

Teachers Notes

by Ananda Braxton-Smith

RED

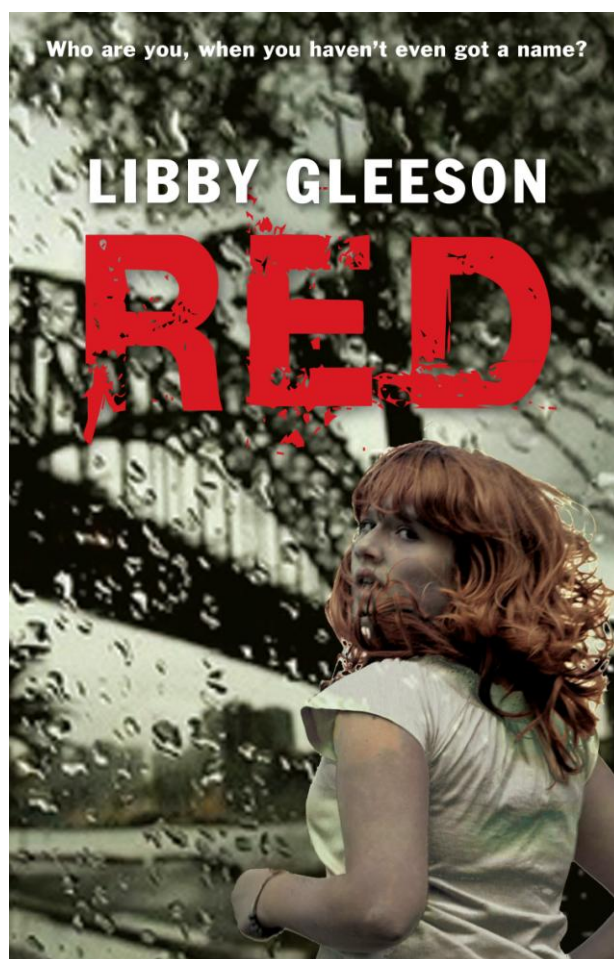
by Libby Gleeson

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Recommended for ages 10-14 yrs; levels 5-9

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INTRODUCTION

SYNOPSIS

A girl wakes into a world of mud and pain. All around her a city lies destroyed and people move like animals among the destruction. There is nothing in her head but a sound: *jaymartinjaymartin*. She cannot remember who she is.

The only object she has left is a locket around her neck.

It is near-future post-apocalyptic Sydney and climate change has brought rising sea-levels and intensifying storms. A cyclone has sent towering waves crashing into coastal suburbs, and walls of water up rivers into low-lying communities. The city is full of broken buildings, bereaved human beings and chaos.

The distressed lost-girl is adopted by Peri, a homeless boy with the smarts to help her survive on the streets. He names her 'Red' and the pair set about finding her identity.

Clues amass. In a deserted school Peri finds a class picture that seems to show a younger Red among the students. Reconnection with a 'best friend' Red cannot remember adds another level of confusion.

In *Red*, Libby Gleeson is investigating notions of selfhood. Red struggles with all that follows from the loss of her memories, and therefore herself. She has no 'face' with which to meet the world, she cannot decide, and she struggles to act. Faced with moral choices, she cannot even say 'I'm not that sort of person' —because she might be.

The story takes Red and her friends from Sydney to Melbourne to deliver to a Royal Commission evidence from a memory stick found inside her locket. The memory stick contains mysterious finance company files, and a filmed plea from Red's father.

Do not take it to the police. Trust no-one. I repeat, trust no-one.

So Red and her friends travel from Sydney to Melbourne to deliver the memory stick. On the way they dodge police, worried parents and well-meaning strangers. They struggle with the problem of holding to normal values in a crisis. As they travel, the amnesiac Red regains her memories and her selfhood.

A note on the philosophical nature of the text: Simultaneously a mystery, a piece of post-apocalyptic fiction and a journey/road story, *Red's* essence is philosophical. The protagonist is asking Who am I? The text asks readers to consider, What is a self? Of what stuff does it consist? Where is it located? What do we lose if we lose our self?

'Who am I 'is the fundamental philosophical question and one which people start asking very young. For those who are exploring the self and society, or philosophy, *Red* provides opportunities to discuss notions of selfhood. Discussion and activities for such study are provided at the end of this document.

RED AND THE CURRICULUM: A GENERAL OVERVIEW

Red and the General Capabilities

The text will support learning in the following capabilities: literacy, critical and creative thinking, ethical behaviour, personal and social competence, and intercultural understanding.

English

Red is constructed using a few instructive literary devices, including the 'amnesia' perspective, an expanded 'pathetic fallacy' that correlates destroyed suburbs with the destroyed mind, and the invocation of faery-tale in contemporary text.

History

Red touches on notions of national 'selfhood' as well as personal selfhood. Historically, Australian literature has constructed an identity for Australian-ness that involves battling the environment, in particular flood and fire. Is *Red* re-versioning this archetypal Australian?

Philosophy/Studies of self and society

Red provides a protagonist clearly struggling with the philosophical and interpersonal question *Who am I?* Discussions arising from contemplation of selfhood are best conducted in a spirit of philosophical enquiry. *Who am I* is an open question. It has no right answer. Some questions are like that.

