

Teachers Notes (Middle Years) by Dr Susan La Marca

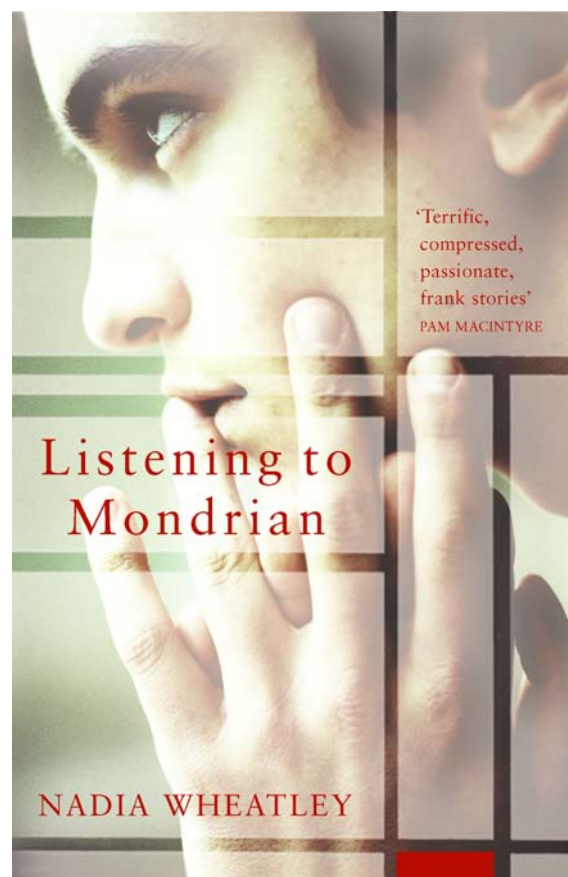
Listening to Mondrian Nadia Wheatley

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Recommended for ages 14+

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INTRODUCTION

ABOUT THE BOOK

This collection of excellent short stories is testament to a writer who understands the power of words. In this collection, Wheatley explores basic human concerns of family, relationships and our place in the world, while also making insightful comments about society in general. Her work is sophisticated, offering a rich reading experience for those who take the time to engage with her writing.

These stories share some common themes but each stands alone as an exploration of the pain and beauty of the human condition.

As a collection, they share a unifying theme of family relationships: between parents or step-parents and children; between children and an absentee parent; between sibling (or step-siblings). This makes them immediately accessible to teenage readers and excellent for introducing students to the critical demands of literature study. Wheatley's writing goes directly to the heart and students will be engaged by trying to understand how she does it.

THE SHORT STORY

The economy of the short story can appeal widely, and makes for short, controlled, yet powerful, reading. The genre has some fine Australian exponents alongside Nadia Wheatley. They include: Isobelle Carmody, Christine Harris, Lucy Sussex, Ruth Park, Robin Klein, David McRobbie, Dyan Blacklock and Margo Lanagan. (See list of related texts – short story collections – at the end of these notes.)

Definitions:

The short story is a fictional prose tale of no specified length, but too short to be published as a volume on its own...[it] will normally concentrate on a single event with only one or two characters, more economically than a novel's sustained exploration of social background.

Baldick, 1990, p. 204

A short story:

- Gets off to a fast start
- Generally has a limited number of characters and scenes
- Starts as close to the conclusion as possible
- Frequently deals with only one problem
- Uses only the detail necessary for understanding the situation
- Usually covers just a short period of time

<<http://jerz.setonhill.edu/writing/creative/shortstory/index.html>>

A short story is a form of short fictional narrative prose. Short stories tend to be more concise and to the point than longer works of fiction, such as novellas (in the modern sense of this term) and novels. Because of their brevity, successful short stories rely on literary devices such as character, plot, theme, language, and insight to a greater extent than long form fiction...Short stories tend to be less complex than novels. Usually, a short story will focus on only one incident, has a single plot, a single setting, a limited number of characters, and covers a short period of time.

Wikipedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Short_story>

After reading the stories in *Listening to Mondrian*, it would be interesting for the class to discuss them in light of these definitions. You could also consider the work of other short story writers (see related texts list for appropriate suggestions)

THE STORIES

LISTENING TO MONDRIAN

The title story of this collection explores a dysfunctional family; the children, their father and an absent mother. The relationship is defined by a lack of understanding and an absence of any meaningful connection between the generations. Despite seeing each other only rarely, the two young people, Jonathon and Gemma, are close. They display a common strength and an understanding of each other's needs that serves to highlight the extent of their disconnectedness from their parents.

