

Teachers' Notes
by Ananda Braxton-Smith

The Simple Things
by
Bill Condon

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Recommended for ages 7-11 yrs
Recommended for curriculum levels 4, 5 & 6

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INTRODUCTION

The Simple Things is the moving story of an ordinary Australian family, seen through the eyes of a shy, uncertain ten-year-old boy.

Told with an enchanting mix of simplicity and complexity, it is a book of conversation starters, exploring the ways social history and family life affect personal development, and providing readily accessible material for discussion in the classroom.

'Beneath Condon's simple writing style, and Beth Norling's supporting line drawings, are deeper themes about death, grief and acceptance. But while these themes hover around the book's edges, its main focus is on life, living and the simple things we take for granted—the message, beautifully rendered for the age group, is that it's never too late (or too soon) to open the door to a friend.' (Lewin, *Junior Books and Publishing* December 2013, p.15)

Warm, realistic, and deeply heartfelt, *The Simple Things* was short-listed for the CBCA Award for Younger Readers in 2015.

SYNOPSIS

Ten-year-old Stephen Kelly is very, very shy. So when his parents take him to stay with his cold, prickly Great Aunt Lola in the country, he is certain it will be awful. And he's right - Aunt Lola corrects his grammar, pesters him about his manners, and confiscates his stuff. But Stephen wants to make Mum happy and Dad proud, so he does his best.

After a terribly awkward start, Stephen and Lola slowly begin to bond over Lola's 'Family Book' – a collection of family photos and documents kept in her shed. Lola allows Stephen to watch, and eventually she lets him help cut and paste, and reads him the story of his amazing pirate ancestor, Long John Silverman. But when Stephen finds an old case hidden in a locked room, Lola tells him to forget about it – it only holds 'sad memories'.

Just before her eightieth birthday, Aunt Lola faints, and has to be taken to hospital. When Stephen is finally allowed to see her, she secretly begs him to destroy the case hidden in the shed. The following morning, she breaks down and says she shouldn't have asked Stephen to take that responsibility. They go together to the locked room, and Lola shares her secret - she had a baby in 1951, when she was seventeen and unmarried. Out of shame, her parents forced her to adopt the baby out. Stephen, seeing the pain that this memory causes Lola, offers to help her make a special page in the Family Book for her lost baby.

By the end of the visit, Stephen and Aunt Lola have each learned to confront and look beyond what scares them, and that empathy is the first step towards healing old wounds and starting new friendships.

THEMES

Social history

Many of the novel's themes focus on recent social history: what has changed and what has stayed the same. Classroom conversations might begin with noting differences between Stephen and Lola's worldview:

- *Differences in expectation of living standards*
Lola has a one-bar heater and goes to bed if she's cold [p.25]. She also has an outside toilet, and a b/w television on which she only watches the news [p.19]
- *Differences in social expectation*
Lola's parents were strict and there were lots of rules. She was 'always getting in trouble' [p.91]

- *Differences in manners and morals*
In smaller matters such as Lola insisting on *May I* instead of *Can I*, or telling Stephen not to 'keep the young lady waiting' when Allie comes to play [p.70]. Or in larger matters, such as Lola's unmarried pregnancy [p.146] and its outcome
- *Differences in gender expectation*
Norm used to go hunting with his father and brothers in his youth [p.87] and Stephen aspires to catch a fish, something he achieves but is surprised by the reality as opposed to the fantasy. Allie's physical prowess throughout the novel, her cheerful competitiveness and her unconcern about the dying fish, are more generally understood to be male characteristics [p.88] and certainly would have been seen that way in the past.
- *Differences in technology*
Toilets [outside and with a chain p.30], books, toys [metal toy cars p.55], television [b/w and small p.19], heating [one bar heater p.25]. This includes change in the universal requirement of skills such as legible handwriting.
- *Differences in child/parent relationship*
Stephen's relationship with his parents is both warm and respectful, full of shared jokes and intimate concern for each others' feelings. Aunt Lola's curt description of her family life suggests a different set of conventions governing family life were in place.[p.91] The more formal relationship between her and her parents, the higher expectations placed on her manners and education, can be easily inferred from Lola's behaviour and from noting what's important to her.