And a note on *Red* and science

In addition to the fundamental uses of the novel outlined above, *Red* also provides opportunities to explore in a subjective manner *effects* of global warming, and to consider *causes* of those effects. In this way it would support formal, objective studies of climate change in a holistic framework.

ENGLISH

Vocab stop - *genre* [noun]

Meaning: A type or category of literature or film marked by certain shared features or conventions.

[http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit_terms_G.html]

Origin: Early 19th century French, literally 'a kind'

[<http://oxforddictionaries.com>]

Red is a post-modern text, constructed from elements of various genres. Its two main genres are *disaster* or *post-apocalyptic fiction*, and *mystery story*.

These notes will focus more on *Red* in the *disaster* mode.

Red could also be characterised as:

- A Hero Journey
- A Buddy/Road Story, and even
- A Treatise on the Self

1. RED AS 'POST-APOCALYPTIC' FICTION

Vocab Stop - *apocalypse* [noun]

Meaning: 1. the complete final destruction of the world, as described in the biblical book of Revelation

2. an event involving destruction or damage on a catastrophic scale

Origin: from Greek *apokalupsis*, from *apokaluptein* --- uncover, reveal

[<http://oxforddictionaries.com>]

Post-apocalyptic stories are set in a world after it has suffered a catastrophic disaster. Libby Gleeson sets the story in near-future Sydney after a cyclone and flood have devastated parts of the city. One of the book's effective devices is *defamiliarisation*. The world of *Red* is familiar enough to a contemporary reader that they will recognise the people and the culture. This means they won't need to spend much time interpreting the physics of this world, its people's motives and relationships, or understanding the machines and so forth. However, setting the story in the future means this familiar world is now unfamiliar. The effects of the disaster, too, turn the city into a stranger. Red is further estranged from her world by amnesia, until she is lost even to the cosmos.

Through the broken back window of the car, the stars were vague and indistinct, half covered with streaks of cloud. She stared at them wishing she could identify them in some way, to know them. (pp.16-17)

'Defamiliarisation'

Vocab stop – Defamiliarisation [noun]

Meaning: In this artistic technique, a writer, poet, or painter takes common, everyday, or familiar objects and forces the audience to see them in an unfamiliar way or from a strange perspective.

Origin: The word is an English translation of Viktor Shklovsky's Russian term *ostranenie*. Shklovsky coined the phrase in 1917 in his essay "Art as Technique."
[http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit_terms_D.html]

There are only so many stories, and only so many elements that can go into story-making. Habitual readers quickly get used to story elements and learn to predict their appearance, and then to pre-form their interpretations. Readers read on through these 'familiar' elements in an automatic manner, assuming knowledge of the story's trajectory and meaning from its familiar tropes. That's why it's such fun when an author turns a cliché on its head. It upturns our assumptions and wakes us up to *this particular story*.

Over centuries some elements of stories have become so familiar they have become clichés: that is they point to a feeling, but no longer produce the actual feeling. We become familiarised to their use. When this happens some authors start using these overused elements in different ways.

Three of the most noticeably defamiliarised clichés of the last hundred years are textual treatments of the hero, the heroine and the villain. These characters were recognisable *types* for many centuries, and only changed as social assumptions about gender and class changed.

Once upon-a time the hero was always honourable, brave and pure. The heroine was always modest, timorous—and pure. Readers could recognise the villain because of his crooked stance, hand-rubbing slyness—and general lack of purity.

In *Red* there is a helpless girl in trouble (a *heroine*), and a boy with the smarts and courage to help her (a *hero*). They are running from a set of faceless *villains*, in the form of drug-runners and corrupt police, and they are also running from a set of moral unknowns, in the form of every other adult. Jazz's father is possibly untrustworthy, and kindly strangers may be doblers-in or worse.

However, the heroine Red turns out to be not so helpless, the hero Peri turns out to be lost and vulnerable himself, and the faceless villains are never encountered in the flesh. They remain shadowy figures, somehow connected to government and law. This apparent absorption of the villain into the state makes for a particularly modern sort of scariness.

Activity 1 – defamiliarisation 1: open discussion—cliché and readerly assumption

Consider the following phrases. They contain well-used story elements. In small groups, share some stories you know containing these elements. What springs to mind when you first hear the phrase? There are no right answers, only interesting ones.

- a full moon
- a black cat
- an old woman
- golden objects
- a white horse

Activity 2 - defamiliarisation 2: It's a *what*?

Because of this dwindling of meaning and power over time, authors spend much time looking for ways to renew both story and language. They often defamiliarise well-used elements, using them in ways that refresh their meaning. The new usage jogs the reader into taking a new look at the element. We can practice defamiliarising familiar objects in the same way authors defamiliarise over-used textual elements.

- STUDY a familiar object closely;
- WRITE the object in 50 words, without naming it or its purpose;
- READ the objects to each other. Listeners try to guess what the object is.

Activity 3– defamiliarisation 3: upturning the cliché

Write a paragraph in which clichés are defamiliarised. One of the simplest ways to defamiliarise a cliché is to reverse it. Simply take the assumptions of the cliché, and overturn them.

