

# Teachers' Notes

by Esther Smith

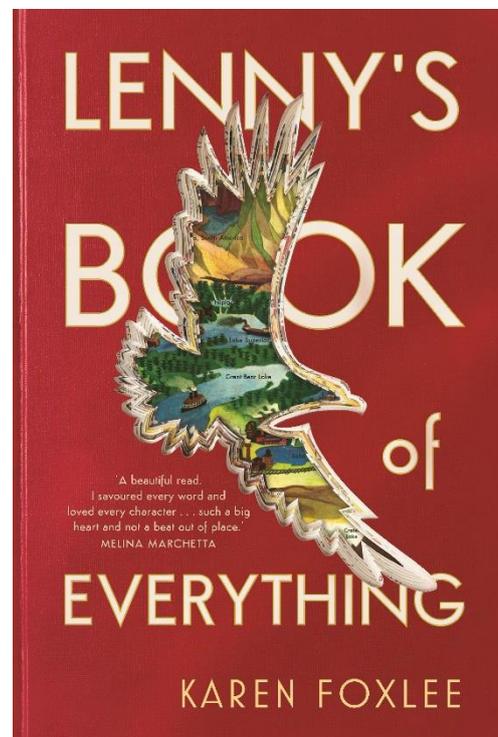
# LENNY'S BOOK OF EVERYTHING

by  
Karen Foxlee

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Recommended for ages 10 – 14 yrs

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83 Alexander Street  
Crows Nest, Sydney  
NSW 2065  
Australia

PO Box 8500  
St Leonards  
NSW 1590  
Australia

ph: (61 2) 8425 0100  
fax: (61 2) 9906 2218

[info@allenandunwin.com](mailto:info@allenandunwin.com)  
[www.allenandunwin.com](http://www.allenandunwin.com)

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## INTRODUCTION

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### SYNOPSIS

Lenny, small and sharp, has a younger brother Davey who won't stop growing – at seven, he is as tall as a man. Raised by their mother, they have a roof over their heads, but not much else.

The bright spot every week is the arrival of the latest issue of Burrell's Build-It-At-Home Encyclopedia. Through the encyclopedia, Lenny and Davey experience the wonders of the world – beetles, birds, quasars, quartz – and dream about a life of freedom and adventure. But as Davey's health deteriorates, Lenny realises that some wonders can't be named.

Lenny's Book of Everything is a big-hearted novel about love and letting go.

### CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT

*Lenny's Book of Everything* is best studied in secondary years (grades 7 to 11), and can be used to teach to all three strands of the Australian English curriculum (Language, Literature, and Literacy). Its themes make it particularly appropriate for units in which social justice is emphasised.

#### Themes explored:

- Disability and physical difference
- Love
- Loneliness
- Grief and death
- Family

### AUTHOR'S INSPIRATION

'I always find the process of story creation quite mysterious. I have the embers of so many stories smouldering in my brain and I'm never quite sure what makes one start to burn. The story of an encyclopaedia set and a boy who kept growing had been in my head for many years, but it wasn't until I was writing *A Most Magical Girl* that it flared to life. This Lenny and Davey story, called to me incessantly like no other story. "Everything will be ok if you can just write me," that story said. When I finally sat down to write it Lenny was there waiting for me. I felt immediately comfortable in her voice. Lenny's Book of Everything felt huge. Davey growing and growing and growing. All the knowledge in those encyclopaedia pages, the big friendships and the big love. It felt like I was trying to fit the universe inside a shoe box, but Lenny's voice kept me calm.

'While story writing is about creating a world and breathing characters to life and enticing readers on a journey, it is also, for me, just as much about sorting stuff out in my head. While I wrote I was thinking a lot about loss and grief, about ill-health, about caring for someone who is dying because I had experienced all these things in recent years. I was also thinking about love in all its forms: sibling love, motherly love, neighbourly love, the love between friends. I wanted to sort out in my head stuff about what it means to love someone who is different, how that feels and the emotions that go along with that love. But mostly, through it all, I think I was really trying to shine a light on what a cracker of a miracle it is to be alive and how everywhere, even in darkest hours, there's always hope. Writing the story certainly gave me hope in many ways.'