After comparing and contrasting Lola's and Stephen's differences in experience and worldview, a more generalised comparison of life in 1935 and 2015 will provide opportunities to segue into specific history tasks. [See [Activities: History](#) below]

Family life & personal development:

Stephen finds Aunt Lola strict, weird and scary. He also finds her attitude to modern technology inexplicable. However Lola is only the product of her social context and experience, as is Stephen. In the future Stephen's grandchildren are very likely to find him weird and scary too, and they will have new modern technologies Stephen cannot even imagine at ten-years-old.

The text is rich in material about family life in general. There are many passages that inform discussion of the tasks of personal development, about living well with one's self and with others. These tasks are not just for Stephen but for everybody no matter their age. Here are a few passages:

- On getting old [pp.4, 52, 84]
- On death and dying [pp.25, 38-39, 73 , 87-88, 89,116]
- On normality [Norm's hair pp.32-33]
- On pleasing people [hugging Lola p.1; Stephen's fantasy about catching a fish p.38 – see the [Discussion Guide](#) below]
- On respecting difference [pp.62-3]

Any discussion of social history benefits from a consideration of both what changes *and* what stays the same over time. This approach softens the tendency to construct history as a progressive motion of discrete ages, in which certain attitudes and activities are quarantined and labelled *bad* or *good* according to contemporary values. Students' own discussions will hopefully clarify that most social values and practice are *reworked*, not *replaced*. For instance, Aunt Lola and Stephen's mother are both trying to improve his verbal skills; their difference on this matter is only one of approach.

Discussion of change across time in manners and morals needs a circumspect approach. Societies develop new social conventions but a population's manners and morals do not change universally, or quickly, or for good [See Extended Study & Further reading, below, for 1935

article on [War Toys](#)]. As part of its imperative any new convention requires a public display of non-subscription to the old, now-discredited, convention. This does not mean that people are not privately subscribing to older conventions and worldviews: it means only that they are not showing it in public!

This is a complex understanding but attempts to simplify the reality of our diverse communities will only lead to misunderstanding.

The Simple Things provides a number of avenues for creative, respectful discussion of important themes, but it is important to note that these themes have the potential to cause conflict in the classroom, and must be handled with caution.

Australia is a plural society in which a variety of people live out a variety of social and sexual codes, some more acceptable than others according to their historical conventions. Right now in our communities, there are parents who are 'strict' and their children are indeed 'always in trouble', just like poor old Lola. There are families for whom an unmarried pregnancy is still a matter of shame. And there are plenty of people who consider a capacity to kill an essential element of 'masculinity'. These conventional notions are not gone.

As a consequence of the above complexity, discussion should remain as open as possible. Students and teachers should practice consciously respectful listening and responding, to avoid suggesting to any child that their family is substandard in some way.

THE SIMPLE THINGS AND THE CURRICULUM: A GENERAL OVERVIEW

The Simple Things has application for classroom use in the disciplines of English (Language, Literature & Literacy) and History, particularly Level 6. The text supports and stimulates discussions that deepen Social and Personal Learning, as well as providing opportunities for project-based learning in Information and Communication Technology.

THE SIMPLE THINGS & THE GENERAL CAPABILITIES

The Simple Things supports learning in the following capabilities: Literacy, Information and Communication Technology, Critical and Creative Thinking, Personal and social capability, Ethical understanding and Intercultural understanding.

- **English:** *The Simple Things* is structured around deeply subjective experiences such as shyness, gender, fear of death and fear of disapproval, and the text provides plenty of entry points into discussions of these experiences that will extend students' capacity for self-reflective language. In addition the story is told by a ten-year-old child-narrator who is really Bill Condon, in his sixties. This act of imagination, which relies on *memory* as well as *projection*, provides an opportunity for students to take part in activities in which they imagine themselves into another body and experience. [see [Activities:Literature](#) below] The text also contains a built-in project for students in the creation of personal Family Books, in which a range of learning may be undertaken: in language and literacy, in the organisation of information, in the usage of grammar and spelling, in recognition and use of informative and personal texts, and in storytelling both in words *and* pictures.
- **ICT:** *The Simple Things* has characters with various uses for and levels of expertise in current ICT, providing opportunities to talk about our rapidly changing technology and its uses and abuses. The creation of students' Family Books requires the use of a range of software, the pursuit of online research, the collection of material using suitable storage devices, online writing and editing, design and layout, and publishing.