The story also makes comment on the paucity of worth in a family whose monetary riches are a poor substitute for love and support. This insight offers up to the reader an opportunity to question the core values of a society that places greater store in the pursuit of wealth above the building of sustained, fulfilling relationships.

The importance of names

How we define or name something often exposes our true perceptions. The connections and associations that come with naming an object can be very powerful. Names permeate the entire story. Consider:

- Jo's names for his father. What do the various names tell us about Jo's views of his father and their relationship?
- Jo's nicknames for his sister, for example. What do these nicknames signify?
 - Gemmy
 - Gemstone
 - Little Fisheter
 - Bub
 - Murgatroyd
 - Gemfish
 - Wheezlebump
- The changing names of Jo's mother throughout the story – track the changes
- The different names given to the headmaster at Jo's school.
- What do the names Jo's father calls his mother on page 16 show you about Jo's parents, their relationship and Jo's perception of them?
- Jo has many nicknames (page 3) but the 'nicest thing I am is Jo' (page 3). Why?

Rite of passage

Jonathon displays a strong desire to make a stand, to free himself from the associations that come with who he is and how he and his sister are treated. His need is partly tied to the desire in many adolescents to separate themselves from the influence / views / ideas of their parents. He feels 'free as a bird let out of his cage' (page 20); or is it more than that? Discuss.

Refuge

Gemma finds a refuge in the artwork of Mondrian. It is a space away from the world where she can be safe. This is part of a personal strategy that enables her to survive the difficult, often loveless, world in which she finds herself.

When Jo's father takes an interest in a woman at the art gallery and the children recognise the regular pattern that will lead to their abandonment (page 11), they respond in different ways. Whilst Gemma does her 'stare and disappear trick' (page 11), Jo feels the rage grow as he slips into the red of the painting (page 17), reminiscent of Alice's fall through the looking glass or the children slipping through the wardrobe into Narnia.

- Do these events serve the same need?

Throughout the events at the art gallery the two children offer each other a level of understanding and support, or refuge, that displays their level of empathy with each other.

- What would life be like for either of the children without their sibling?
- Refuge is a different place, thing or feeling for each of us. What characteristics do they share?

Read the passage where Jo describes the feeling of space he found 'beyond the prison bars' (page 25) and Gemma's description in the same section where she is careful not to go beyond the 'first line of breakers'.

- Where is this place? Does it matter?
- Jo and Gemma are each other's lifeguards? How? Why?

Art

Consider the importance of the art of Mondrian to this story, particularly the work *Composition 1938-9* (page 13). There are numerous excellent books and art encyclopaedias that contain reproductions of Mondrian's works, a few of these are listed in the reference list. Consult your library. The work of Robert Delauney is also mentioned by Jo (pages 8 & 24) and is worth investigating.

- The artwork of Mondrian has an enormous impact on Gemma and Jo. Why?
- Use the work of Mondrian, or that of other modern artists, as impetus for a creative short story writing exercise.
- Why can art of any kind (consider other media) affect us so strongly? Could other things, places or ideas offer the refuge that the artwork offers for Gemma? What could be that thing for you?
- What is the 'wheelbarrow of surprises'? (page 26)

THE BLAST FURNACE

Liv needs a place to escape the life that she finds herself in and the blast furnace near the house offers a perfect opportunity – a place of refuge and dreams. Liv's existence has become menial, downtrodden and almost slave-like. At the furnace, though, she can 'smell' a possible future. The furnace has a 'solid power' (page 27)

Fairytale

The promise for the downtrodden that is found in fairytales permeates this story. There are a number of references to classic fairytales. For instance:

- The power held by Gordo's family
- The witch (page 32)
- The 'big brick tower' – 'It has arched windows, the kind princesses lean out of, but it's not all soft and fanciful like fairytale pictures.' (page 29)
- Liv's names for the different areas of the blast furnace (page 32)
- Cinderella - 'good shoes to the ball' (page 35) and Liv named as such on page 38
- Old lady gives Liv an apple (page 40)
- Poppies (*The Wizard of Oz*) (pages 40 – 41)

Place

The town in which Liv resides is described as a 'trapped beast' (page 28). The hills seem alive as they 'surround the town' 'trapping her' (page 37). Compare the description of the town to that of the blast furnace (pages 31, 38, 47)

Rite of passage

Do we all need to be offered an opportunity / a glimpse of the future by a guiding hand? Or is it something that we can find for ourselves?

