

The Endsister

By Penni Russon

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Recommended for 12 – 16-year-old readers

Summary

Meet the Outhwaites. There's Dad (Dave) and Mum (Olly). There's 16-year-old Else, the violinist who hates the violin. There's nature-loving Clancy, who likes animals more than people – particularly the girls who tease him now he's at high school. There're the twins, Oscar and Finn, Finn and Oscar, who are never far apart. And then there is four-year-old Sibbi, the baby of the family. They live in a cottage on Aunty May's property, among the trees and the possums and as much space as you could ask for. But when Aunty May gets sick, they begin to worry that they will lose everything...then Dave discovers he has inherited a large, run-down house in the city. But there's one problem, the city is London.

The family pack up and move to London only to discover that not everyone is comfortable with the change. Dave is never around, constantly tied up in legal and financial drama. Olly is alone and cut off from her work and study and friends. Else is even more miserable in London than she was in Australia, missing her violin and not sure how to make herself feel better. And Sibbi is misbehaving, feeling left out and unwanted, and she won't stop talking about the people in their house, the people no one else can see.

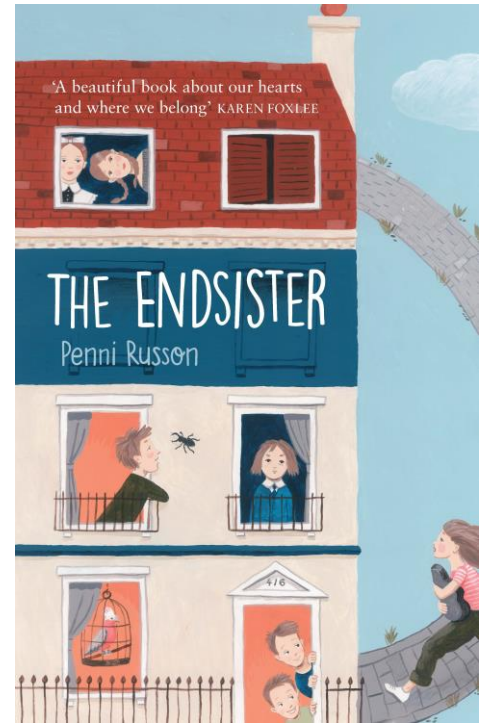
Meanwhile two ghosts, Hardly Alice and Almost Annie, watch as this new family moves into their house...and hope and pray that they can keep them away from the locked door upstairs...

Themes

- family relationships
- the meaning of 'home' / national identity
- coming of age
- ghosts

Use in the curriculum

- Suitable for English study in the middle years of schooling and further.
- Use as a class set to explore the novel's themes and the craft of writing.
- Can be used in a Literature Circle as students explore books about moving home, moving country, finding ghosts in a new home. Why are these themes so common in books for young people?



Other books on similar themes

Danny Allen Was Here by Phil Cummings, illustrated by David Cox. Pan Macmillan Australia 2007

The challenges of a farming life force a family to move.

Eleanor, Elizabeth by Libby Gleeson. Angus & Robertson Publishers 1984

An oldie but goodie. A girl discovers a feeling of wholeness and belonging in a new place by learning about her grandmother's life.

Six Impossible Things by Fiona Wood. Pan Macmillan Australia 2010

Moving into an inherited house after his father becomes bankrupt, Dan eventually learns to feel at home in his new circumstances.

The Other Side of Summer by Emily Gale. Random House Australia 2016

After a son dies in a London terrorist attack, an English family moves to Australia. Major theme is moving through the stages of grief.

The Green Laurel by Eleanor Spence, illustrated by Geraldine Spence. Oxford University Press 1963

Set in Australia, the daughter in an itinerant family learns that 'home is where the heart is'. CBCA Children's Book of the Year.

[Introduces a historical dimension to the study of Australian literature for young people.

Eleanor Spence earned an Order of Australia for her contributions to Australian literature for young people. As the *Sydney Morning Herald* wrote in her obituary, 'Spence (made) an outstanding contribution ... in a pioneering career spanning five decades and entertaining generations of young people. Her work helped shape the direction of children's literature in Australia.']

<https://kidsbookswithoutborders.wordpress.com/book-lists/>

An interesting website for 'third culture kids' - the children of families that move around the world. Most of the recommended books are picture books for young children, but students could browse the reviews on this website to add to a discussion about why so many books for young people are set around the problems of moving house.

Style

The Endsister pushes many of the conventions of children's fiction, in the process creating a thoroughly compelling story with loads of unexpected twists and turns. Its moving exploration of friendship, learning to be yourself and navigating family dynamics during a period of change is overlaid with a thrilling gothic subplot involving teenage ghosts trapped in the house and something, possibly ominous, behind a locked door that hasn't been opened for a century.