- Critical and Creative Thinking: Bill Condon has partly constructed his young (Stephen) and old (Lola) protagonists through a focus on the way they speak, or don't speak. *The Simple Things* can be critically analysed for language and conversational conventions, or lack of such. The novel provides opportunities to create texts based on these conventions, giving students the experience of creating character while learning about the contextual nature of language.
- Personal and social capability: *The Simple Things* is a deeply personal book. Its themes include managing relationships and understanding the self. It models a language to develop clear expression of personal values, especially the expression of love or fear. The discussions it engenders will give practice in learning to listen, evaluate and respond in respectful ways.
- Ethical capability: *The Simple Things* contains characters with differing worldviews who learn to appreciate one another. It is a story in which managing conflict, empathising with others through imagining the self into their situation, is central. The difference in worldviews is shown to be a result of life experience.
- Intercultural understanding: *The Simple Things* is a story about inter-generational change: about what changes and what stays the same. It provides a model of how one personal identity has been shaped, and how another is being shaped, by experience and context.

NOTE ON HISTORY/HISTORIES IN *THE SIMPLE THINGS*:

The Simple Things presents individual and family history as not just personally important, but socially relevant. Lola's individual experiences, as a child and young woman of early twentieth century Australia, were experiences arising from socially generalised ideas and practices that governed behaviour at that time. Inclusive collections of individual histories (as opposed to the single History of the large movements of state power), including family histories, are the best basis for understanding our past. In so far as individual persons make a family, plural families make a community, and collections of communities make a nation, family histories are central to understanding the character of 'nationhood' at any point in time.

THE SIMPLE THINGS & THE CURRICULUM: DETAILS & ACTIVITIES

Vocab stop! [Language] Convention

Meaning: 'A conventional linguistic trait is an arbitrary one learned from others, not one determined by some natural law or genetic inheritance. Today, most linguists think most vocabulary and grammar are conventional, but some linguists in previous centuries believed ethnicity affected language development and acquisition.'

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

ENGLISH LANGUAGE: 'THE PAST IS ANOTHER COUNTRY.' L.P. HARTLEY

Not only people from other places have their own particular cultures, with specific language, social and sexual conventions. In non-traditional cultures such as Australia, age differences also create markedly different cultures. A young person and an old person of the same contemporary community will have had different life experiences, at different times, leading to different worldviews—and different cultures and conventions. As with cultures created

in other countries or religions, however, this does not mean there cannot be understanding and fellowship.

Great-aunt Lola was born circa 1935. Research into the language conventions of this time will reveal a speaking and writing culture more concerned with the display of formal respect than contemporary Australian culture. There was also a concern with the teaching of consistent grammar and spelling that has dwindled in past decades, plus a historical connection with British usage that has shifted to the usage of the United States of America.

Books for the children of Aunt Lola's time were in general richer in their use of language, more obvious in their didacticism, and such was the confidence in the teaching of 'received' English, that jokes could be made regarding its misuse and the educated child reader would 'get' them.

[A small list of [fiction titles published for children between 1935 and 1950](#) is in the Further reading/Extended Study section at the end of this document.]

Activity 1: Don't say it like that!

As you READ the book LOCATE and LIST Aunt Lola's attempts to correct Stephen's language. NOTE Stephen's response to her corrections. ASK yourself: why does Lola dislike Stephen not speaking correctly? Does she say why she doesn't like it? What could be her reasons?

Here are a few examples of relevant passages that provide good starting points for a consideration of conventional language and its use.