Discuss the motto 'My father's house has many mansions' (page 27) in relation to the story and the change that comes over Liv.

'Liv is impervious now to Gramma's slanders. For if Liv is not a princess, and the tower is not a tower, then the witch is not a witch, and cannot harm her.' (page 49) What has happened to Liv?

Why does the breeze across the blast furnace 'carry a faint tang of salt' (page 51)?

LEADLIGHT

'Leadlight' explores the close relationship between family members and the impact that these relationships have on every aspect of our lives. The parent / daughter relationship is contrasted or compared to the biblical story of the prodigal son as Marta contemplates this story for use in her leadlight windows.

This particular story opens with a short sentence style (see opening pages from page 52).

How does this affect the feel of the story?

The story also moves quickly into dialogue – both that between Marta and her mother, and Marta's own internal dialogue.

- Is this appealing?
- How does it affect your reading of the story?

Family

Wheatley is honest in her portrayal of family. Insightful and painfully accurate, Wheatley has her characters feel and say those things many of us have experienced. For example:

- Even in imaginary conversations we argue (page 53)
- Resentful of attention for the absent Maree (page 54)
- Maree's return (page 63 onwards)

Why is Marta so resentful of the 'middle road'? (page 55)

Religion

Marta's parents turn to religion when Maree disappears.

- What does it offer them?
- Does it offer the same things to Marta?

The story of the prodigal son is central to Marta's understanding of Maree's story. Marta identifies with the prodigal son's brother (page 57). Note other similarities and differences between the two stories. Look at Maree's return (page 63)

Marta does not seem to believe in God (page 58).

- How does this affect your view of her, particularly in relation to her parent's strong adherence?
- In relation to your own beliefs?
- What does their faith offer her parents?
- What offers Marta the same feeling?

Marta questions her father - consider the style of his response (page 66) and his words in relation to this story's biblical links.

Creating leadlight

Marta uses leadlight to 'escape the pain' (page 59). She considers herself 'addicted' (page 59).

- How does leadlight help her escape?
- Is it possible to find such deep solace in art?

- Can you think of other examples from amongst the other short stories, or elsewhere, of art or place offering such solace?

Consider:

'The very word somehow made my head spin. The combination of lead, that was heavy, and light, that was – well light.' (page 57)

and

'it was satisfying just to get all the pieces to fit when everything else in the world seemed out of kilter.' (page 59)

- What is the significance of leadlight to Marta?
- What is the significance of lilies? (page 64 & 69)

Is Maree akin to a leadlight window? – '..bringing the sense of sunlight that always seems to shine right through her' (page 70)

Colour

Colour in this story is linked to the leadlight glass and windows and the intrinsic power of colour – the colours of life that surround Marta and help her explain her world.

- Contrast the colours of the glass Marta describes to the colours you might assign to the world of Marta's parents.

'...it was the tones, the shift and change of red and gold and blue that absorbed me' (page 56)

Marta starts to see the colour around her. For example, golden haloes (page 62) and her father's pale blue eyes (page 66)

- Describe Marta, Maree and their parents in colours. Try this with the characters from another story. Refer back to the text to justify your choices.

THE CONVICT BOX

This story is an exploration of the need for communication between a mother and a son. They find the means to do so by a paring back to the basics of their own existence with the assistance of a powerful historical presence.

Communication

The ability to communicate within families is often undermined by a variety of pressures.

- What is stopping Dan and his mother communicating effectively?

When the power goes out, Dan and his mother have 'none of the toys of the twenty-first century to help us not talk to each other' (page 85)

- Do you think present day families find even greater difficulty in communicating than in previous times? Discuss

Dan and his mother are able to write about their true concerns and feelings in the convict letters and write things that otherwise may remain unsaid. (page 85 – 90)

- Is writing 'easier' for some? Why?
- Write a letter as one of the characters from one of Wheatley's other stories. For example, write a letter from Maree to Marta (*Leadlight*), from Liv to her mother (*The Blast Furnace*) or from Jo to his mother (*Listening to Mondrian*).