The novel's poetic turn-of-phrase and dreamy sequences fit beautifully with its primarily first person alternating narrative voices. This unusual choice of 'voice' increases the sense of intimacy between reader and characters (as we are invited deep inside the heads of Else, Clancy and Sibbi), while the use of present tense heightens the novel's sense of supernatural mystery.

Comprehension questions

- Why does Clancy want to leave the Natural History Museum suddenly? (page 111)
- What do you think Else means when she says she is 'a song trapped in a chest in a cage in a city. That's who I am without my violin.' (page 160)
- How does Lev Starman help Else to love playing the violin again?

(cont. over page)



In the classroom...

- Why was the spirit of Beatrix Elizabeth Rose Outhwaite so unhappy?
- What do you think happens to the spirits of Almost Annie, Hardly Alice and Beatrix when they pass through the front door at the end of the story?
- Explain what you think the last sentence in the book means, 'A story that ends where it begins: a story about coming home.' (page 242)

Extension:

- Read the chapter describing the dream of each living member of the Outhwaite family over one evening. (pp 167-170) Choose one or two dreams and explain what you think they tell you about that character.

Discussion questions and activities

Prologue

- What is a prologue?
- Why do you think authors choose to include a prologue in a book?
- Re-read *The Endsister's* prologue and describe the mood that it sets.
- What words in the prologue are particularly good at setting that mood?

Chapter 1 - Sibbi:

- Does the mood in this chapter change from that of the prologue? Can you find any similarities in mood between this chapter and the prologue?

Alternating points-of-view

- The story is told from three distinct points-of-view: Else, Clancy and Sibbi, as well as Hardly Alice and Almost Annie's shared point-of-view. Why do you think Penni Russon chose to tell her story this way? What do you like about this approach and is there anything you don't like?
- Re-tell the story from the point-of-view of one of the other Outhwaites, Olly, Dave, Finn or Oscar.

Tense

- What tense is *The Endsister* written in?
- Try re-writing a section of the story in past tense and describe how the way we read the story might change.

Characterisation

- Choose three adjectives to describe Else, Clancy and Sibbi.
- Now find a scene in the book to illustrate each word you chose. For instance, if you chose the word 'confused' for Else describe a scene or scenes in the novel where she demonstrates her confusion.

Language study

'Soon,' says Hardly Alice ... 'How much longer, Mama?' Sibbi asks.

'Soon,' says Olly. (pp 58-59)

- Discuss the effect that repetition, imagery and contrast of scene have in this passage.

Cover design

- After reading *The Endsister* list the things you like and/or don't like about the book's cover. What is the significance of the birdcage and insect on the wall? Why is one of the girls in the attic window standing perpendicular to the other?
- Design a new cover for the story. Choose an image you feel would be appropriate, as well as colours and font that would suit the story. After completion, write a short paragraph explaining your choices.

Penni Russon on writing *The Endsister*

'*The Endsister* began life in serial form on Storybird (an online creative platform for writers and artists of any age) and because of that I pushed lots of the conventions for middle grade books. In the online version there are passages from the parents' points of view. In the online novel I wrote in third person, 'head-hopping' between the characters. When I was rewriting for the printed book I changed lots of things. I narrowed the points of view down to Clancy, Else and Sibbi. In the first version, I tried to keep it so that only the kids would see or believe in the ghosts, but in the rewrite, I realised I needed to show the reader that the ghosts were real, and that Dave, who had spent time in the London house as a child, believed in them too. It would be an interesting exercise to compare a passage from the online version with a passage from the published version – basically it's like having a first draft out in the world.

'I actually travelled to London myself after writing the Storybird version and before rewriting for the book version. I went to Harrods and Richmond and took some photos of houses that looked like Outhwaite House. I had Clancy's realisation in the Natural History Museum, and wanted to include it in the novel. What I did learn was how good Google Earth had been as a tool to navigate the city, but it doesn't give you things like smells, and I swear England always smells of fabric softener to me.

'The storyline about Else and the violin is very personal to me, because this book was written at the tail end of a paralysing bout of writer's block. I was winning awards for *Only Ever Always* and at the same time, I felt like I might never write again. I was pushing through this blockage to write *The Endsister*, and the online platform, the instant feedback, the readers eager to go wherever I wanted to take them, and the feeling of community and accountability probably cured me.'

For teachers: Penni Russon recommends Storybird.com as a great way to get your students' creativity sparking. Go to storybird.com and click on the 'Educators' tab to find out more.



About the author

Penni Russon is an internationally acclaimed, award-winning writer and academic with an enduring interest in childhood and adolescence. Penni lives in the bushy outskirts of Melbourne with her partner, three kids and a schnauzer called Swoosie.

Find out more about Penni at pennirusson.com, or her blog eglantinescake.blogspot.com.au.