For instance, can you imagine the full moon as a time when people sleep best and clear-thinking sanity rules? Can you imagine the prince falling in love with the witch? Can you imagine a circumstance in which grey skies rain joy, and sunshine spreads sorrow?

In class:

- LIST some clichés;
- REVERSE their assumptions;
- WRITE a group-story. Use an upturned cliché at its core.

2. RED AS 'MYSTERY STORY'

Red is a mystery story but one in which the legal mystery is less important than the mystery of the self. It asks less *Whodunit*, and more *Who am I?* In most mysteries the poser is for the protagonist to discover the identity of the external mysterious stranger. For instance, it asks who is the thief, the killer, the leak, the traitor. In *Red* the stranger is the protagonist herself, and the task is to discover her own identity.

LANGUAGE

1. RED AND FIRST PARAGRAPHS:

The introductory paragraph of any piece of writing is like an introduction to a person. It should have its best foot forward. A weak or overly-offensive first paragraph can mean readers will refuse to read on. Or they will read on, but they'll never quite recover from that first impression and it will affect the rest of the encounter.

In general strong, empathetic first paragraphs will make a reader want to continue.

Consider Libby Gleeson's first paragraph to *Red*:

Mud. In her mouth, her nose and her eyes. Mud in her hair and caked on her neck and arms. Mud filling her shoes and seeping through her clothes. She lay sprawled on her side, a garbled, barely distinct sound coming from her *jaymartinjaymartin*. One eye opened, then the other. She coughed, spat, tried to clear her throat. Mud was stuck to her tongue, her gums and the top of her mouth. Still she said the words *jaymartinjaymartin*. She tried to sit up but her left shoulder and arm ached and needle-sharp pain stabbed her fingers, her palms and the backs of her hands. Sand and stones tormented her broken skin. She fell back. She pushed herself up on her other elbow. *Jaymartinjaymartinjaymartin*. Her world was mud and pain. (p.1)

'Concrete' language

Vocab stop - Concrete language

Meaning: Language that describes qualities that can be perceived with the five senses as opposed to using abstract or generalized language. For instance, calling a fruit "pleasant" or "good" is **abstract**, while calling a fruit 'cool' or 'sweet' is **concrete**.

An Origin: Philip Sidney was praising concrete imagery in poetry in a 1595 treatise, *Apologie for Poetrie*.

[http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit_terms_C.html]

Red's first paragraph uses concrete language, and strong physicality to set-up *Red*'s situation.

A repeated use of the concrete word *mud* fills the paragraph with a sense of paralysis. Mud has a number of metaphorical uses: to describe something as *clear as mud*, for instance, is to say it's obscure. *Red* is caked, inside and out, with thick mud pointing to her obscure, or hidden, nature. She also rises from this mud like the primal unnamed human.

Libby Gleeson also chooses strong and lesser used verbs such as *seep* for soak, and *srawl* for spread.

Red's strong physicality means she has a personal, feeling body to which painful and disgusting things are happening. This is another powerful point of entry into the text. Readers have bodies too.

Then there's the mystery of the babbling *Red*. Her collapsing of the words *Jay Martin* defamiliarise the idea of a name as something important and therefore to be capitalised, and rewrites it as just another set of sounds that can be emitted from the human throat. This foreshadows the main theme of the story: the lost self. Everything important in the human world, even an inanimate object, has a name.

By the end of this first paragraph the mystery of *Red* is firmly in the readers' minds; a lost-girl, distressed, in pain and with a mind annihilated like the world around her.

Activity - first paragraphs: waking up with a body

Rewrite *Red*'s first paragraph with her waking up to different disaster scenarios. Focus on using strong verbs, concrete language and giving your protagonist a physical body. Ask yourself, where in the body does s/he feel sensations?

What does s/he smell? Taste? Hear? Sense?

Try the following scenarios:

- After the quake
- After the fire
- After the landslide

2. RED AND PERSPECTIVE

Red doesn't know anything—and that's a good place to start a story. Libby Gleeson has chosen limited 3rd person style, an intimate perspective but one that allows for some intimacy with other characters. The effectiveness of a limited 3rd person perspective lies in its capacity to reveal information *only as it is revealed to the protagonist*. The protagonist can then go on to be wrong in their interpretations of other people and events, and this lends an unreliability that is very like life. In *Red* the unreliability of this perspective has been fortified by afflicting the protagonist with amnesia.

First- and third-person limited perspectives are the perspectives used to create unreliable narrators. With her youth, trauma and amnesia Red must be one of the most unreliable narrators in recent fiction. Red has an empty mind but a full sensibility; she doesn't know who she is or what she thinks, but she knows what she feels. Therefore her perspective involves a lot of physicality and feelings—and the rest is questions. Counter-intuitively this gives her a somewhat trustworthy quality.

Activity - perspective and intimacy: 'me' or 'they' writing

Rewrite your first paragraph from the previous activity using different perspectives. How does changing the perspective change the tone and effect of the voice?