Rite of passage

On pages 78 & 79 Dan spends some time sorting his accumulated possessions to decide what he will take with him.

- What items from your childhood would you find it hard to part with?
- What items do you own that best represent who you are?
- Do we all acquire too many 'things' in our lives? In the *Gospel According to Larry* by Janet Tashian, Larry believes society has become too materialistic. He limits his possessions to 75 items. Could you imagine doing this in your life?
- Is there a difference between what we want and what we need?

See also *The Short and Incredibly Happy Life of Riley* by Colin Thompson (2005). This picture book questions the nature of human existence, particularly our dependence on possessions.

What Dan decides to take to his father's house is his own 'convict box' (page 80)

- Replicate the convict box activity that Dan has to undertake for his history class. Students could choose a time period, a particular person or an event to represent via the items they collect.
- Or, ask students to create a box, or time capsule, that represents them at this time in their lives.

PASTORAL

Denzil has no home and lives a life being passed around amongst various relatives. At the moment, she lives on Willowglen farm, her only friend is Kylie the dog, but even that is not something she can count on.

What images does the title of this story conjure? Consider definitions of the word and your own views. Do these images sit with the world in which Denzil finds herself?

- On the surface, the farm is quite pastoral in nature but at its depths it is not (page 97). The farm is far from idyllic – in what ways is it not?

For Denzil, Kylie the dog is the only one on her side (page 96). She is helpless against the decisions of others who control her life (page 104). Denzil's sense of helplessness is real. At the conclusion of the story she compares her life to clothes boiled grey in the copper (page 104).

- Is Denzil's story ultimately hopeless? Compare her story to that of Liv in 'The Blast Furnace'. What future do you see for Denzil?

MUM'S DATE

This is a story about change, and particularly about change in families. It is also concerned with the idea that all of us need to accept ourselves as we are and set appropriate priorities.

This is a family that knows each other well. They interact on a very perceptive level. As an example of this, read over the introductory conversation between Callie and her Mum (page 105 onwards). They are close and can predict what the other might say or think.

They also share a dialogue that is of their family – Callie impersonating her brother's reaction to the date is evidence of this (page 107).

Patterns

Callie can see the 'neat pattern of the family's life thrown out of kilter' (page 114 and 129).

- Why is change always so threatening?
- Follow the concrete / cement imagery throughout the story. What is its significance?

Humour

There are a number of witty and funny lines in this story.

- The description of Damien making eggs for dinner (page 108)
- Callie trying to contemplate Damien's future wife (page 108)
- Losing the battle of the lettuce (page 112)
- Do these jeans make me look fat? (page 113 – 114)
- Callie imagining her mother's date (eg. Page 125)

Consider this ability of Wheatley to write amusing lines as well as harrowing, painful passages.

- Where lies the greater skill? Or, is writing any type of good prose difficult?

The humour is Callie's voice being heard clearly through the story.

- Compare Callie as a character to others in this collection.
- What words would you use to describe Jo, Liv or Ant?

Daughter / mother reversal

Callie's mother's 'dating' shifts the pattern of their family, with Callie worried about her mother and advising her mother on her date. This happens on a number of occasions throughout the story:

- Callie feeling like the mother (page 109)
- 'Don't worry about me' (page 111)
- Callie mimicking the wicked stepmother (page 113)
- Callie's mother the other child (page 123)
- Waiting up (page 130)

Is it Callie's mother who must learn to recognise her true self and see the error in presenting herself as something else? (page 135) Usually it is the teenager that must come to this realisation in most YA stories.

- Is this roll reversal effective? Believable? Why? Why not?

First lines

This story has a great opening line 'It was on a Monday that Mum started' (page 105).

Discuss the importance of first lines, first paragraphs or first pages or even covers of books available to you. These are often your first introduction to the reading experience before you.

- How important is it for a story to grab the reader's attention quickly?
- What best grabs you and makes you want to read on?

Consider your thoughts in relation to some famous first lines. For example:

- 'Call me Ishmael' *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville
- It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife' *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen
- 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times' *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens
- 'It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.' *1984* by George Orwell
- 'All this happened, more or less.' *Slaughterhouse Five* by Kurt Vonnegut

More can be found at the American Book Review's listing of 100 best first lines from novels at www.litline.org/ABR/100bestfirstlines.html

ALIEN

This story explores difference and acceptance in various forms through the first performance of a young girl at a music concert in her family's new town.

