

**Teachers Notes (Secondary)**  
by Anita Jonsberg  
**It's Not All About YOU**  
**Calma!**  
**Barry Jonsberg**  
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**Recommended for age 14 and over.**

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Introduction ..... 2

Pre-reading activities..... 2

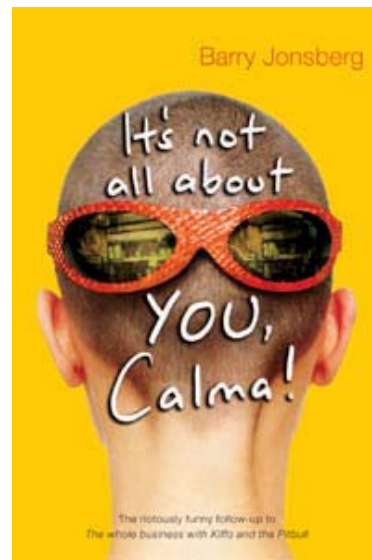
During reading:

    Chapter activities ..... 3

Post reading:

    Major assignment suggestions ..... 12

Meet the Writers ..... 13



## INTRODUCTION

It's Not All About YOU Calma! is the hilarious follow-up to The Whole Business with Kiffo and the Pitbull. Calma is back, swashbuckling her way through life and relationships. She is in love (or at least lust) for the first time and her normal 20/20 vision is somewhat impaired. Her father returns to 'stalk' her; friend Vanessa is in trouble and Fridge notes no longer document the truth. It seems that nothing is... as it seems.

Calma is in fine form as she puts two and two together and makes nine in this pastiche of literary forms, ranging from soap opera script to 19th century fiction. She flexes her literary muscles by producing free verse, a villanelle and even a Shakespearean sonnet in order to clearly communicate feeling and experience. Such a rich array of styles enlightens the reader about the extra dimensions genre adds to writing and will engage students of all abilities. The subject matter is pertinent to both teenagers and adults alike, as we explore the consequences of preconceptions, assumptions and poor communication. The notion of appearance versus reality is central as Calma journeys into adulthood.

## PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

### POETRY

Look at various types of poetry, with special emphasis on audience and purpose. The following websites are particularly helpful: <http://thewordshop.tripod.com/forms.html>

<http://www.poetry-online.org/poetry-terms.htm>

and, for a little fun, have students experiment with their own poetry forms:  
[http://www.educationworld.com/a\\_curr/curr079.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/a_curr/curr079.shtml)

### INTERNET AND EVERYDAY TEXTS

There are many opinions on the art of 'being wrong', as Calma is in this phase of her life. Some of these are available at the following addresses:

<http://www.iloveulove.com/unconditlove/wrong.htm> a look at the damage that can be done to relationships by not admitting 'wrongness'!

[http://www.objectivistcenter.org/navigator/articles/nav+ctomlinson\\_on-being-wrong.asp](http://www.objectivistcenter.org/navigator/articles/nav+ctomlinson_on-being-wrong.asp)  
This short essay ponders whether we should be right all of the time, and what our options are if we are simply wrong...

### COVER STORY

**Task [providing students have not read the 'blurb' on back cover]**

Look at the picture on the front cover carefully. List five 'clues' regarding what the novel may be about and support your opinions.

## DURING READING

Below are suggested activities for use alongside specific parts of the novel. Major assignments are in a separate section (below).

**It is in no way suggested that you use all of the following activities, rather that you alter tasks and select activities best suited to the make-up and level of your class.**

### CHAPTER 1

#### Snippet One

At the beginning of the novel, the reader is given a clear message about the feelings Calma has towards her father. Though the scene is a little farcical, it becomes clear that Calma's resentment is real.

#### Tasks

- After reading the opening, describe your initial impression of Calma. How is this impression formed?
- [Discussion] If a long-lost relative turned up at your front door, (even if you didn't want to see them) would you be able to do what Calma does? Why or why not?

#### Snippet Two

We are introduced to Jason, Calma's lust-interest. The setting is described in detail. *Crazi-Cheep* is the type of store everyone knows, and makes an unlikely backdrop for passion. Things to consider: how does the setting foreshadow what happens as the novel unfolds? In some ways, it is symbolic of the 'unheimlich' nature of the events which follow, where 'common sense' no longer rules...