— Karen Foxlee

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## LITERATURE STUDY

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### CHARACTERS

#### LENNY SPINK

*Sometimes rain made me want to cry, like there was something deep inside of me – the sadness flower that opened up when rainy days came, and blossomed inside of me until I couldn't breathe.* p. 22

*'I can't imagine what it's like inside that brain of yours. I bet it's a jumbled up mess like a junk sale.'* p. 38

*...beetles had wings but they hid them away.* p. 52

*Because whatever was inside me seemed powerful. My anger and sadness, a big ball of it, felt electric, white hot...* p. 107

*'Yeah, you got a sweetheart,' said Mr. King. 'I have not, you wouldn't know anything,' I said.* p. 194

*I found I was strangely good at doing bad things.* p. 216

*'Tell me what made you do it, Lenore,' said the police officer. 'You don't look like a girl who just goes around breaking windows.'...*

*'He tried to hurt my mama,' I said."* pp. 219-220

*'Two wrongs don't make a right,' he said again at the bottom of the stairs and he smiled at me.*

*What about three wrongs? I wanted to say it. Or five? I felt like I had more wrongs inside me. I was just a thin dam holding back all the wrongs.* p. 223

*I was filled up with sorrows like Mrs. Gaspar's Lady of Sorrows, like my mother. I was young and already I was filled up.* p. 230

*It was my father going. That was when I disappeared.* p. 284

1. The book is set over the years that Lenny is 8 to 11 years old. These years span the period over which Lenny grows from a child into what we would call a 'tween'.
  - a. What changes do we see in her that can be attributed to this maturation? Think about her actions, her relationships, and her changing awareness of herself and the world around her.
2. In a story like *Lenny's Book of Everything*, it would be easy to make Lenny into a martyr who nobly handles her brother's illness with perfect grace and equanimity. Instead, Foxlee makes Lenny a more flawed and complex character.
  - a. What adjectives would you use to describe Lenny as a person? How does she describe herself in the text?
  - b. Why do you think Foxlee made this choice for Lenny?
3. Lenny develops her interest in beetles early in the novel. She describes all the things that fascinate her about them, but the thing that makes them most appealing to her is "*the simple fact that beetles had wings but they hid them away.*" p. 52.
  - a. What does this tell us about Lenny?
  - b. What can we predict about Lenny's character arc when we read this early on in the narrative?

## DAVEY SPINK

*'Why, he's perfectly normal.'* p. 6

*Davey bellowed like a wounded bull. Davey's bellows shook the walls.* p. 13

*'He's too big,' she said.*

*She was the first one to ever come right out and say it.*

*It wasn't He's VERY big' It was He's TOO big. He didn't fit.* p. 18

*Davey's ultimate favourite was the golden eagle and it figured; it was a grand bird with huge wings which shone all burnished bronze.* p. 47

*There would be four neat lines of first graders and then Davey.* p. 68

*Everyone fell in love with Davey.* p. 77

*In the park, Davey lay in the sunshine on the grass. He watched the sky. I could tell he was imagining Timothy, his eagle.* p. 177

*Even after all that he stuck up for me. Even though he was still smarting from the disaster of Great-Aunt Em, he stuck up for me. Even though I kept changing my mind about running away to Great Bear Lake, he stuck up for me.* p. 252

1. It can be argued that, in many ways, *Lenny's Book of Everything* is actually a story about Davey.
  - a. Do you agree with this statement? Why/why not?
2. Why does everyone fall in love with Davey?