On a couple of occasions during this story the main character writes and expresses herself in what could be called a 'stream of consciousness' style. (eg. within brackets on page 136 and on page 139)

- Examine how the tone and flow of this style is constructed. Consider punctuation and word use.
- Do you find this style appealing?
- Is it reminiscent of any other mediums?

Alien / Outsider

The main character in this short story uses the analogy of an alien to perfectly describe her sense of being the outsider. Explore her feelings. The following may be useful:

- 'The problem with my parents is – I am not like them. Sometimes I feel as if I've come from outer space.' (page 140)
- song called alien 'new and strange' (page 143)
- 'I clutch my guitar like it's my only friend in the world' (page 142)
- What is normal? (page 140)

Compare this to the feelings of other characters represented in *Listening to Mondrian*.

Communication

Explore the different kinds of communication offered in this short story. What does the main character mean by:

'I can hear the look on my parents' faces' (page 144)

Music is a very effective form of communication. For the central character of the story, it is extremely powerful. She says: 'And as I keep singing and everyone keeps dancing, I feel we're all somehow connected into the one body. I mean, everyone. Everywhere.' (page 145)

- How effective is music as a form of communication for you?
- What can it communicate?
- Consider the use of music to communicate mood and feeling as the background to film action or television shows.

Parents

In this collection of short stories there are a variety of parenting styles displayed. How much does it really matter?

- Do some parents sometimes try too hard? If so, why?
- Consider the examples of Marta's parents (Leadlight), Callie's mum (Mum's Date), Liv's mother (The Blast Furnace) and Jo and Gemma's dad (Listening to Mondrian). What characteristics do they share?

LAND/SCAPE

This story traces the development of a relationship between Ant and his father. Time spent together brings them closer as they begin to see each other as people, with flaws and strengths, rather than stereotypes.

Subheadings

The following subheadings are used in this story.

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------|
| 1. Holding pattern | 6. Layers |
| 2. In the wilds | 7. A limestone gorge and caves |
| 3. His father's footsteps | 8. The movement of water |
| 4. Port Fairy, where the past is ever present | 9. Inside |
| 5. The evidence | 10. Shrinking |

11. Outside

12. The eye of the beholder

13. Economics

14. The fine art of conversation

15. Day five

16. Recording the journey

- Does the use of subheadings affect your reading of the story?
- Do they assist or detract from your understanding of the story?
- Do the subheadings trace the development of the story?
- Create a writing exercise in which the students must replicate this style. Discuss how and why the subheadings could be used as a device to enhance a story.

Rite of passage

At the opening of the story Ant feels physical 'dread' at the thought of spending time with his Dad (page 146); by the end of the story things have changed.

- How important to his own re-evaluation of himself is it that Ant needs to see his father differently? Consider the contact lens scene (page 165-6)
- What points in the story are pivotal to the changes in Ant?
- What enables Ant to talk to his father about Art School?

Communication

Ant wants to make a different path for himself and communicate that path to his father. Both Ant and his father have a need to be seen as who they really are.

- Why is communication so difficult for them?

Landscape

Ant defines landscape on page 178. Discuss this definition and what it means to the story as a whole and Ant and his father's relationship in particular.

Layers

This story explores layers of many kinds: layers in the earth, layers in relationships and the layers in Ant's artwork. Discuss.

Colour

Colour in everything around us is often taken for granted, yet Wheatley shows us how important and powerful it can be in many lives. Ant sees the world around him in relation to colour and art (pages 155, 171).

- Compare Ant's interactions with colour with the importance of colour in the stories 'Leadlight' and 'Listening to Mondrian'.

Memory

At the beginning of the story Ant has few memories of his father (page 165) but at the end of the story Ant is using his artwork to make memories (page 185). Memories are powerful things.

- Discuss the significance they have in our lives.
- Can we really know the difference between real memories and things we only think happened?

STYLE AND LANGUAGE

Moira Robinson has said of many of the stories in this collection:

‘Each story, too, makes us aware, in Dr Leavis’s phrase, of the ‘infinite possibilities of life’ which he felt to be the function of all good fiction’ (Robinson, 1994)

As a group, the stories are varied in style and content. Though they share common themes, they often display different aspects of that theme, posing varied questions for the reader.