#### Tasks

- Make a *Crazi-Cheep* corner in your classroom: include some of the products they might sell -everyone will have something to contribute! If you have time, try to alter the décor in tune with the 'cheep' idea. Give prizes for the most apt contribution.
- Design uniforms for *Crazi-Cheep* employees and suggest fabrics for them.
- Calma buys 'FHP' (feminine hygiene products) and wishes fervently that they weren't Crazi-Brand. Discuss how she feels her image might be affected because she does not buy branded products. [This task can grow exponentially according to time constraints!]
- Does the reader feel empathy for Calma in this chapter? If so, how has this been created?

#### Snippet Three

Here, Calma highlights herself as an 'unreliable narrator' and suggests that all narrators' accounts are intrinsically unreliable because "all people are unreliable. We might not lie, exactly, but our narration is coloured by our experiences, our prejudices or our misconceptions. One person's truth is not another person's truth."

Having told the reader about her unreliability, Calma goes on to be, well, unreliable (pg 10).

- Read the following scenario. Choose two characters from it, and write two accounts of what takes place as if you were writing incident reports for the Principal. Remember that each character would have a different point of view, and different motivations about what they choose to emphasise –or leave out - when writing down their versions.

*Michael and Dave are in a computer lab sitting side by side. Dave begins to make some snide comments to Michael about Michael's girlfriend, Sophie, who is also in the class. Michael begins to respond in a low voice. The teacher Mr Barker, asks the boys to get on with their work. Dave leans towards Michael and suggests that Sophie would really prefer what he could offer her, and Michael snaps. He pushes Dave off his chair and a fight breaks out. Mr Barker shouts at the boys, as does Sophie, but they're not listening. Chairs are knocked over and the whole class begins to shout and laugh at the boys. Ms Kerry, the teacher from next door, comes in to find out what the noise is about. As she enters, Michael and Dave fall onto a computer: it falls to the ground and is smashed. Ms Kerry tries to separate the boys, and is badly hurt in the scuffle. As she yells out, the boys stop, realising what they have done. Mr Barker takes the boys to the office, and the two teachers involved, Michael, Dave, Sophie and various members of the class are later asked to write down their version for the Principal.*

\* When selecting your two characters, imagine how they might be feeling, and what they might be afraid of. The teachers, especially Mr Barker, would be keen to show that they reacted appropriately to stop the disruption from escalating. The two students involved would be looking to minimise any punishment that might be coming their way. Ms Kerry is hurt, and may be thinking about taking further action, while other students would probably try to be as truthful as possible (depending on whom they are friends with). Sophie might well have some knowledge that others do not have. Remember that different characters have different voices, and that students and teachers often use very different registers, particularly in formal communication.

#### **Snippet Four**

Link Calma's poetry writing guide to your pre-reading discoveries. Is she right?

#### **Task**

- Hold a fun debate on the merits of poetry. The topic might be:  
"That poetry does not have to have rhyme, rhythm or, indeed, meaning in order to get published!"

#### **Snippet Five**

The Fridge notes are introduced in this section and tell a lot about the nature of Calma's relationship with her mother. Her mother's comment that she "should have told" is echoed throughout the text. There is a strong hint of closeness despite the impersonal nature of communication and students may wish to discuss how this is achieved.

### **Snippet Six**

Miss Moss decides to teach Calma a serious lesson that undermines Calma's blasé confidence about poetry in section 4. The reader is positioned to feel empathy towards the teacher in this instance, but the author maintains Calma as a sympathetic character. Does this event change the reader's perception of Calma?

### **CHAPTERS 2 & 3**

Calma enters a daydream as she attempts to make sense of the events around her. This is in the form of a magazine article which promotes the lives of the stars. Discuss the function of this chapter. What insights does it give us into the way Calma might actually be feeling? How does this contrast with the reality of chapter 3?

#### **Task**

- Rewrite the scene between Calma and her mother from her mother's point of view. What differences in attitudes and feelings might exist?
- Write your own magazine article – you are the star of course!

### **CHAPTER 5**

The news program update and the fact files are not part of the main narrative, though they are connected with it. Why do you think the author uses these techniques?

The chapter ends with a poem Calma writes for Miss Moss, and which concerns her best friend Vanessa.

#### **Tasks**

- Write a poem in iambic tetrameter: what, in your opinion, are the strengths and weaknesses of this form?
- What does the poem reveal about Calma's newly-forged friendship with Vanessa?