Try the following perspectives:

- 1st person perspective is an 'I' story, and the most narrow of perspectives. The protagonist cannot know other people's thoughts and can only guess at their feelings from reading their faces and behaviour.
- 3rd person is a 'she/he' perspective, and a more distanced view. Readers are given emotional access to the protagonist and most or all of the other characters. It's also known as Omniscient Narrator perspective because the narrator 'knows' everything about everybody and everything, including the future.

3. RED AND THE 'PATHETIC FALLACY'

The 'pathetic fallacy' is a false belief in an empathetic world, or a world which reflects human joy and misery. In literature it refers to the writers' habit of having landscape or objects mirror the protagonist's inner world. 'Pathetic' does not refer to the pitifulness of such a fallacious notion, but is short for empathetic or 'feeling with'. An infamous text structured around this fallacy is Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*.

Libby Gleeson uses the land and its buildings as broad empathetic objects. *Red's* landscape starts as a destroyed city full of loss, mirroring the protagonist's inner landscape of destroyed mind and lost self. As she begins to recall small parts of her life, the action of the story moves to the intact suburbs. Eventually she arrives in a fully intact city and her memory, and thereby her selfhood, is fully recovered.

Activity - the pathetic fallacy: outside/inside writing

In *Red* the cyclone and flood set the scene for the protagonist's own emotional and mental disaster. The outer chaos is a mirror-image of the chaos inside Red. The mud is a strong concrete image; a sticky, undifferentiated mass like Red herself when we first meet her. Different sorts of settings can be used as settings for different emotional states or challenges. Try writing these landscape elements into an emotional or mental state:

- A still, pure-white snow-covered field
- Hot-winds gusting down city streets
- A yellow sun in a pure blue sky

LITERATURE

CONTEXTUALISATION: *RED* AND TERROR

Vocab stop - Context [noun]

Meaning: the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood

Origin: From Latin *contextus*, from *con-* 'together' + *texere* 'to weave'
[<http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/context>]

Red is essentially post-apocalyptic fiction. Contemporary disaster and/or apocalyptic fiction reflects what we're scared of *right now*. We are mostly scared of climate change, terrorism, peak oil, and aliens. These are the present changes our world is facing [though hopefully not the aliens]. Our visions of apocalypse tend to be related to global warming disasters, violent enemy-within scenarios, and the de-evolution of humans caused by running out of fuel for our technology.

Looking in context at enduring post-apocalyptic texts teaches us what people were scared of in the past. It turns out they were scared of their own social changes. In the Industrial Revolution, for instance, people were afraid of machines taking over the world, or of human beings being reduced to a type of mere machine. Their texts reflected their discomfort with such change.

For instance, Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* between 1816 and 1818. At this time Europeans were at the start of an industrial revolution. Machines were becoming prevalent, and people were on the move from the country to the city, and from the land to the factory looking for work. Improved medical science and social conditions meant that more people lived, and populations exploded. There was deep anxiety about the morality of humanity's scientific progress. Shelley's monster can be read as an embodiment of terror about human beings stealing God's status as life-giver and life-saver.

Activity - context: terror then and now

WATCH the film versions of any of the following texts. They are all successful and enduring post-apocalyptic or disaster fictions. They have several filmic versions each, some made many decades apart. If you love a film other than those mentioned below, please choose that one.

- War of the Worlds (original novel H.G.Wells 1898)
- Frankenstein (original novel Mary Shelley 1818)
- Animal Farm (original novel George Orwell 1945)

Consider the following contexts for the production of the film's original text. In groups, RESEARCH in more depth any one of the contexts. SHARE with the class what your group has found out.

- The text's production in context of its time and place: wars, political events, sporting and military achievements, art movements, social movements, scientific discoveries, technological advances, disasters

- The text's production in context of the author: where and when they lived, their gender, class and upbringing, their religious feeling and their political leanings, sickness, travels, love and family life, friends and peers, feuds and passions
- The text in context of its one main expressed terror: for instance, invasion by outsiders in War of the Worlds

LITERACY

1. INTERTEXT: *RED* AND THE MISSING RIDING HOOD

Authors sometimes enrich their own work by referring to characters or elements from culturally familiar stories and reworking them. This creates an intertext with the other work. The newer story will gain dimensions borrowed from the well-known older text. The strength of the effect depends on the reader's knowledge of the earlier text. The characters or elements do not have to be named specifically in order to evoke a response. Readers are generally good at making such intertextual connections and will respond to partial mentions or even echoes of other stories.

Red has been constructed using elements from the fairy-story Red Riding-Hood. The intertext between the fairy-tale and *Red* is invoked immediately by the protagonist's name alone. When we recognise an intertext between texts, we naturally start to look for connections and correlations. There are a number of points of contact between *Red* and Red Riding-Hood.

Here are three:

- Peri finds Red because of her bright red T-shirt and then he names her for that attribute. Red Riding-Hood is also named for her clothing. (Faery-tale folk often are named for external attributes, being not-so-much persons as qualities and warnings walking about.)
- Red must go on a journey to deliver an important parcel.
- Red doesn't know who she can trust. There seem to be 'wolves' everywhere, including previously trustworthy literary *types*, such as policemen and parents.