Wheatley’s stories are never timid or indecisive. They are compassionate and frank offering disturbing insightful commentary on the nature of human existence.

Wheatley has said of her work:

‘I wanted to show that the short story can have so many different ways of being written, and that there’s no right way to write a short story. There are better ways for different stories, but I let content tell me what the form should be’ (Wheatley in Matthews, 1995).

Look through the stories for examples of variety and similarities in style. Consider:

- The various openings to the stories
- Sentence structure
- Tone
- Dialogue
- Setting

Wheatley has the excellent ability of being able to convey feeling and a sense of place or person through her powerful descriptive passages. Discuss her use of analogy, metaphor, imagery and descriptors using the examples below and any others you can find in the text.

‘Once Maree left there was no family, just three peas rattling in a two-bedroom brick-veneer pod’ (page 54)

‘She was sharp, vivid, with a cloud of fizzy gold spiral curls and a face that was all movement. I was stodgy, stolid, with limp brown hair that just sort of flopped down in strands over the broad bones of my cheeks. With Maree gone, I somehow felt less dull.’ (page 60)

THEMES

FAMILY

Patterns in family life

Discuss the different family patterns and the possible disruptions to family patterns in the various short stories in the collection

- Consider the uncertainty when patterns are disrupted. For example, Callie in ‘Mum’s date’ and Maree’s disappearance in ‘Leadlight’
- Ant thinks he knows the ‘pattern’ but finds a new one in ‘Land/Scape’

Relationships

The collection presents a range of good and poor relationships between various family members.

- Consider possible examples of rivalry, dominance, love, and indifference in the stories.
- How much of who we are is linked to the relationships we foster and those that are thrust upon us? Look to the text for examples to illustrate your views.

Sacrifice

Making a sacrifice for someone we love is an interesting aspect of human relationships. Explore examples from society or your own family.

In this collection, Jo is prepared to stand up for his sister in 'Listening to Mondrian' and Liv's mother in 'The Blast Furnace' tries to help Liv in a limited way.

- Is self-sacrifice the ultimate gift?

Truth

Families are an institution in which people can become very close. For many they offer the closest relationships they will ever experience.

- Is it only our families that know the true nature of us as people?

Why/ Why not?

Wheatley shows a number of families in which deep truths are recognised and sometimes even accepted despite being unpleasant. For example:

- Jo and Gemma recognise the true nature of their father in 'Listening to Mondrian'
- Marta's father knows the true nature of his wayward daughter Maree (page 66) in 'Leadlight'
- Ant and his father in 'Land/Scape' learn to see the real person faults and all.

- Is this the power of families – to offer us a view of ourselves that is the closest to reality?
- Or can even those closest to us not comprehend the real person?

While Wheatley shows us families with a strong empathy for each other, we are also shown families in which members do not connect with or comprehend each other. For example:

- Marta and her mother in 'Leadlight'
- Jo and Gemma and their father in 'Listening to Mondrian'

Discuss the following quotes in relation to the families in Wheatley's short stories:

'Happy families are all alike, every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way'. Leo Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina*

'Other things may change us, but we start and end with family.' Anthony Brandt

The bond that links you to your true family is not one of blood, but of respect and joy in each other's life. Rarely do members of one family grow up under the same roof.' Richard Bach

'The family is the country of the heart.' Giuseppe Mazzini

COMMUNICATION

Communicating feelings is a major theme in many of the stories in this collection. The extent to which characters are able to communicate effectively impacts markedly on the quality of their relationship.

- Compare the destructive relationship between Jo and his father in 'Listening to Mondrian' and the positive, supportive relationship exhibited between Callie and her mother in 'Mum's Date'.
- What is communicating really about?
- Consider the efforts of the deaf parents in 'Alien'
- What makes a good communicator?

Naming

Naming something is often linked to understanding that thing or giving it a certain power. There are a number of examples of this amongst the collected stories:

- Importance of names and nicknames to Jo in 'Listening to Mondrian'
- The name-calling that torments Liv in 'The Blast Furnace'
- Dan identifying with Seamus, his imaginary character, once he has named him in 'The Convict Box'
- Ant sees his father as Tony not Dad (page 147)

- How important are names to you and your friends?
- Consider how trends in names change over time.