### **CHAPTER 8**

Two new narrative devices – FastF™ and ReWND™ - are introduced here. The use of these functions replicates the sometimes unsequenced way we remember events and make sense of them. Calma later dismisses these techniques as 'Cheap narrative devices to keep you focused'. What effect might these devices have on the pace of the novel and the reader's level of engagement? How does their use help to further develop the character of Calma?

#### **Tasks**

- Experiment with using the FastF™ and ReWND™ functions in a short piece of your own.
- Having found out that the Fridge has lied, Calma decides to confront her. How would you handle a situation like this? Write down your tactics and give an explanation of why you would use them.

### **CHAPTER 9**

All is not well with Calma and Vanessa's relationship early in the chapter, and this culminates in a brief but loud screaming match between the pair. Vanessa uses some hurtful comments about Calma's erstwhile friend Kiffo in an attempt to get a response,

though she is probably not prepared for the depth of it. What factors contribute to Calma's emotional state? As she prepares to go to work, she ponders that the sick employees she is covering may, like her mother, want 'to wander around the riverfront and lie to their children about it'. Calma goes to Vanessa's house to try and defuse the situation. As she enters, Vanessa is watching a daytime soap opera, and Calma goes into a daydream of the same genre. The reader can see that such musings are part of Calma's coping strategy when things are emotionally tough, and her use of humour here makes her character more sympathetic.

### **Task**

- Imagine your own class as a soap opera: assign roles to some of the students: 'villain', 'hero' 'victim' etc. Produce a short script and storyboard about a lesson which involves an overload of drama and intrigue – there doesn't have to be any orientation or resolution, just lots of complications!

## **CHAPTER 10**

Calma describes her 'hairdo from hell' in this chapter – an unfortunate result of her attempts to look great for a night out with Jason. We've all had similar experiences, though the boys in the class may not own up as readily to mishaps of this variety. Explore why and how those who are meant to be serving us can intimidate us!

## **CHAPTER 11**

It's clear that Calma can't find too many positives about her life in this 'chapter'. Have the class brainstorm some for her!

## **CHAPTER 12**

We again experience the FastF™ and ReWND™ devices: this time reading about Calma's full experience of getting ready for her date and seeing her mother in the cinema complex. How does the full version affect our understandings about what is taking place? Does the repetition of narrative still come as a surprise to the reader? If it does, what does this suggest about the process of reading?

Calma tries on not just clothes, but a range of different personas when getting ready to see Jason. Discuss how clothes, accessories – and hairstyle! - can act as symbols to communicate aspects of personality and interests (see Chapter 14 for more sartorial exploits).

Also in this chapter, we encounter another e-mail from Miss Moss to Calma. Miss Moss is trying to develop Calma's writing talent by suggesting challenging writing tasks, the first of these being a Shakespearian sonnet. We see Calma's response on the following page.

### **Tasks**

- Design an outfit to go with Calma's new look. Write a brief commentary on your design, explaining your choices.
- Look at a Shakespearean sonnet (sonnet 18 would be a good choice) and compare Calma's sentiments with those of Shakespeare – what similarities are there and how limiting is the form?

## CHAPTER 13

Calma's date goes well, but is affected by the sighting of her mother a second time, and by her spotting Vanessa looking extremely upset on a park bench. With the class, explore possible reasons for -

- (a) the Fridge being dishonest with her, and
- (b) Vanessa's despair.

## CHAPTERS 14 & 15

Chapter 14 deals with Calma's abortive attempt to tail her mother. Arriving at Crazi-Cheep, looking like 'Sexually Deviant Barbie' does nothing for her frame of mind. Chapter 15 records her mood plummeting, exacerbated by a visit from her father. Later, the store is held up, Calma decides she's had enough and knocks out the villain with a frying pan. The narration as this takes place details Calma's thought-processes as she acts and creates most of the humour in this chapter.

### Task

- Read Calma's conversation with the robber as she accompanies him around the store prior to the hold-up. The reader knows Calma's thoughts, but not the robber's. Write an account of his thoughts in a similar style to the 'speech/thought' models shown in chapters 5 and 13

## CHAPTER 16

The newspaper article that begins this chapter is typical of the genre in that it uses 'poetic licence' to edit the truth and it includes a quote from someone in authority. The headline is funny precisely because we understand that the industry manipulates the truth, and we can well imagine a reporter coming up with the headline. Compare the article that appeared in the newspaper with Calma's own, at the beginning of Chapter 17. Look at similar stories in your local newspaper and discuss which elements may have been added or exaggerated for effect.