## CYNTHIA SPINK

*She was good at knowing the wrongness of things, sadnesses and sicknesses and, in the park, she could always find the pigeon with one leg.* p. 2

*She was thin with worrying our mother... She was made almost entirely out of worries and magic.* p. 4

*She tied up her fair hair in a fountain on her head. She went to work at the Golden Living Retirement Home.* p. 9

*My mother lied with gay abandon.* p. 28

*She didn't like sad things or hard things or mean things.* p. 32

*Sometimes Mother worked at the fruit store in the morning for four hours, then changed and caught the twenty-eight bus to the Golden Living Retirement Home.* p. 48

*She didn't like to take any kind of gifts or charity.* p. 62

*'Hush,' said Mother and she hiccupped and tried to get herself under control which was straight up and down and skinny with a frown. She closed her eyes and I closed mine.* p. 78

*She worried about money. She worried about food. She worried about clothes. She worried about weather. She was jangly with worries.* p. 97

*My mother's high school handwriting had grown rigid and jerky.* p. 104

*My mother was not the sort to be caressed.* p. 285

1. Cynthia is full of anxiety, and as a single mother in the early 1970s she has good reason to be.  
In the USA, the minimum wage in 1970 was \$1.00/h. As a woman working in aged care, Cynthia would have been unlikely to earn much more than this.
  - a. Research the likely cost of basic items such as milk, bread, a bus fare, a pair of shoes, the rent on a small two-bedroom apartment.
  - b. Knowing all this, what does Mr. King represent to Cynthia?
2. Do you think Cynthia is a good mother? Give reasons for your answer.

### **MRS. GASPAR**

*She deposited us with Mrs. Gaspar and Karl and Karla. Mrs. Gaspar said, 'My little Dumplings,' and took us in. p. 9*

*We loved Mrs. Gaspar's dreams. They were colorful and wild and full of warnings. In her dreams birds spoke and the sea washed into the city streets and mother got married in a blue wedding dress. p. 34*

*They were tight, Mrs. Gaspar and Davey. He knew the holy rosary. He knew the entire cast of Days of Our Lives. He knew all the ingredients in goulash. They watched Starsky and Hutch together every Tuesday when Mother worked the late shift. Side by side they ate pretzels. p. 45*

*She needed to sit quietly without us and smoke her cigarettes and read her magazines. She needed to draw glasses on Jackie Onassis and a moustache on Elvis. She needed to close her eyes and think of Jesus and Hungary. p. 60*

*...dandruffy and unravelly with a big gravelly cough. p. 317*

1. Mrs. Gaspar's dreams are woven throughout the narrative.
  - a. Do you see links between her dreams and the events that are happening in the story?
  - b. Choose one of her dreams and try to interpret what its different elements might symbolize.
2. What would the Spink's life be like without Mrs. Gaspar?

### **CJ BARTHOLEMEW**

*CJ was a small wild slip of a thing. She had a blast of fair hair that wouldn't stay in the bunches her mother tied. p. 16*

*'I'm going to be a drummer...'*

*Everyone in CJ's family was a nurse or going to be a nurse...She belonged to a great nursing dynasty. p. 90*

*She played the triangle with fierce concentration. p. 90*

*'Why'd you do that?' I asked when she took her seat next to me.*

*'I just couldn't keep it inside anymore' she replied. p. 147*

*... she plunged into my chest so hard I was winded. She hugged me and hugged me and hugged me and told me that everything would be fine. p. 210*

*That sadness rose up in me like a giant wave and I was going to be drowned. CJ kept her arm around my shoulder so I didn't drown. p. 330*

1. How would you describe the bond between CJ and Lenny? What qualities do they share, and what makes them different?
2. What does CJ's friendship mean to Lenny. What does CJ represent to her?
3. CJ is from a nursing dynasty, but she's determined to be a drummer. What does this tell us about her character?
4. On pages 146-147 we see CJ have her moment rocking out on the drums at school assembly.
  - a. Rewrite this event from CJ's perspective. How does she feel? What does this moment mean to her? What does she hope will happen next?

### **PETER LENARD SPINK**

*Until one night the key turned in the lock and Peter Lenard Spink appeared. He stood very still as though he wasn't sure if he was in the right place. p. 7*

*Peter Lenard Spink went to Pensacola. He went to Tuscaloosa. He went to St Louis. He went to St. Marks and St. Cloud. He went North and South. He went East and West. p. 8*

*He was leaving sounds; rusty suitcase clasps and zippers. p. 8*

*'He'll come back,' Mother said each time Peter Lenard Spink left.  
'He'll come back,' she pleaded with no one. p. 9*

*He whispered out of our lives at dawn, unlatched the door and clicked it behind him, and never came back again. p. 9*

*...Mother was on the number twenty eight and her whole night stretched out in front of her with no idea that we were disappearing.  
Just that thought and I stopped. I was like Peter Lenard Spink. Davey too. We were disappearing. p. 268*

*There is room in this story for him to come back... He has room to come up the stairs. There is no one stopping him. p. 304*

1. Peter Lenard Spink is first introduced as an absence rather than a person. We see him through the eyes of the people who miss him.
  - a. How does this position the reader with regards to his character? When a character is introduced in this way, what do we expect they will be like?