- pp.69-70 & p.92: *Can I?* vs *May I?* Lola's problem is the supposedly interchangeable meanings of *can* and *may*. She finds linguistic imprecision irritating. *Can* and *may* mean two different things.
 - (As a small but vital extension to the above, such a loss of stable meaning doesn't matter much when it's simply an inversion of *May I* or *Can I*, but grows in import when we get fuzzy about other meanings, such as the difference between *Refugee* and *Illegal Alien*, for one example. Language being our main mode of *thinking*, a ready acceptance of unstable meanings leads to dangerous slipperiness in forming and holding ideas.)
- p.8 Lola dislikes Stephen's use of double qualifiers such as 'really, *really* ...' and 'very, *very* ...'
- pp.9-10 Stephen's attempts to say *Yes* instead of *Yeah* impress Lola
- p.21 & p.76 Lola finds Stephen's non-verbal utterances, such as 'aw' and 'huh', unacceptable

After a consideration of Stephen and Lola's linguistic misunderstandings, the discussion can extend into the students' own lives and language. The activities below might encourage students to think about their personal language style, and consider reasons for concern about slipperiness meanings and unintended rudeness.

Activity 2: Talking proper!

THINK about your own family and school life. Are there people who try to correct your language? How does such correction make you feel?

MAKE a class list of words and phrases your relatives, friends or teachers try to correct. What would they rather you said? Why do you think they have such a preference? Do you think they have a point?

MAKE a list of words and phrases you dislike? Do you try to stop people saying them? Why do you do that? What would you rather they said?

SHARE your list with your classmates.

Here's a few my mother and grandmother tried to instil in me:

- *Pardon? not What?*
- Use a person's name, not *She/He* or *Her/Him*:
'*She? Who's she? The cat's mother?*' my grandmother used to say when I forgot this mannerly convention. It was a matter of respect. Humans had names. Only animals were reduced to the third person pronoun.
- *I don't mind, not I don't care.* These two statements mean two different things, one of which is friendly while the other is rude.

ENGLISH LITERATURE: WRITING DIFFERENCE

***The Simple Things* has a ten-year-old narrator but its author is a man in his sixties. It's been a long time since Bill Condon was ten! The writing of a character much younger than an author relies not just on imagination, but on memory.** For a child character to act his or her age on the page instead of a simple-minded, less linguistic [and de-gendered!] version of an adult, the author must *remember what it felt like* to be that age.

Here is the novel's author Bill Condon on writing ten-year-old Stephen:

'One of the really good things about writing is that you can use your imagination to take you back to another time ... I would suggest to anyone writing a story based on a character younger than them, that they think back to an important event from their own lives. 'Firsts' are a good place to start: first day at school, first time you caught the bus or train on your own, first time you took part in a race – there are lots of possibilities.'

[Bill Condon by email 20/7/2015]

Activity 1: Growing down

SIT in a quiet and peaceful manner. JUST SIT. CLOSE your eyes.

GROW DOWNWARD. IMAGINE yourself getting younger and younger. SEE your body becoming smaller. Your hands and feet are shrinking. Your head is getting bigger in relation to the rest of your body. FEEL yourself smaller.

Grow downward.

IMAGINE being in grade three, grade two, grade one, prep. Let your mind travel back. REMEMBER.

SEE the world grow bigger around you. LOOK UP at your tall, tall mother. TAKE her hand. SEE how big the park is and the huge slide and the climbing frame rising up above your head. WHAT do you want to do?

FOCUS especially on the feelings in your body that come with remembering. NOTE the things you see and feel in a few words and close your eyes again.

SPEND some time playing in that park.

WHEN YOU ARE FINISHED bring your mind home. COME BACK into the classroom. FEEL your hands and feet. WRIGGLE your toes and fingers. YAWN wide and long. OPEN your eyes.

You won't be able to remember *everything* but that's OK. You only need to remember *something*.

When you have remembered something from each year of school, you can try going further back.

Activity 2: First Times

SIT in a quiet and peaceful manner, as above. JUST SIT. GROW DOWNWARD.

GROW DOWN to a time before you started school. LET your mind travel back to a time before you started school.

REMEMBER your kindergarten. Where was it? What did you do there? What did it smell like? Was there something about it you loved? Was there something about it you hated?