These elements cause us to think *Red* in some way similar to the old fairy-tale. What meanings we take from the connections we make between the two stories will be idiosyncratic, but the connections are likely to generate meanings apart from those we might have taken from the same novel but now called *Crusoe*, for instance. Sometimes the intertext is so plain and well-developed that the new work becomes a reversion of the original tale. *Reversioning* uses the older story's elements as a template, but reworks them so as to render the new story meaningful for its new audience.

Activity - fairy-tales: reversioning

CHOOSE a fairy-tale and consider its important elements. For Red Riding-Hood your list might look like this:

- a girl
- a red cloak
- a journey through a wild place
- a 'wolf'
- a 'woodcutter'

REWRITE your fairy-tale in a contemporary setting. You can rewrite the characters as you please, make the hero do a bad thing or the villain do a good thing, for instance, but

always keep in mind the original story. Keep it short and keep it simple to start with. Ask yourself questions as you write.

Some questions might be:

- What is the attribute the original fairy-tale character is named for? How can I use this attribute so that it makes sense for contemporary readers?
- What is the original fairy-tale character's task or purpose? Can you think of a similar contemporary task?
- How can I use the older fairy-tale relationships in a more meaningful way? Who is the 'hero'? Who is the 'heroine'? Who is the 'villain'? Can I think of different motives other than the conventional ones, for each character? Can I overturn their usual fates?

SHARE your new old stories with the class. MAKE a book of them for fundraisers.

2. 2ND HAND REPORTAGE: *RED* AND WHO TO BELIEVE

Red wakes to a world of mud and pain—and to floods of information, data, images, and government spin. She must navigate Peri and his story, reportage from TV, radio, and online, her so-called best friend Jazz, the information board, the 'scrum' at the information board, the professional helpers, the police and the Prime Minister. Everybody has information and a perspective on the floods. There are countless voices, too much data.

...confirmed dead 800, missing believed to be a further 650 ... estimated homes destroyed 10000 ... businesses and schools and other places of learning 6000Premier believed to be among the dead ... (p 43)

Activity – textual familiarisation: floods of data

There was a lot of data on the 2011 Brisbane floods disseminated into the community from all possible types of media.

As I write, a You-Tube search on "Brisbane floods" still turns up 4,460 results. A general Google search for the same turns up 874,000 results. These numbers include privately filmed uploads, as well as authorised news agency or government uploads. Many of the images are repeats, copied over and over. When such images of disaster are inescapable what might be the result?

Might we become 'familiarised' [see above] to them as we might to over-used literary elements in written texts?

- WATCH some of this flood of images of the disaster. Can you remember seeing any of the pictures at the time? Which ones?
- CONSIDER the aforementioned notion of literary overuse and familiarisation. Did you watch the disaster a lot? How did you feel as you watched the images? Do you remember?
- DISCUSS. What might be a result of people becoming familiarised to images of suffering?

HISTORY

1. *RED* AND AUSTRALIAN 'SELFHOOD'

On one level Red is an historical Australian literary figure; she is a battler fighting the environment. She may not be on a drought-stricken sheep station watching her animals

die of thirst, but she is just as challenged by her environment as any stockman or swaggie. Australians in the past, like most countries, defined themselves by how they responded to major disaster and they created an Australian 'self' from these experiences.

Other major Australian disasters are referred to in *Red*. The two mentioned by name are Cyclone Tracy (1974) and the Brisbane Floods (2011).

Activity 1 – research: a natural disaster

Storms, droughts, floods, cyclones and wildfire will all increase as a result of global warming. Finding out how people in the past dealt with natural disaster, and learning it can be survived, is a useful response to the changed conditions. Use the suggested websites below (in 'Resources and Further Reading' p. 16) to explore the disaster of your choice.

Activity 2 – national identity: of droughts and flooding rains

READ POEM: 'I Love a Sunburnt Country' by Dorothea Mackellar 1885-1968 @ <http://australianpoems.tripod.com/mycountry.html>

READ POEM 'Drought' by Will H. Ogilvie 1869-1963 @ <http://australianpoems.tripod.com/drought.htm>

Questions for discussion:

- SHARE other Australian poems, songs or stories you know or find in which people battle the environment to survive.
- DOES this still seem to you a meaningful representation of Australian-ness? If so, why do think the representation persists? If *not*, why do you think that particular image of Australian-ness has lost its hold on our imagination?
- Do you think battling the environment is largely an Australian experience? What other countries might have historically battled the environment to survive? FIND some non-Australian texts about surviving harsh environments.

For instance, here's a poem by a grade 6 student at Lincoln Elementary School, Grand Forks, ND, about a flood in his home town:

Flood Poem by Ben Blake of USA

I am mad at the flood because it
snatched half the summer from me.
It turned some of my things into useless garbage.
Before the flood,
my parents freaked trying to get
everything out of the basement.
The day we were evacuated,
I was a little excited because I knew we were going to Kansas to stay with my parents' families.
When I got back,
I was upset because the summer was half gone,
and I had to work harder
to get our house back to normal.

[<http://web.mnstate.edu/archives/exhibit/children.htm> published in *A Flood of Memories*, November, 1997]

2. A NOTE ON RED AND NED:

One of the effects of Red losing her sense of self is to place her outside history, as well as outside her personal life. She does not know who she is, and she does not know who anybody else is either. Nobody is famous to Red.