### **MR. KING**

*He had sparkly black eyes and they danced all over Mother. p. 40*

*'Pah,' said Mrs. Gaspar. 'That man is a wolf. Beware, Cyn-thi-a. His apples are bad and his bananas never ripen.' p. 48*

*He ruffled Davey's hair and told him to behave which was stupid because Davey was the best behaved kid in the world. p. 114*

*He tried to wheedle his way in with us. He said, 'Well here come the two best looking kids in town.' p. 137*

*He listened to the word tumours and the word operation and the word radiation, but they didn't much affect him. They pinged off him like he was wearing armour. p. 169*

*Then we heard a shout. It was Mother, shouting, 'NO!'*

*It was a terrible no.*

*I jumped up fast. Davey too. We ran out into the living room and Mr. King was on the floor. He was on his back like a round dung beetle that couldn't get up.*

*'Get out,' said Mother.*

*He struggled there on the floor, rolled himself over onto his knees.*

*'Get out, I said,' cried mother because he was going too slowly. He stood up and glared at us. He grabbed the keys to his Ford Gran Torino with great effect.*

*He said, 'You'll be sorry for this.'*

*And that was the last time Mr. King ever came to our apartment for dinner. pp. 199-200*

1. What adjectives would you use to describe Mr. King? Think about:
  - His physical appearance
  - His attitude to the Lenny and Davey
  - The way he treats Cynthia both before and after the incident when she kicks him out of their apartment.
2. Mr. King is very proud of his Ford Gran Torino.
  - a. What does it represent to him?
  - b. What does this tell us about his character?
  - c. What does it mean when Lenny throws a rock through the car's window?

### **NANNY FLORA**

*Nanny Flora lived far away and neither Davey nor I had ever met her in person. She spoke on the phone, once a month on a Sunday, twelve Sundays a year. She was an official regular event. p. 21*

*On the phone she spoke down, from somewhere high above, a cloud perhaps, perfectly white and sanitized. p. 21*

1. Even though they are mother and daughter, we don't see much interaction between Nanny Flora and Cynthia in the novel.
  - a. What can we infer about the relationship between them from what we know of their characters?
2. How might Cynthia feel about her life when she compares it to that of her "perfectly white and sanitized" (p. 21) mother?

### **GREAT AUNT EM**

*'There's no Great-Aunt Em,' she said when I was finished.*

*'Shut up!' I cried.*

*You should never tell your mother to shut up.*

*'There isn't,' she said. 'I met his mother. There was no sister.' p. 241*

*She was wild bright memories in plucked chicken skin. p. 283*

*She was a big fat hurt. She was nothing but lies. She was a glorious blaze of big fat lies. I hated her. And I missed her. She was my chance to find my father, to build him up again from all his broken parts, and now that chance was gone. p. 283*

1. Why is it so important to Lenny that Great Aunt Em is real? Why is it so heartbreaking to her when she finds out she is not?
2. Do you think Great Aunt Em was wrong to deceive Lenny? Can you understand why she did it?

## SETTINGS

### GRAYFORD, OHIO

*"Second Street, Grayford, Ohio was long and straight and its buildings were almost entirely the color of moon rock; light grey, dark grey and occasionally a strange light green."* p. 13

*"Second street, all moon-rock coloured, stretched forever and I wondered sometimes if it ever even ended."* p. 40

*"It made me feel like all the glittering wet Grayford streets were inside me. All the lost kittens and sad old ladies waiting at bus stops and pigeons with broken legs."* p. 53

1. What would it be like to live in an urban American environment in the early 1970s? Grayford is a fictional place, but you will be able to find information about real cities.
2. Create a 'Greetings from Grayford' postcard, depicting a landmark of the city (e.g. the park, the bus station). Try to convey your sense of what the place is like.