You had lots of First Times at your kindergarten. Maybe the first best friend? The first time in trouble with a teacher? The first class show? The first fight? The first goal? The first weird food?

FOCUS on one First Time. Just let it come. REMEMBER everything you can about it. NOTE everything you remember. LISTEN to your body, too. Your body has a memory of its own.

When you have remembered and noted those memories, you can give them to fictional characters. You don't have to make *everything* up when writing fiction; in fact, using real life experiences makes stories feel real to readers. You can use as much or as little as you want of your memories but never forget to include how you felt.

Activity 3: Write a 'kinder' kid

MAKE UP a child of kindergarten age.

Is the child a boy or a girl? Are they four or five years old? What do they look like? Do they like 'kinder'? Are they shy or outgoing? What is their favourite thing to do? What is their hardest thing to do? NAME them.

YOU DECIDE:

LOOK AT your notes from activities one and two. CHOOSE one of your First Times. It can be a funny or a sad or a scary First Time.

YOU DECIDE:

GIVE the First Time to your made-up kinder kid. GIVE him or her all your old feelings and thoughts. WRITE as much as you can in the time the teacher gives you.

SHARE your kinder kid with your classmates.

Maybe you could make a class story in which all your kinder kids play a part. You could act out all the different First Times. Then you'll have a play. You could show the play to other classes in your school. *Everybody knows about the nature of First Times.*

Extension: practising perspective

The student can choose to write in third- or first-person at the outset and then swap, or teachers can nominate different perspectives in two different sessions. The experience of writing in the two perspectives will change the intensity of the memory.

HISTORY (LEVEL 6): THE HISTORIES OF US

The Simple Life includes a character that many young people will recognise; that is the grandparent engaged in family tree research. These grandparents are rich resources in social-historical inquiry, and not just because of their genealogical projects. From their pursuit of family history they not only hold historical data, they also hold information about finding and using available *sources*. In addition, they are walking, talking, historical objects!

These grandparents actually lived through the wars, civil rights movements, unionisations (and de-unionisations) of work forces, the discoveries of science and their applications, and movements back and forth in the political and artistic landscapes that students will study later in their schooling.

These grandparents are the people who brought us second wave feminism, most of the modern movements for human rights, vaccination, rock 'n' roll and the computer! And that's just the tip of their chronological iceberg! They hold material for many projects.

Activity: The Family Book

A family history book provides a project with immediate built-in interest for students: it's a project with their self at the centre of the inquiry. It allows for a personal engagement in the ways Australian life changed over the twentieth century. It also provides an immediate experience of the diversity hiding in Australia's national history.

A systematic approach to creating a historical Family Book would provide for learning in multiple discipline areas, including:

- Development of line of inquiry: what line of questioning will the student follow? Language? Status of children? Manners and morals? Toys? Boys and girls? Race?
- Location and assessment of sources
- Exposure to different sorts of 'sources': online government material, letters and diaries, business records, school records, immigration sources

The creation of such books will also exercise the primary skills of thinking and decision-making, online writing and editing, organisation of material, page design and layout, handling of images—and the development of an interview technique that will please the grandparents.

Activity alternative: The Class Book

Grandparents can be utilised individually in the above Family Book project, or they can be a group resource in the more overarching project of a Class Book. The Class Book is a record of interviews with the students' older relatives. The interviews can be conducted over one afternoon, perhaps with tea and cake. Tea and cake help everything.

These interviews can take the form of written records of the interviews, or interviews conducted on video- or audiotape. Students will use their best manners and serve tea while they interview the older people.

It is best to focus on two or three agreed subjects rather than conduct individual rambling conversations, no matter how interesting they might be.

Your finished interviews should give a plural overview of a few topics. The line of inquiry should be prepared in advance in the form of a questionnaire. The questionnaire provides a framework for conversation, and gives shy children like Stephen a guide. See [Blackline Master 1](#) for an example.