[Cassie] laughed. 'We'll be in Kelly country soon.'

"Kelly country?"

"You know, the bushranger. Ned Kelly."

Red nodded. She didn't have a clue what Cassie was talking about. (p134)

Ned Kelly is not only a famous and favourite Australian historical figure, but a favourite literary one. He and his gang, and his family and friends, have been the subjects of many a retelling or reversion. *Red* relies partly on an intertext with the story of the Kelly gang to authorise its conditional ethics. Commonly written with affection, Kelly still remains an ethically ambiguous figure. Some people think him a class hero or freedom fighter. Others think him a thief and murderer.

Before Kelly was caught and executed, he played a cat-and-mouse game with troopers around the Victorian/NSW border. He didn't trust the law. He didn't trust the British. He was an anti-establishment hero or a 'larrikin', another favourite of Australian literature.

Red is like Ned. She is ethically ambiguous; while delivering the memory stick to the Royal Commission, she both steals and lies. She is anti-establishment; on the same border as Ned hid from the troopers she hides from her 'establishment': the police, parents, and other adults. In this she resembles the larrikin version of Ned.

However, she still delivers the memory stick to the present version of Ned Kelly's troopers. Her overarching 'justice' ethic is strong, while her moral acts are conditional on environmental factors such as hunger and fear. In this she resembles the 'freedom fighter' version of Ned.

PHILOSOPHY/STUDIES OF SELF AND SOCIETY

1. *RED*: A STUDY OF SELFHOOD FOR YOUNGER PHILOSOPHERS

Red's lack of ability to answer the question *Who Am I* from the outset leaves her dependent, without agency, and distrustful. It leads her to tell lies; both straight self-protective lies and those lies that aren't so measurable. She makes up stories in her efforts to explain herself to herself, and to others. Her loss of self also leaves her inhabiting large empty silences. In fact, she loses a long list of attributes along with her memory.

From all these losses, the text suggests the composition of a self.

The self according to *Red*

The text suggests that Red's self is tightly bound up with her memories. It gives many examples of what Red loses when she loses her memory. Here are some I noted:

- **loss of name p.10**

"If you don't know your name," said Peri, "we should make one up just so I can call you something."

"Like what?"

"I dunno."

"Have you got a mum or sister? I could borrow their name."

He looked away.

"What did you think when you first saw me?"

'I thought you were dead.'

‘Well, that won’t work as a name.’

“I saw your bright red T-shirt in the mud and I went over to see what it was. I could call you Red.”

“Sounds like dead. Try other words that mean red.”

“Rose. Scarlet. Ruby.”

Rose? That felt familiar. Ruby? ...

“What’s a ruby?”

“You know. A jewel. A bright red jewel. Like rich people wear.”

She looked at her torn, mud-stained T-shirt. “That’s not me.”

“I’m just gunna call you Red. I reckon you might even have red hair—under all that mud.”

“Suit yourself.” She closed her eyes. Her head hurt. (pp.10-11)

- **loss of *meaning* p.1 onward**

They moved around the broken walls of brick. Then came roaring, deafening sound of a helicopter, blades whirring, turning above them. Huge up-drafts of wind tossed mud and water flying. What did it mean? What was happening? (p.2)

- **loss of *continuity* p.13 (the locket)**

- **loss of *belonging* p.23 onward**

If she wasn’t on this [information] board, did that mean no one missed her, there was no one to claim her? Did she belong to no one?

- **loss of *agency* p.39**

“Sometimes I feel a bit like I’m in a story that someone’s made up and they’re moving me around and maybe they’re going to let me find out who I am ...”

- **loss of *fellowship* p.47**

I don’t know who I am, Red whispered to herself, and you don’t understand that. You’ve got no idea how it feels.

- **loss of *interior world* p.98**

” It’s like I’ve got nothing inside me ... everything’s on the outside, or it’s gone ... My brain too. I can’t think.”

Activity 1- mapping selfhood: a personal journal exercise

Don’t forget to keep notes while you’re reading *Red* for this activity.

- LIST the attributes you think Red lost along with her memory.
- REFLECT on your list. Do these things add up to your idea of a self? Are there other attributes of a self that you think are not mentioned in Red?
- MEDITATE on where you feel the attributes dwell in your body. For instance, where do you feel *your will* most? Your *sense of belonging*? Your *agency*, or ability to act?

Activity 2– mapping selfhood: pin the attributes on the body

This activity is for fun and profit. The fun part is it's a game. The profitable part is it might help in remembering *Red's* attributes of selfhood later. After you've finished the game, laminate what you've made and hang it on the wall. *Now it's art.*

- BRING your reading notes to school and MAKE a class list of all the attributes of selfhood you found.
- DRAW a person-sized outline of a human body on big paper.
- WRITE the attributes on small slips of paper.
- BLINDFOLD each other and pin the attributes on the outline. The object is to pin the attributes *inside* the body. And to enjoy bumping about blindfolded. Obviously.

2. OTHER PHILOSOPHICAL CONTENT

***Red* and knowing stuff: on knowing what you think you know**

In chapter five *Red* finds a note on the info board from Jazz, a girl who writes that she is *Red's* best-friend. Peri wants to phone Jazz straightaway, but *Red* isn't sure.