### THE SPINK'S HOUSE

*"The small nest of rooms that was our home."* p. 7

*"Our apartment looked smaller and shabbier for having him there. The pale green walls and the threadbare sofa and the plastic fruit in the bowl on top of the television."* p. 311

1. If you were to walk into the Spinks' apartment without having met them, what would you infer about the family that lives there?
2. Imagine you are in Davey and Lenny's room. Look around you and choose an object. Describe that object, how it appears in the context of the room, and what you think it might mean to the person who owns it.

### GREAT BEAR LAKE

*"I drew my finger around Great Bear Lake and shivered. Davey felt it too. The Keith Arm, the Smith Arm, Grizzly Bear Mountain. Canada was airiness and wildness. We would have to walk for weeks and weeks through trees but we'd have air in our lungs and fish in our bellies. We'd make a fire each night and above us the Milky Way would blaze."* p. 63

*"Great Bear Lake gleamed far away as perfect as a postcard photo but our balloon snagged itself on a power line. Davey never wore a fur hat. He never strode through the forest with his golden eagle on his shoulder."* pp. 65-66

*"Davey sorely wanted a bicycle. In his daydreams, we both rode to Great Bear Lake. He was utterly impractical."* p. 84

*"My eyes were tired from staring into my imaginings. Saskatchewan and Yellow Knife and Great Bear Lake shrivelled like fallen leaves. We flew backwards, our hearts lurched and landed right back in our chests. Back in our little room."* p. 110

*"I was dismantling our story of running away to Great Bear Lake, I knew it. I was folding up all the dusty roads. Scrunching them up, a fistful of paper ribbons. I was blowing apart our log cabin with one big breath."* p. 180

1. Great Bear Lake is a source of poignancy in the novel. It is a place that is longed for but never reached.
  - a. Was there a point in the novel where you believed that Lenny and Davey would actually make it to Great Bear Lake? Why/why not?
  - b. Imagine Lenny visited Great Bear Lake after Davey's death. Write a letter to Davey from her, and include descriptions of what she sees, and how she feels.

## THEMES

### DISABILITY & PHYSICAL DIFFERENCE

*'He's too big,' she said.*

*She was the first one to ever come right out and say it.*

*It wasn't 'He's VERY big.' It was 'He's TOO big.' He didn't fit.* p. 18

*'Please leave,' said Sister Agnetha, the red phone in her hand. 'Straight away. Take your mon...'* She didn't finish the word. *'And leave.'*

*I think she wanted to say monster."* p. 20

*There'll be staring, mother had said, but I just wasn't prepared for how much staring."* p. 67

*"What if I said I was ashamed of him sometimes... And what if I told her the shame of being ashamed was even worse than the shame."* p. 121

*"A man came from the Guinness Book of World Records and knocked on our door. It's the kind of thing that happens when your brother grows too big."* p. 290

1. Why is Cynthia so furious with the man from the Guinness book of records who comes enquiring after Davey?
2. Davey's condition is called 'Gigantism'. Do some research on what this means, the causes, and the physical challenges faced by people with this condition.
  - a. Places to start:
    - <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/gigantism>
    - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gigantism>
    - If you have an encyclopedia in your school library, look it up in there and see what the entry has to say.
3. *I've since looked at the entries on the tallest people in the world ... There were figures and graphs. Pictures of pants and purpose built chairs. But nothing of dreams. Nothing of love. Nothing of goodbyes.* p. 291
  - a. Look up some of the 'giant' people Lenny researched when finding out about people like Davey:
    - Ella Ewing
    - Edouard Beaupre
    - Jack Earle

- El Tomanini
  - b. What can you discover about them? What important information is missing from their biographies?
4. In the past, people with gigantism who survived the strain that the condition put on their bodies would often find themselves in circuses or sideshows. In these shows people with physical differences were exploited, ridiculed, and objectified for entertainment.
- a. Look at the image in [Blackline Master 1](#). How does it make you feel?
  - b. How do you think the people in the side show felt about their lives, and how did they feel about themselves?
5. People with physical differences face unique challenges in their day-to-day lives. For example:
- They are often perceived as oddities, and not as people.
  - They find that they constantly have to educate others on their condition, which can be extremely draining, and taxing on their mental health.
  - They can be ridiculed, mocked, and the subject of threats and violence.