## CHAPTER 18

Miss Moss encourages Calma to further explore her writing talents, this time in free verse. She writes of an early memory of her father, just as her earlier sonnet was a memory of her friend Kiffo. What are the narrative functions of Miss Moss as a character in the novel, and of Calma's first two poems?

## CHAPTER 19

Calma makes a disturbing discovery about her friend Vanessa at the end of this chapter. She has injuries that she has kept hidden.

### Task

- In pairs, discuss the possible reasons for Vanessa's injuries. Share your ideas with the rest of your class, while one pair collates ideas on the whiteboard. As a group, what is the most likely reason you can come up with to account for her physical state?

Consider:

- o Vanessa's being upset on the night she goes to stay with her father
- o Mrs Aldrick's mouse-like personality
- o Vanessa's bored, distracted air and her lack of friends (apart from Calma)

## CHAPTER 21

Calma starts to put the clues about Vanessa together for herself at the beginning of this chapter, and it's clear who, and what she suspects is the cause of Vanessa's misery. How do her conclusions match with your own?

## CHAPTER 22

Calma decides to face Vanessa's father, and retreats into a detective-style fantasy world. She packs all the detective vocabulary she can muster into a short excerpt, which, in tandem with the children's style on the same page, further demonstrates the range of registers she commands, as well as adding to the comic effect of this piece.

### Task

- Write a short account of your arrival at school this morning, using a similar vocabulary (or your own knowledge of the detective genre). Use your friends and teachers as characters and 'cast' them into suitable roles.
- Later in the chapter, Calma uses Jason to get to the city, and then abandons him. This behaviour seems out of character for Calma – what's happening to her? Discuss with a partner.

## CHAPTER 23

This chapter documents the first lengthy conversation between Calma and the Fridge. Their exchange is heated and charged with emotion. Look at the dialogue used in the chapter and evaluate its effectiveness in communicating the two characters' feelings.

### Task

- Look at the two passages below and discuss why the second is much more powerful than the first. Have a go at re-writing the passage yourself, using the suggested characteristics given after the two examples. Use powerful dialogue in order to communicate depth by *showing* how the characters are feeling, rather than *telling*.

### EXAMPLE ONE

'I think it's time you got yourself off to bed, son,' said my dad, barely looking up from his newspaper.

'Ah, come on,' I replied. 'This program's over in ten minutes. I've been watching for nearly an hour.'

'Yeah, but you've got school in the morning.'



'Ten minutes won't make any difference.'

'I guess not.' My dad folded the paper, yawned and got to his feet. 'Listen, I'm going myself. Make sure you turn everything off. And no more than ten minutes. All right?'

I nodded.

'Good night,' he said, pausing at the door.

'Good night, dad.'

Let's try this exchange again – same scenario, same use of first person narrative – but this time, the characters have distinct personalities. The father is weak and doesn't like confrontations; the son is rude and arrogant.

#### **EXAMPLE TWO**

Dad came over and ruffled my hair. I jerked my head to one side.

'Don't you think it's about time you were getting to bed, son?' he said. 'It's pretty late and ... well, you know ... school in the morning and all that.'

I didn't say anything.

'Son?' he continued.

'Look, will you get out of the way?' I snapped. 'I can't see the damn TV at all when you stand there in front of it.'

'Oh, sorry.' Dad moved a couple of paces to the side. 'It's just that you've been tired in the mornings and ... your mum and I think...'

'DAD!' I yelled. 'How can I hear what's going on, if you keep on talking?'

'Oh. Right. Well, I'll leave you to it, then. Just turn everything off when...'

'Yeah, yeah, yeah.'

'Good night, son.'

I punched the button on the remote control, cranking the volume up a few notches.

Now try writing your own dialogue, using the same characters and choosing one set of characteristics from the list below:

- The father is very strict and the son is very nervous or shy
- The father is drunk and the son is impatient

- The father is very loving and the son walks all over him
- The father is argumentative and so is the son
- The father tries to be strict, but can't sustain it. The son doesn't give a stuff
- The father tries to be friendly and jokey, the son is bored.
- The father wants to give a sermon, the son politely ignores him.
- The father is angry, the son just laughs at him.