"Let's phone her, then. She'll know who you are." ...

Red couldn't look at him. "It's weird." She tugged at a piece of grass, pressed her fingernail into the centre of the leaf and slit it neatly in two.

"Telling me won't be enough. I need to remember. I need to know it to believe it." (pp.50-51)

How do I know that? is a very good question. People have always made distinctions between different ways of knowing things, and these ways of knowing have been privileged or demonised depending on time, place and temperament.

Here are three ways of knowing:

- *Received wisdom 1*: knowledge that comes to us from authoritative sources: that is information passed to us by parents, teachers, doctors, scientists, priests, the Law and other 'experts'. As well as these authorities however many people also rate the media as a reliable place to get knowledge. In spite of our growing scepticism, there is still a high level of trust in these sources.
- *Received wisdom 2*: class or cultural knowledge and attitudes, passed through our families, close friends, and our texts. This sort of knowledge is often not stated directly but assumed as a general agreement. It can be most easily summed up in the phrase 'I just know it'.
- *Direct experience*: you know it because you've done it, felt it, had it, seen it, eaten it.

Today in the west we tend to privilege knowledge that comes to us from *external authoritative sources*. But that doesn't mean we universally respect all the possible authorities that exist side-by-side in our communities—and inside ourselves. There's the authority of science, for instance, versus the authority of scripture.

Exploration of personal belief is best done privately in a journal. When everybody has spent time considering their knowledges, then the class can come together in small groups to talk. The private journal experience is one that allows for creativity and lateral thinking, as well as organising. The group experience will give opportunities to feel affinity, disagree respectfully, and experience the difference between knowledge and belief.

- DRAW balloons in your journal and fill them with some of the stuff you *just know*.

- ASK YOURSELF how do I know that? Who told me? Who showed me?
- DRAW strings from your balloons to the agents responsible for your knowledge. There will probably be many agents for each sort of knowing.
- SHARE some of the stuff you *just know* in a small group.
- LISTEN respectfully to each person. (Even if they say something you *just know* is wrong!)

Red and conditional values: the truth about lies

When we are children we are generally taught that lying is never OK and stealing is always dishonourable behaviour, even if we *really, really* want something. On their journey to Melbourne, Red and her friends steal even from helpful strangers and parents. They lie to just about everybody they meet. Red is disturbed by these dishonest acts but still commits them.

Red provides a good opportunity to discuss the more complicated nature of values in the adult world. Here are some open-ended questions to think about:

- Is it always wrong to steal?
- What might be some situations where a theft might be thought acceptable behaviour?
- Is it always wrong to lie?
- Are some lies worse than others?
- What might be an acceptable lie? A lie that isn't acceptable? What's the difference?
- Can a person who lies or steals still be an 'alright' person? How?

CROSS-CURRICULUM PRIORITY

Aboriginal and TSI histories: Victorian aborigines and early climate change

Climate change is commonly understood as a recent occurrence mostly caused by human activity since the industrial revolutions. Because of such changes, our challenge is to develop cleaner energy and less harmful ways to grow and build. It is responsible for changing weather patterns worldwide, and their resultant disasters. In these contexts climate change can seem overwhelming and terrifying.

However, climate change is also a normal part of earth's dynamism and human beings have already been witness to some very large changes indeed:

[Victoria] formed over 300 million years, through a succession of rising and sinking seas, roller-coasting heat and cold, and 700,000 years of volcanic activity and dormancy ... the Melbourne area has been populated for at least 40,000 years, mostly by the Kulin people ... That's about 1,600 generations. Over the volcanic era these people witnessed eruptions that hurtled molten rock and ash into the sky, blanketing Lilydale to Ferny Creek and sending rivers of sulphuric lava and rock flowing past Upper Ferntree Gully ...

The Kulin people also witnessed the inundation of Port Phillip Bay. At the height of the ice-age, about 20 000 years ago, sea levels had fallen by 130 metres. Victoria's coastline was 300 kms to the south of its present position. Tasmania and New Guinea were part of the Australian continent. Six-to-eight thousand years ago the ice-age softened and the pack-ice began to melt. Here's how their mythic stories describe the inundation:

*Then the land was flooded. Barwool the Headman cut the Birrarung (Yarra River) to free the country from the flood. The waters flowed into the plain where they had hunted kangaroo, and created Narrm (Port Phillip Bay).*¹

Activity: climate change and 'myth' creation

The Kulin people gave explanations for their environmental change other than those supported by science. Their stories talk of the desire of great spirits, the decisions of headmen, and the activity of humans as all being responsible for environmental changes. Right behaviour, right relationships, and right intent all play their role in these stories.

Keeping this in mind, write your own myth. Remember that for early people the world itself was a living being. Your mythic story should:

- explain a flood;
- be written in concrete language (see *Language* section);
- be meaningful to you personally.

RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

NOVELS

Deborah Abela *Grimsdon* Random House Nth Sydney NSW 2010

9 – 13 years

Climate change. Friendship. Politics. Science. Survival.

Julie Bertagna *Exodus* (2002) and ***Zenith*** (2007) Young Picador (imprint of Pan McMillan) London UK 2002

YA series

Global warming, melting ice-caps. Survival. Friendship.