The best way to learn how to be compassionate and respectful of people with physical differences is to listen to their stories.

Carly Findlay, an Australian writer, speaker and appearance activist, is very articulate and candid about her experiences as a person with ichthyosis form erythroderma.

*While it is medically challenging, the social challenges can be even more difficult. I am stared at, commented on and teased every day. I try to deal with peoples' questions and rudeness the best way I can, with a smile and a polite answer (most of the time). Sometimes all I can do is laugh at the stupidity of some people!*

— Carly Findlay

- <https://carlyfindlay.com.au/about/>
- <https://twitter.com/carlyfindlay>
- <https://www.instagram.com/carlyfindlay/>

You can find many first hand stories and other resources about facial difference from the British organisation Changing Faces:

- <https://www.changingfaces.org.uk/campaigns/dituk>

ABC's *You Can't Ask That* has an episode interviewing people with facial difference. The people interviewed share their own experiences and answer the kinds of questions that people have about them.

- <https://iview.abc.net.au/show/you-cant-ask-that/series/2/video/LE1617H005S00>

## LOVE

Karen Foxlee says that when she was writing *Lenny's Book of Everything* she was 'thinking about love in all its forms: sibling love, motherly love, neighbourly love, the love between friends.'

1. Think about the relationships we see in the novel, and choose one that you found particularly meaningful. Try to describe the kind of love that exists between those two people, and what each of them brings to the relationship.

Foxlee also said 'I wanted to sort out in my head what it means to love someone who is different, how that feels, and the emotions that go along with that love.'

2. Can you see this process of discovery play out over the course of the novel?
3. What do you think Foxlee learned about loving someone who is different?
4. What have *you* learned about this?

*There was a tense stand-off of sorts over Davey. Mrs. Gaspar fussed over him and Nanny Flora fussed over him and they met head to head over him. p. 317*

5. Davey inspires fierce love in the people in his life. Why do you think this is so?

## **LONELINESS**

*'Do I steal children because I am lonely?' said Mrs. Gaspar indignantly. I had never thought of Mrs. Gaspar as lonely. Not once... p. 283*

*I hated to think of her alone. Sitting there waiting for something. Just skin and bones and memories. Maybe I was the last person she'd ever see. Lonely people needed care. They couldn't help themselves. They were too lonely for that. They would just sit there and fade. They would droop like pot plants without water. They would wither and dry and turn to dust. pp. 282-283*

*Loneliness was like a town. You found yourself there. You didn't even know how it happened. And there were no buses out. No trains. People had to come in. Like loneliness rescue teams" p. 283*

1. Lenny is shocked to discover that Mrs. Gaspar is lonely.
  - a. Who or what do you think she is lonely for?
  - b. Do you think the Spinks can ease that loneliness?

## **GRIEF & DEATH**

*Death was the end of life. Death occurred when vital organs, the lungs, heart and brain, stopped functioning. Death sat between Dearborn, Henry and Death Adder on a lonely page. There was no illustration or diagram...*

*...Those two death paragraphs seemed so clean and clinical. Empty. p. 81*

1. Is this a sufficient explanation of death? Why/why not?
2. Do you think it helped Lenny at all? If so, how?

*Life is full of last times, so many of them you don't even know they are happening. The last time you struggle to tie your shoelaces and the last time you keep a chafer bug in a matchbox. The last time your mother reads you a bedtime story and the last time you imagine the water going down the bath drain is a mini tornado. The last time your friend will have a mole on his face with five feelers. p. 245*

3. Can you think of a 'last time' that you weren't aware of as it happened? What was it? Would you have done anything differently if you had been aware it was the last time?