RITE OF PASSAGE

Some of these stories show us clear moments in a person's life that are important events in the development of that person; moments that signal their passage from one period of life to another. Other stories, like 'Pastoral', offer us less hope of change but still show us a period in life that may have great influence over the future.

Discuss the following moments of significance:

- Jo choosing to do what he thinks is right despite the probable consequences in 'Listening to Mondrian'
- Liv's glimpse of a possible future in 'The Blast Furnace'
- Dan realising that he does not have to go in 'The Convict's Box'.
- Callie and her mother recognising the importance of the life they have with each other in 'Mum's Date'.
- Marta's acceptance of her sister in 'Leadlight'
- Ant and his father beginning to see each other in 'Land/Scape'

Many of these moments are empowering.

- Is this part of successful growth?
- What of Denzil's story?

REFUGE

Consider the places of refuge found in this collection of stories – compare and contrast what the following offer to each story and the characters:

- The paintings of Mondrian in 'Listening to Mondrian'
- The blast furnace in 'The Blast Furnace'
- Marta's leadlight in 'Leadlight'
- The relationship between Callie and her Mum in 'Mum's Date'.
- The girl's guitar / music in 'Alien'
- Kylie the dog to Denzil in 'Pastoral'
- Ant's sketching in 'Land/Scape'

PERCEPTION OF THE PAST

John Marsden said of Wheatley's work:

'with Wheatley's characters we gradually realise that their perceptions of the past have brought them to the moments of crisis that the stories explore.' (1994)

and

'Perhaps it's Wheatley's training in history that gives her such an awareness of the need in personal lives to interpret past events' (1994)

In relation to these quotes consider:

- The events surrounding their mother that haunt Jo and Gemma in 'Listening to Mondrian'
- The history of the blast furnace and the power Liv finds in knowledge of Gramma's past in 'The Blast Furnace'
- The historical context that enables Dan and his mother to reinvent their relationship In 'The Convict Box'.
- The multi-layered earth and the weight of history in 'Land/Scape'

OUTSIDERS

Wheatley, discussing her work, has said 'I have to be on the side of my young adult characters against the old adult ones' (Wheatley in Matthews, 1995). Wheatley appears interested in powerless people and those on the edge of grasping power, yet she offers them up to the reader with great empathy and in a non-judgemental fashion. This only serves to make the characters more real.

- Discuss how and why the characters in each of the stories are outsiders. Refer to the text for evidence.

THE ARTS

In many of these stories the Arts feature strongly. They are often the source of solace for characters, a place of refuge, or the impetus for healing and finding answers. Various forms of the arts are represented:

- Painting in 'Listening to Mondrian'
 - Story and the importance of understanding / believing / living stories in 'The blast furnace'
 - Marta's skill with leadlight, design and colour in 'Leadlight'
 - The importance of story in the leadlight windows in 'Leadlight'
 - Ant's sketching and drawing and ability with colour in 'Land/scape'
 - Musical talent of the girl in 'Alien'
- Discuss the importance of the Arts in your community, your family and amongst your friends.
 - Encourage students to respond to one of Wheatley's stories in a medium other than written text.

RESOURCES

RELATED TEXTS

Short story collections

Baillie, Allan. (2005) *A Taste of Cockroach*, Penguin.
 Carmody, Isobelle (1996) *Green Monkey Dreams*, Viking.
 Lanagan, Margo (2000) *White Time*, Allen & Unwin.
 Lanagan, Margo (2005) *Black Juice*, Allen & Unwin.
 Sussex, Lucy (Compiler) (1995) *Shadow Alley: Nine Crime Stories*, Omnibus.
 Wilson, Budge (1999) *My Cousin Clarette*, UQP.
 Winton, Tim (2005?) *The Turning*, Pan Macmillan.