Starting with these general questions students can develop more specific lines of inquiry. This project is a beneficial activity for the development of specific questioning lines and *sticking to them*. It also gives experience in conducting further research extrapolated from the interviews. Some of your focuses might be:

- Changes in the lives of women and children from 1915 to 2015
- Changes in the face of post-war Australia: migration and refuge
- Changes in what we eat, what we wear, how we talk

The books you create will be historical resources in themselves. Donate them to your library's historical archive. Or keep a part of the school library to house the Class Books. Imagine being able to borrow a 2015 Class Book in 2050!

See the [Extended Study and Further Reading](#) section for a list of helpful websites.

TWO DISCUSSION GUIDES

ENGLISH: LITERACY

Discussion: Secret Men's Business?

A consistent motif running through *The Simple Things* is a consideration of death, both from the dying and the killing perspective. Aunt Lola is very old and coming to the end of her life. Norm Smith hasn't long to live. There is a critique of fishing and hunting as rites of passage in which boys prove themselves men.

Read the following passages. They are constructed from Bill Condon's memories of his own experience with a youthful notion, an *idea of fishing*.

'Another thing that is true is the incident in which Stephen catches a fish. I caught my first fish on that trip to New Zealand. I'd been dreaming about it happening for so long – wanting it so much - but when it finally did happen, it was a huge shock.'

[Bill Condon by email 20/7/2015]

1. READ aloud together Chapter Nine, in which Stephen and Dad go to the river to watch people fishing. At this stage Stephen has a thoroughly romantic view of catching a fish. The scene culminates in his fantasy of what it will be like when he finally does so.

There is much to talk about in this scene. Some questions might include:

- Why did Stephen want so badly to be *seen* catching the fish? Would it have been as desirable if there was no one to see?
- Do you think Stephen thinks it will please his father to catch a fish? Who else might be pleased and impressed?
- Do you think Stephen wants to be 'like' his Dad? What other passage in the book discusses trying to be 'like' fathers and brothers? [Norm's hunting story pp.87-88]
- Do you think Stephen is embarrassed because Allie can catch fish? Why?
- What is *not* in the fantasy passage? Does Stephen imagine ahead of fishing what being 'caught' might be like for the fish? Does he imagine what it might feel like to kill the fish?

2. READ aloud together pp.112-114. In this scene Stephen finally catches his fish but the reality is different to the fantasy.

- What does Stephen feel for the fish now he has caught it?
- Does he care what people think when he tries to save the fish?
- Have you had a fantasy about something you wanted badly, only to have the reality turn out different? Were you disappointed? Angry? Ashamed? Did you learn something useful about yourself, or about the real world?

HISTORY(LEVEL 6)

Discussion: Frankenstein at large

The last hundred years have seen human beings go from letters sent by hand to mobile phones; fuzzy still photographs on heavy glass plates to YouTube; the launching and sinking of the Titanic to space probes photographing Pluto.

Great Aunt Lola was a newborn when:

- English botanist [Arthur Tansley](#) introduced the concept of the [ecosystem](#)
- the world's first [parking meter](#) was installed in Oklahoma City

She was ten years old in 1945, when:

- the [United States dropped atomic bombs](#) on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (August 6th & 9th 1945)
- the first all-electronic computer was completed. It was called [ENIAC](#) (Electronic Numerical Integrator and Calculator).

Every new technology requires a community to reorient itself in relationship to that new technology: to redraw the border between human and machine, human and chemical reaction, human and artificial intelligence. Our creations both intrigue and frighten us. When Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* in 1816 she, and the rest of intellectual Europe, were fascinated by experiments with electricity that had been conducted for a hundred years. The era's leading electrical researchers, Humphry Davy and William Nicholson, were friends of Shelley's father and she knew them socially. At that time, scientists thought that electricity might be one of the causes of life. Nineteenth century researchers did pass voltage through dead bodies to see what would happen:

'Aldini's most famous exhibition took place in 1803 at the Newgate Prison in London, U.K. He inserted metal rods into the mouth and ear of the recently executed corpse of murderer George Foster. "The Newgate Calendar," a book about the criminals of Newgate Prison, described what happened next: "On the first application of the process to the face, the jaws of the deceased criminal began to quiver, and the adjoining muscles were horribly contorted, and one eye was actually opened. In the subsequent part of the process the right hand was raised and clenched, and the legs and thighs were set in motion."