*You don't become someone perfect just because your brother is dying. You stay the person you are and all your good and bad bits are magnified. p. 300*

4. Which parts of Lenny become magnified as Davey's condition deteriorates? Why do you think this happens?

*One day. All the one days I got that Davey didn't. That sadness rose up in me like a giant wave and I was going to be drowned. p. 330*

## FAMILY

*[Mrs. Gaspar] had looked after him from when he was a baby. She looked after him from when she had to help him to sit up, when she had to burp him. She fed him mashed pumpkin off her mother and father's tarnished silver spoons. p. 234*

1. Mrs. Gaspar is not the children's biological grandmother, but she is much closer to them than Nanny Flora. What does this tell us about the nature of family?
2. Have you ever heard the expression 'chosen family'? Do you think it applies to Mrs. Gaspar and the Spinks?
3. Do you have people in your life who are your 'chosen family'? Who are they and what do they mean to you?

*I wondered if the Bartholomews would adopt me. I wondered if Mr. Bartholomew would shine my little shoes. The guilt that came with the thought twisted my insides into a tight knot. p. 209*

4. What is it about the Bartholomew family that is so appealing to Lenny? How is their family different to hers?

*'We're just fine, us three,' she said.*

*'Cindy!' he said. Like that was the stupidest thing he ever heard. How could a woman and two kids be okay?*

*'Yes,' she said. 'Just fine.'* p. 273

5. What makes the Spink family special?
6. What does 'just fine' look like to them?
7. Why can't Mr. King imagine them being fine?

## LANGUAGE AND STYLE

### METAPHOR

*I liked to say his name in bed. Peter Lenard Spink. Peter Lenard Spink. Peter Lenard Spink. His name rolled off my tongue like a punctured wheel. p. 6*

*...the sadness flower that opened up when rainy days came, and blossomed inside me until I couldn't breathe. p. 22*

*She was nothing but a Cindy Spink cicada shell filled up with dark heart feelings. p. 101*

*...each time I went to tell him, my thoughts clogged up. The secret sat on my tongue like a spoonful of peanut butter. p. 175*

*We ran home through the blustery streets and my heart was big as a gold fish bowl in my chest. p. 239*

Metaphors help us understand more about something than literal description can.

Karen Foxlee uses metaphor liberally in *Lenny's Book of Everything*, particularly when describing emotions and feelings.

1. Why do you think metaphors are so useful in communicating emotions?

Lenny talks about her "sadness flower" – it's her way of describing the sadness she feels when it rains.

2. How does describing a feeling in this way help the reader understand it?

3. Draw a picture of Lenny's sadness flower as though it were real. What is the shape and colour of it?
4. How might other emotions be described? There's no right answer to this question, because everyone experiences emotions in different ways. Perhaps you have an anger firework, a guilt stone, or a joy bubble?
  - Choose a few different emotions, give them metaphoric descriptors, and then draw and/or describe them.

### **FIRST PERSON NARRATIVE**

*Lenny's Book of Everything* is a first person narrative. This means that the story is told from Lenny's perspective.

1. How would the book have been different if it were written in the third person?
2. What would have been different if the story was told from another character's perspective?
3. Choose a key scene in the text (e.g. the trip to the nursery school, one of Davey's hospital stays, the school dance) and rewrite it from the perspective of either Cynthia or Davey.  
Think about the knowledge, feelings, and insight that character has that might be different to Lenny's.

### **DRAMATIC IRONY**

Dramatic irony is when the reader of the story knows something that the character doesn't.

We see an example of this in Lenny's experience with Great Aunt Em. From early on we see signs that things are not quite as they seem, but it takes Lenny longer to admit to herself that she may not have a great aunt after all.

1. What effect does this have on the reader?
2. How does it make you feel when you have this knowledge and Lenny doesn't?
3. How would the story have been different if Lenny had had a sudden realisation, rather than a slowly dawning awareness?

### **FURTHER QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES**

*I'd have to unzip, throw, run. I found that I was strangely good at doing bad things. I was methodical. I looked at the rock. I looked at the rear window of the Ford Gran Torino. I looked to make sure there was no one passing. I touched my finger tips to the fire rock hidden inside my parka. p. 216*

1. The actual rock-throwing incident happens 'offstage' in the novel. We see the planning, the lead up, and the aftermath, but not the actual act.
  - a. Why do you think Foxlee made this choice?
  - b. What is the effect on the reader?