## CHAPTER 24

Calma wakes on her seventeenth birthday to a host of seemingly impossible problems, and, of course, she must be the one to solve them. She skips school until lunchtime, when Miss Moss reveals that she is leaving Calma's school, and Calma's usual strength deserts her – another person she cares for is moving on.

The chapter ends with a further e-mail from Miss Moss, and it becomes apparent that the appearance of these in the novel is not concurrent with what is actually taking place; instead, they are inserted to elucidate Calma's inner preoccupations and concerns. In 'Villanelle for Jason', a truer picture emerges, that illustrates that Calma is aware of the potential damage she has inflicted on their relationship. The reader is reassured that Calma 'is herself' despite outward appearances.

## CHAPTER 25

Early in the chapter, we encounter another 'Fact File', this time concerning Jason. His attraction for Calma clearly hasn't dimmed, and a happy ending seems possible at least in this area of her life.

When her mother arrives at the restaurant for Calma's birthday meal, Calma interprets her edginess as a result of having broken up with Vanessa's father. This is a bittersweet moment for Calma, who is beginning to reap what (she thinks) she has sown. When her mother gives her an antique copy of *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, Calma realises that her mother is still very much in touch with the adult she is becoming, and this foreshadows to the reader the possibility that Calma's version of events may be flawed in some aspects. This foreshadowing becomes more pertinent when we find out where Calma went, and what she did, during the morning she didn't attend school.

Through the ReWND™ facility, we find that the morning's 'lost hours' were spent with Vanessa's mother, when Calma poured out her hypothesis concerning Vanessa's injuries. Calma feels she is absolutely correct in all of her assumptions and is going to set things right. At no time does she doubt the wisdom of her actions: she believes that for every complication, there exists a resolution: all the main character has to do is to act to make things happen. Despite Calma's verbal sophistication, her inability to understand that, in reality, things are seldom so simple is evidence of her emotional immaturity.

Jason's present of a mobile phone is both ironic—he would like to communicate more—and symbolic in that it is given at the point in the novel just before Calma's assumed 'world' is about to be interrupted by an alternative reality.

Calma's father arrives at the dinner table and their exchange is short and aggressive. Calma describes the interchange then suggests that "Typically, what followed was bluster." The reader perhaps questions on what evidence Calma asserts that "bluster" is typical of her

father's mode of communication. Calma's status as first person narrator is also foregrounded in the rest of this chapter, which is high on drama and intrigue, and where the characters' lines are just a little clichéd...

As the dénouement unfolds, the distance between the narrative tone here and the rest of the novel alerts the reader to several possibilities:

- (a) the author got bored and needed to finish the novel quickly
- (b) Calma is an unreliable narrator
- (c) Calma is daydreaming about events that vindicate her earlier actions and conclusions and is toying with the idea of 'selling' her version of events to the reader.

The 'Manuscript ends', only to begin again as Calma's 'real' voice is heard once more. The narrative ReWND™s back to the middle of the restaurant scene and we are given the 'truth' about events, which is almost diametrically opposed to Calma's presumptions throughout the novel. She finds that her mother is not an extension of herself, but a real person with an emotional life of her own. Calma's egocentricity is further disrupted when she finds that the 'barmaid' her father ran off with is a good person, with a great sense of humour, not the stereotypical character Calma had entertained in her imagination for so many years. The monster she has made of her father is dissolved by the truth that he is dying, and that the only reconciliation he is seeking is with her. The television report in the takeaway area of the restaurant confirms that her mother did tell the truth about how her relationship with Vanessa's father began, and Calma becomes more and more confounded by her own lack of understanding.

Calma grapples to make sense of the fact that she has been wrong about so many things, and clings to the fact that she has *at least* done right by Vanessa.

The chapter concludes with an e-mail from Miss Moss, with a subtle reminder that people think they know things, and don't see beyond their own assumed knowledge in order to grow. Miss Moss' words validate Calma in at least one sphere: her mastery of language, whilst adding poignancy to her need to practice her 'scales' in other areas. Her suggestion that Calma "compose (her) own music, in (her) own way", is metaphorically powerful at this point. Calma's response, "The Blank Page" augers well for her being able to cope with the future.