Famous short stories

(List from Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Short_story)

'A Rose for Emily' by William Faulkner
 'The Snows of Kilimanjaro' by Ernest Hemingway, the classic stream-of-consciousness short story
 'The Lottery' by Shirley Jackson
 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' by Flannery O'Connor
 'The Gift of the Magi' by O. Henry (William Sydney Porter)
 'The Tell-Tale Heart' by Edgar Allan Poe
 'The Lottery' by Shirley Jackson

'The Cask of Amontillado' by Edgar Allan Poe
'Araby' by James Joyce
'Why I live at the P.O.' by Eudora Welty
'The Story of an Hour' by Kate Chopin
'Marrakech' by George Orwell
'A Sound of Thunder' by Ray Bradbury
'The Most Dangerous Game' by Richard Connell
'The Monkey's Paw' by W.W. Jacobs

RESOURCES ON THE WORLD WIDE WEB

Million writers award

Top ten online short stories for a given year. Readers can vote for their favourite
<<http://www.storystsouth.com/millionwriters/2005toptenstories.html>>

Online website of short stories including many classics

<<http://www.short-stories.co.uk/>>

Interesting site on the short story that lists, and then describes, a top ten of hints for creative writers.
<http://jerz.setonhill.edu/writing/creative/shortstory/index.html>

Story Bytes

This site hosts a regular zine on short stories and includes a number of stories on the site. Of interest are the two word stories

<<http://www.storybytes.com/view-length/0002-words/index-0002.html>>

THEMATICALLY LINKED TEXTS

Family / relationships / rite of passage / freedom

Barnes, Helen *Killing Aurora*, Penguin.
Clarke, Judith *Wolf on the Fold*, Allen & Unwin.
Clarke, Judith *Friend of my Heart*, Allen & Unwin
Condon, Bill *No Worries*, UQP.
Crowley, Cath *Chasing Charlie Duskin*
Donnelly, Jennifer *A Gathering Light*, Bloomsbury.
Feinberg, Anna *Borrowed Light*, Allen & Unwin.
Green, John *Looking for Alaska*, HarperCollins
Hartnett, Sonya *Thursday's Child*, Penguin.
Lanagan, Margo *The Best Thing*, Allen & Unwin.
Lanagan, Margo *Touching Earth Lightly*, Allen & Unwin.
Metzenthén, David *Falling Forward*, Penguin.
Moloney, James *Bridge to Wiseman's Cove*, Penguin.
Moloney, James *Lost Property*, Penguin.
Wheat, Chris *Looselips*, Hyland House.
Wynne-Jones, Tim *The Flight of Burl Crow*, Allen & Unwin.
Zusak, Markus *Fighting Reuben Wolfe*, Pan Macmillan.
Zusak, Markus *When Dogs Cry*, Pan Macmillan.

REFERENCES

Baldick, C. (1990) *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxford: OUP.
Deicher, Susanne (1994) *Piet Mondrian, 1872 – 1944: Structures in Space*, Benedikt Taschen.
Elgar, Frank (1968) *Mondrian*, Thames & Hudson.
Fauchereau, Serge (1994) *Mondrian and the Neo-Plasticist Utopia*, Ediciones Poligrafa, S. A.

Marsden, John (1994) 'Different by the Dozen' in *The Weekend Age*, October 1st, page 15.

Matthews, Stephen (1995) 'Short, Sharp Stories for Children' in *Canberra Times*, January 1st, page 18.

Robinson, Moira (1994) 'The Night Tolkien Died' in *Viewpoint: on books for young adults*, Volume 2, Number 4, Summer, page 18-19.

ABOUT THE WRITERS

NADIA WHEATLEY

Nadia Wheatley was born in Sydney in 1949. Nadia began writing fiction in 1976, after completing postgraduate work in Australian history. Her published work includes picture books, including the celebrated *My Place* (with Donna Rawlins), novels for younger readers, young adult novels, short stories (for adults as well as young adults), history and biography (for adults). She has also written for television and the theatre, and has reviewed history and fiction for a number of newspapers and academic journals. Her work has received many awards and commendations including the CBC Book of the Year Award for Younger Readers, the Eve Pownall Award, the New South Wales Premier's Children's Book Award and NSW Premier's Special Children's Book Award.

SUSAN LA MARCA

Susan La Marca is a secondary school teacher-librarian. Her PhD, completed in 2003, explored how a teacher-librarian creates a reading environment.

Susan works for the School Library Association of Victoria (SLAV) and edits their research journal *Synergy*. She is also an associate editor of the journal *Viewpoint: on books for young adults* and editor of a number of books on reading and school library design. She is the co author, with Dr Pam Macintyre, of *Knowing readers: unlocking the pleasures of reading* (2006).

As well as being the Children's Book Council of Australia awards judge for Victoria for 2006/7 Susan works as a consultant and writer in areas related to reading and teacher-librarianship. She has presented in these areas both nationally and internationally.