*'Do you know where the pituitary is and what it does?'*...

*...We didn't have the P issues of the Burrell's Build-It-at-Home Encyclopedia Set but we did have the brain one. p. 117*

2. In the time before the Internet, encyclopedias and reference books were where people learned about the world.
  - a. What does their encyclopedia mean for Lenny and Davey?
  - b. What does it represent to them?

- c. How does it change them?
3. Go through the novel and mark the pages with the letters between Cynthia and Martha Brent at Burrell's Publishing Company. Read these letters consecutively, without the rest of the narrative in between.
  - a. Note the change in tone as the letters progress.
  - b. How would you describe each party's change in tone over the course of their correspondence? How is this tone communicated through language choices.

*...sometimes people just keep doing wrong things and never getting into any trouble for them. No police officer turned up at Mr. King's door and arrested him for trying to kiss Mother, even when she told him to stop. No one escorted him to our house to apologize... p. 223*

4. Why is Mr. King able to get away with assaulting Cynthia?
5. What was the nature of the power imbalance between a male business owner and a female employee, or men and women in general, in the 1970s?
  - Think about this incident in the context of a discussion about the #metoo movement which began in 2017.
  - These questions can be discussed in the broader context of the development of feminism in the 20<sup>th</sup> & 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

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## **FURTHER READING**

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### **OTHER NOVELS BY KAREN FOXLEE**

*A Most Magical Girl*. 2016. Piccadilly Books (Bonnier)

*The Anatomy of Wings*. 2009. UQP (University of Queensland Press)

*The Midnight Dress*. 2013. UQP (University of Queensland Press)

*Ophelia and the Marvellous Boy*. 2014. Hot Key Books (Bonnier)

### **NOVELS WITH RELATED THEMES**

*Two Weeks with the Queen*, by Morris Gleitzman. 2010. Pan Australia

*Tuck Everlasting* by Natalie Babbitt. 2003. Bloomsbury UK.

- Movie released 2002, directed by Jay Russell, released by Walt Disney

*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* by Mark Haddon. Many editions available via Penguin Australia.

*Wonder* by R.J. Palacio. 2017. Puffin (Penguin, Australia) Film tie-in edition.

- Movie released 2017, directed by Stephen Chbosky, released by Lionsgate

*The London Eye Mystery* by Siobhan Dowd. 2016. Puffin (Penguin, Australia)

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## ABOUT THE WRITERS

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### KAREN FOXLEE

Karen Foxlee is an Australian author who writes for both kids and grown-ups. Her first novel *The Anatomy of Wings* won numerous awards including the Dobbie Award and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book. *Ophelia and the Marvellous Boy*, Karen's first novel for children, was published internationally to much acclaim while her second novel for younger readers, *A Most Magical Girl*, won the Readings Children's Fiction Prize in 2017 and was CBCA shortlisted the same year.

Karen grew up in the Australia outback mining town Mount Isa and still frequently dreams she is walking barefoot along the dry Leichhardt River.

One of four children, she started telling stories when she was young. She filled countless small exercise books with sweeping sagas of orphaned girls illustrated with pictures cut from the back of Readers Digest magazines.

She has worked as an underground cable mapper, pool kiosk attendant, library assistant and hotel laundry hand and eventually became a registered nurse. All the while she never gave up her secret dream of becoming a writer.

Karen lives in South East Queensland with her daughter and several animals, including two wicked parrots who frequently eat parts of her laptop when she isn't looking. Her passions are her daughter, writing, day-dreaming, baking, running and swimming in the sea.



### ESTHER SMITH

Esther Smith is a writer of both fiction and non fiction, with a background in secondary education and psychology.

Children's and YA fiction has always been a special interest and was why she became an English teacher. She likes to approach texts in a thorough and holistic fashion, looking not only at plot, character, and style, but also embedding them in their cultural context. Her aim is always to encourage students to be critical and inquisitive.

She loves to read aloud with her wife and son, and she always does the voices.

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