<http://www.juliebertagna.com/exodus.html>

Saci Lloyd *The Carbon Diaries 2015 / 2017* Hodder Children's Books 2008

YA series

Climate change disasters. Survival. Politics. Friendship.

Summary: It is the year 2015 and global warming is creating environmental chaos.

Britain introduces carbon rationing as a response but doesn't foresee the result. One girl's story told through diary entries.

* *School Library Journal Best Book of the Year 2009*

NON-FICTION

Larry White *The Australian book of disasters* Murdoch Books 2011

WEBSITES

Historical flood: The story of the 1889 Johnstown flood in Pennsylvania USA. Well-written, easy to navigate site all about this historic flood, including picture galleries and maps. This page tells the basic story.

<http://www.jaha.org/edu/flood/background.html>

And this page gives an eyewitness account.

<http://www.jaha.org/edu/flood/why/beale-dam2.html>

Cyclones: For clear & user-friendly site about cyclones. What they are, how they form, their effects, history, and links to other sites.

<http://clearlyexplained.com/nature/earth/disasters/cyclones.html>

¹ See Bibliography at end of next section for bibliography of quoted material

Cyclones: For simple interactive modelling of wind movement (from ABM)
<http://clearlyexplained.com/nature/earth/disasters/cyclones.html>

Global warming: Government information site with concise description of climate change.
<http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/change/>

Natural disasters: From avalanches to volcanoes, a list of links to kids' disaster sites. (Mr Rosie's Homework Help: Natural Disasters)
http://home.vicnet.net.au/~hmkhelp/hwh_natdis.htm

Brisbane floods: Journalism and reportage: Mail online (daily Mail UK) accessed 6th Dec 2011. Report on the flood with pictures. Includes footage of an empty car being swept away.
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1346374/Australia-floods-Death-toll-reaches-22-water-Brisbane-swallows-city.html>

Brisbane floods: Google Map of Brisbane with interactive balloons. Hover cursor over balloon and witness the flood levels at different places in the city.
<http://panedia.biz/vst/vtmap.swf?map=zpgfgqtn>

National selfhood: A list of natural disasters explained, with reports on specific disasters such as the Black Saturday fires. Drought. Fire. Heatwave. Flood.
<http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/natural-disasters>

International natural disaster poetry: Read more @
<http://website.lineone.net/~johnmingay/tsunami.htm>

3 more versions of the Kulin Port Phillip Bay story @
<http://www.dpced.vic.gov.au/heritage/maritime/submerged-landscapes-virtual-archaeology-project/dreamtime>

MISCELLANEOUS MEDIA

Audio CD Tim Flannery *We are the weather makers: the story of global warming* Vision Australia Enfield NSW 2009
12+ yrs/non-fiction

You-Tube upload/category: education 'A flood story from the Murray River'
The story of Tiddalik the Frog's part in drought and flood.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9Hi_CbLQs

BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR ABORIGINAL AND TSI HISTORIES: VICTORIAN ABORIGINES AND EARLY CLIMATE CHANGE

The Kulin nation & the inundation of Port Phillip Bay

© A. Braxton-Smith in Upper Gully News Local History Edition 2006

Presland, Gary. *Aboriginal Melbourne: The Lost Land of the Kulin People* Harriland Press, Forest Hill 3131 Australia 2001

'The Lyre-bird and his Wives'. *Bunjil's Cave* Lansdowne Press, Melbourne, Australia, 1968. p 70

Hannah Steyne 'Investigating the submerged landscapes of Port Phillip Bay, Victoria' @
http://www.heritage.vic.gov.au/admin/file/content2/c7/AIMAPoster_A3.pdf

With special thanks to Judy Williams, Librarian at the Koori Heritage Trust at 295 King Street, Melbourne. TEL: 8622 2600

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Libby Gleeson is an acclaimed and much-loved author of over 30 books for children and teenagers. Her books have been shortlisted for Children's Book Council awards eleven times and she has won three times – most recently the Early Childhood Award for *Amy and Louis*, illustrated by Freya Blackwood. *The Great Bear* (with Armin Greder) was the first Australian title to win the prestigious Bologna Ragazzi Award, in 2000. Libby has been a teacher and lecturer and a speaker at national conferences, and is actively involved in writers' organisations. In 1997 she was awarded the Lady Cutler Award for Services to Children's Literature and in 2007 she was made Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for services to literature and literacy education. You can find Libby's website at www.libbygleeson.com.au.

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Ananda is a community journalist and author. She has written four books for young adult readers. These include a history of the bubonic plague from 1347 - 1900 entitled *The Death: the horror of the plague* (2009), and two novels in the Secrets of Carrick series: *Merrow* (2010) and *Tantony* (2011). *Merrow* was a CBCA 2010 Notable Book, and was also shortlisted for a 2010 Aurealis award. She was a guest at the Reading Matters youth literature conference 2011, and speaks at libraries around Melbourne. With her husband she sings in a bluegrass band called the HillWilliams, and lives in Victoria's Dandenong Ranges with him and two young adult sons. Ananda is currently working on a third novel in the Carrick series.