy’s accident brings her back to ‘the land of the speaking’. As Professor Durrani’s counselling helps Eloise realise that not talking about her mother hurt more than actually thinking about her, and Dad comes to realise that Eloise IS important to him, Mo also faces her demons, taking forty-nine fateful steps out of her house and over to the Durrani’s place.

Moreover, when the identity of the ‘summerhouse girl’ is finally revealed, time in fact turned forwards not backwards, the implications herald the start of a new life for them all– no more giving up and running away, the family grateful to the ghostly Anna for her revelations.

An easy-to-read and simply told, beautiful tale of growing up, friendship and family, *Cicada Summer* also addresses the ‘big’ issues of anxiety and agoraphobia, acceptance and belonging, and of death and grief. Cleverly titled – it is the roar of cicadas which transports Eloise to her protected, sunlight world - Kate Constable writes with sensitivity and empathy, her evocative style skilfully building the fantasy and the ethereal atmosphere of mystery in this story, set where ‘time is a looped piece of string’. Recommended for inclusion in the primary school library, appealing to students aged 9-12 for individual borrowing, *Cicada Summer* is also suitable as a teacher read-a-loud in upper primary classrooms, the themes of the novel providing further creative writing and discussion-starter opportunities, with Constable’s rich prose and heartfelt wisdom.

“You have to keep swimming through. That’s what my mumma always says. Never give up.”

**Alison Cassell, Qld**

A fascinating adventure! The story of Eloise is told as a child might listen to their parent read at night time. It is a soft and soothing story of family, loss, love, friendship, fitting in and the past and the future.

Eloise has suffered a loss that no child should bare at such a young age, the loss of a parent. Kate Constable skilfully shows us the journey Eloise takes as she moves through her grief. This text would act as a useful resource for working with children around issues of loss and grief, and understanding that individuals deal with these experiences differently. This eloquent story may also act as a friend to any child who finds themselves in the very same position as Eloise.

The cover shows a creative integration of grey and colour, just as I see the relationships in the story. There are links between father and daughter, mother and son, neighbours, friends, the country and city. There are lessons here about difference, tolerance, understanding, and respect. This is not a lesson written to teach a message, but a beautiful experience we as readers can appreciate, being inspired along the way.

The story is beautifully written and a pleasure to read. I will happily read, and re-read this book, gaining deeper and further insights upon each re-reading.

**Georgie Eberbach, Vic**

Beautiful attractive eye-catching cover...opens to reveal....the following:

From the first page the reader is drawn into the world of Eloise. Sensitive, silent and artistic and grieving at the loss of her mother she is moved to live with her grandmother whilst her get-rich-easily father attempts to inject money and action into his ideas. Eloise finds herself drawn to the old house her father hopes to turn into a convention centre. Here she meets a girl, a ghost, maybe from the past possibly from somewhere else. A girl with whom she becomes friends and who she comes to know, even more closely than she can understand, at first. Eloise spends time with the ghost girl and

over the duration of the story comes to a deeper understanding of the importance of friendship, family, grieving and taking a risk.

Ultimately, a more dangerous turn of events ensues where Eloise must come to terms with her life, and learn from the past, ready to tackle the future.

The beauty of this story is in the fact that you are immediately empathise with many of the characters and are taken on a journey of mystery, a little magic and the whole gamut of human emotions.

Written in the style of "When Marnie was there" by Joan G Robinson, the reader is embraced by an almost dreamlike quality to the text ... is this a ghost story, a coming-of-age story...? Both and more ... the reader will feel truly satisfied that they have read a "jolly good story" - satisfying and thought-provoking.

Suited best to girls from around 10+, but great reading for anyone who likes a story to provoke thought and atmosphere and tension.

**Francesca Massey, Exeter Primary School, Tas**

"The house gathered Eloise in and embraced her,  
and she realized that she was smiling."

Eloise has given up any reason to talk, slowly sinking into silence since the death of her mother. Meanwhile, her seemingly unsympathetic father finds solace in new relationships and a heavy work schedule. Unable to relate to his mute daughter he leaves her with her grandmother Mo, while he throws himself into redevelopment plans for his mother's abandoned run-down, art deco property on the outskirts of the country township of Turner.

Mo's old house carries the heartbeat of the story and is a character as strong as any other. It is on her regular visits to the old empty house that Eloise finds herself living in two worlds, one of which seems to be filled with mysterious people from a different time. It is during these visits that she develops a relationship with Anna and recovers a reason to use her voice. In the real world, plans to bulldoze the house create an ignition point for the long felt tension and clashing values of Mo and her son. On a dark stormy night when dramatic events put Eloise in danger, what really matters in life becomes starkly apparent to her father, and then the house provides a new start for all of them. In her real life, on that stormy night, Eloise finds her voice in a desperate bid to save Tommy from drowning in the pool of the old house. Tommy is part of an Afgani refugee family who live next door to Mo. They are like guardian angels to Mo who has become socially isolated and too afraid to leave her home. With gentle persistence, Tommy eventually breaks down the barrier of silent isolation that cocoons Eloise from the world, and with their friendship she continues along her healing journey. Kate Constable gives us an intriguing story line with a child's perception, where the lines between imagination, reality and the supernatural blur.

At a deeper level this story takes us on a journey exploring grief, loss, isolation, loneliness and fear, through the well crafted characters of Eloise, her father and grandmother. This journey will resonate and touch readers of any age, and challenges us to choose honesty and courage over withdrawal or superficiality, and concludes by restoring our faith in the healing power of relationships.

The beautiful cover makes reference to the important role Eloise's gift as an artist and the way she uses drawing to express herself when all else fails.

Australian readers will feel right at home with the images and atmosphere unobtrusively created by Kate Constable in her *Cicada Summer*.

**Stephanie Hanscamp, Mountain District Christian School, Vic**

A sweet and descriptive, well written narrative. This is a story about love, loss and friendship, which everyone can relate to. Eloise loses her mum in a tragic car accident and gets dragged from place to place due to her father's string of not-good-enough girlfriends. Her father has huge plans to turn his mother's decrepit old home into a convention centre. The story follows Eloise as she struggles to come to terms with her emotions surrounding the proposed building and the knocking down of the house and then the accident of a neighbour's son, Tommy. Finally, Eloise finds a friend in Tommy and the story ends happily. This would be a great novel for older primary/lower secondary students to study. It demonstrates perfect narrative structure and addresses age appropriate issues of friendship, family, community and heritage.

**Carolyn Hicks, Winton Primary School, Vic**

*Cicada Summer* begins with beautiful imagery of the main character's early memories of her deceased mother. Eloise is drawn out of her reverie by her father, whose overly comedic personality I found a little annoying. Closed down by grief, Eloise has not spoken since her mother's death.

Her father unceremoniously drops Eloise off at her grandmother Mo's. I think the reader will identify with many threads throughout this poignant story, including grief, feeling out of control, misunderstood and unwanted. My heart almost broke when Eloise's father drove off, leaving her alone with Mo, who doesn't seem to want her at all.

Encouraged by her grandmother, Eloise begins to explore her neighbourhood and discovers a ghostly house and a girl called Anna. A friendship emerges and Anna is the first person Eloise speaks to. *Cicada Summer* is effectively a ghost story but one that helps Eloise to move forward with her life and her relationship with her father. The story has a timeless feel about it and is reminiscent of *Tom's Midnight Garden*.

Beautifully written, *Cicada Summer* is aimed at 8-12 year olds but will be enjoyed by all.

**Julie Huntley, Qld**