[\[http://www.insidescience.org/content/science-made-frankenstein/1116\]](http://www.insidescience.org/content/science-made-frankenstein/1116)

Most new technologies are met with much distrust, and some with violent opposition. These oppositions take different forms. Think of the opposition aroused by the following:

- new technologies that take over work that used to be performed by human beings (for instance, car manufacture, checkout work, tram conductors etc)
- new technologies that encourage sedentary and superficial existences (television, ducted heating, video games, instant dinners etc)
- new technologies that allow phenomena that people see as unnatural or morally disturbing, or more plainly as stealing the role of a god (organ transplant, human-animal chimeras, IVF etc)

Great-Aunt Lola's attitude to new technology is an attitude that many older people express. They often report finding new technologies overly expensive, more trouble than they're worth—and they worry about effects on children's self-motivation, socialisation and problem solving skills.

Instead of buying a powerful (and expensive) heater, when she's cold Aunt Lola just 'goes to bed' [p.25]. Instead of installing an inside toilet with choice of flush options, she still uses the outhouse [p.30]. She is uninterested in colour television [p.19] and her PC is used only for

genealogical research. For Lola a book is made of paper, and a diary is handwritten and private, not public and online, as blogs are.

Stephen does not understand Lola's attitude. He is comfortable with his hi-tech life and its operations come easily to him. He knows nothing else. He does however appreciate the solid lifelikeness of the old cast-metal toy cars Lola gives him [p.55].

Research into technologies

To discuss technological development across time, the class will need to conduct some initial research. In small groups students can research particular technologies from their inception, look into their dissemination and early problems, and track improvements up to the present time. Timelines can be created to help visualise the progress of each technology and its use.

Part of such research includes looking into contemporary *objections* to new technologies as they appeared.

Students' research can be shared in the groups and/or as a class.

Here are two technologies featured in *The Simple Life* that might provide profitable (and fun) research to inform profitable [and fun] discussions. [Websites that provided information on each technology mentioned, and a few others, are listed in the [Further Reading & Extended Study](#) section at the end of this document]

Television: Colour television only arrived in people's homes in the 1960s when Lola was already twenty-five-years-old. The early television networks' first all-colour season of programming only occurred in 1972, in America. Regular colour programming did not arrive in Australia until 1975.



[image @ <https://imagcwp.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/tv20timeline2.jpg>]

Toilets: Five thousand years ago latrines that used running water to carry away waste were in use in Egypt. The first flush toilet was described in 1596 in Elizabethan England. Flushing this toilet required 28 litres of water! In early 1800 most working class homes did not have their own toilet—they had to share one with their neighbourhood. By the twentieth century most working class homes had a toilet of their own but it was outside. That only began to change in the nineteen-fifties, when Lola was fifteen-years-old. Many people still do not have proper sewerage. [The World Toilet Organisation](#) was formed in 2001 to improve toilets and sanitation in the developing world.

EXTENDED STUDY & FURTHER READING

SOME CHILDREN'S LITERATURE PUBLISHED OVER 1930s

National Velvet Enid Bagnold 1935

Little House on the Prairie Laura Ingalls Wilder 1935

The Hobbit J.R.R. Tolkien 1937

The Sword in the Stone (The Once and Future King) T.H. White 1938

First instalment of the *Narnia* series C.S. Lewis

HISTORY OF THE TOILET & THE TELEVISION

Toilet

Follow the development of this humble but crucial technology

<http://www.localhistories.org/toilets.html>

and <http://www.show.me.uk/editorial/1187-toilets-through-the-ages>.