## CHAPTER 26

The last vestige of Calma's reality is washed away as her mother explains that the source of Vanessa's injuries is not her father, but Vanessa herself. Calma is shocked at the effect she has had on Vanessa's mother with her accusations, and begins to see how her manner and actions can affect others – she remembers Vanessa telling her "It's not all about you, Calma", and realises that it's true.

Her first action the following morning is to plan out the future, though the reader suspects that she knows that a plan is only a guide.

\* Although the disclosure of Vanessa's self harming occurs at the end of the novel, it's important to deal with this issue sensitively. A fairly high proportion of teenagers engage in this activity at differing levels. The activity below serves two purposes: it encourages students to explore the issue and gives those students in need of help some resources and suggestions, without them having to disclose to anyone. I strongly discourage allowing

students to surf the net to find their own resources: some sites are positively harmful for anyone engaging in this type of behaviour.

**The link between self-harming and suicide is undeniable, though some studies show that even discussing suicide openly can sometimes 'normalise' the term and increase the likelihood of it occurring. Seek advice from your school counsellor before using the activity.**

### **\*Task**

- Calma is going to try to help Vanessa by keeping her upbeat and by being there for her when she needs someone. Look at the 'reachout' site below and suggest more things that Calma can do to help ensure her friend's safety.

[www.reachout.com.au](http://www.reachout.com.au) There are some great resources here, especially for friends of self-harmers. It seems that very few self-harmers disclose to doctors, though as many as 80% may disclose to friends.

<http://www.sane.org/index.php?option=displaypage&Itemid=319&op=page> This website is valuable for linking self-harming to suicide and gives a list of some of the warning signs.

<http://www.mentalhealth.gov.au/resources/nysps/causes.htm> a portion of this Australian site notes the exacerbated risk of self-harm and suicide in Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal youth.

[http://www.rch.org.au/cah/research/index.cfm?doc\\_id=1016](http://www.rch.org.au/cah/research/index.cfm?doc_id=1016) The Centre for Adolescent Health is a reliable source of correct information on self harming, suicide and other health matters.

### **Task**

- What is the effect of Calma's two endings? Which do you prefer and why?

## **MAJOR ASSIGNMENTS**

- I. [Imaginative] Write a parallel narrative about one of the events in the novel from the point of view of Jason, Mrs Aldrick or Vanessa.  
You will need to consider what your character knows about the chosen event in the novel and what they think about what is happening. Try to create a world for them outside of what you know from the novel.
- II. [Creative – would work in pairs or groups] Produce a collage that represents the novel. Think about using pictures from magazines and consider the effect of fonts and colour as well as layout for your final version. Write a short commentary explaining the choices you have made.
- III. [Analytical] Describe how Calma's view of the world and herself is changed by the events in the novel.
- IV. [Argumentative] Calma describes her mother as "the Fridge". Is she a good mother to Calma? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

- V. [Analytical] Is this a humorous novel with some serious parts, or is it a serious novel with some humorous parts? Write your answer using evidence from the text.
- VI. [Creative] Write the letter that Calma might send to her father, informing him of her decision to visit him in Sydney.
- VII. [Creative] Compose a poem that Jason might write as a result of his decision to 'dump' Calma. Use one of the poetry forms featured in the novel.
- VIII. [Oral] Perform a monologue as one of the characters from the novel. The monologue can take place at any point in the narrative and you will have to put it in context for the class.
- IX. [Recount] Describe a time when you were really wrong – what happened as a result? In the long term, did you benefit from realising you were wrong, or did you make a situation much worse? What will you do in the future as a result of realising it is possible to be wrong?

## **MEET THE WRITERS**

### **BARRY JONSBURG**

Barry is an English teacher, originally from the UK but he has lived with his family in Darwin NT since 1999. He is a supporter of the greatest soccer club in the world—Liverpool FC. He also enjoys watching cricket, particularly when England beats Australia, though he is the first to admit this doesn't happen with monotonous regularity. His first book for young adults was *The Whole Business with Kiffo and the Pitbull* which has enjoyed success in Australia (where it was shortlisted for the CBC Book of the Year (Older Readers) in 2005) and in the UK and the USA.

### **ANITA JONSBURG**

Anita is a high school teacher in Darwin NT. She is currently working with senior students, trying to convince them that a year is not a long time to complete all of their assignments. Anita lives with her husband Barry, daughter Lauren and son Brendan. Her main functions are answering the phone and taking messages for her offspring.