And the truth about the Thomas Crapper urban myth is at

<http://theplumber.com/crapper.html>

Television

A basic timeline that provides a jumping off point for more qualitative research:

http://www.softschools.com/timelines/television_timeline/31/

See the first public television broadcast, aired on July 7 1936, part one from website 'historycomestolife'. They filmed themselves filming it!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6iWJ5L0bN2o>

Part two of the above at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mHKPSH9dskI>

HISTORY OF TOYS

Short items on the origin and history of many toys at

<http://www.ideafinder.com/history/category/toys.htm>

Barbie on above website at

<http://www.ideafinder.com/history/inventions/barbiedoll.htm>

Lego on the above website at <http://www.ideafinder.com/history/inventions/lego.htm>

A short overview of toys through the ages at

<http://www.localhistories.org/toys.html>

A list of toys from the 30s with pictures at

<http://www.thepeoplehistory.com/30stoys.html>

An image gallery of old Australian toys at

<http://museumvictoria.com.au/education/learning-lab/little-history/australian-toys/>

The story of Hannah who is home sick from school and gets to play with the toys in her grandmother's toy box. It has toys from Hannah's family, back to 1845 at

<http://museumvictoria.com.au/pages/38750/my-grandmothers-toy-box-story.pdf?epslanguage=en>

MORALS AND MANNERS CIRCA 1935

Article in Women's Weekly 1935: 'For Young Wives and Mothers: Do Toys Foster the Spirit of War' @ <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/47810493>

FAMILY HISTORY

National Library of Australia family history webpages: Getting Started at <http://www.nla.gov.au/research-guides/family-history/getting-started>

Dedicated family history for children (and activities for classrooms) at <http://www.gouldgenealogy.com/2011/02/ancestry-com-au-brings-family-history-to-life-for-australian-kids/>

Large list of links to family history sites serving specialised needs at http://familyhistoryresearch.com.au/courses/AustFamilyHistory/Aust_Miscellaneous.htm

Family History: Further Reading List

Plenty Ananda Braxton-Smith

**Stolen Girl* Trina Saffioti & Norma Macdonald

**The Memory Shed* Sally Morgan, Ezekial Kwaymullina & Craig Smith

Climbing Your Family Tree Ira Wolfman - one of the many non-fiction books guiding children through their family history

Scholastic's list of books on the subject of family diversity with activities at <http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/lesson-plan/books-teaching-about-families>

= refugee story

* = indigenous story

ABOUT THE WRITERS

BILL CONDON

Bill Condon was born in 1949 and he and his wife, the well known children's author, Dianne (Di) Bates, live on the south coast of New South Wales, Australia. He has worked as a real estate agent - but was sacked after the first day for trying to talk buyers out of deals – delivered groceries, mown lawns, was a labourer in a milk factory, and for ten years was a journalist on a suburban newspaper. In the early 90s he became a full-time writer specialising in children's books. He has about 100 titles to his credit; these include short stories and non-fiction, and collections of plays and poetry. In 2001 he wrote his first young adult novel, *Dogs*, which told of his experiences as a greyhound trainer. Since then he has concentrated mainly on the YA genre. Most of his books are autobiographical in some way, except for the ones where he is drop-dead handsome and clever and mega-rich. They are just wishful thinking.

Bill was the winner of the inaugural Prime Minister's Literary Award in 2010 for Young Adult Fiction for his book *Confessions of a Liar, Thief and Failed Sex God*.

Other books by Bill Condon:

A Straight Line to My Heart (Allen & Unwin, 2011)

Confessions of a Liar, Thief and Failed Sex God (Woolshed Press, 2009)

Give Me Truth (Woolshed Press, 2008)

Daredevils (UQP, 2007)

No Worries (UQP, 2005)

Dogs (Hodder Headline, 2000)

ANANDA BRAXTON-SMITH

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 the novels of the Secrets of Carrick series: *Marrow* (2010), *Tantony* (2011) and *Ghostheart* (2013). *Marrow* was a CBCA 2010 Notable Book, and was also shortlisted for a 2010 Aurealis award. She has also published a novel for younger readers, *Plenty* (2014). 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.

Planning an interview

When interviewing someone: it is best to focus on two or three agreed subjects, rather than conduct individual rambling conversations, no matter how interesting they might be.

Your finished interviews should give an overview of a few topics. The line of inquiry should be prepared in advance in the form of a questionnaire. The questionnaire provides a framework for conversation.

1) Here is a general line of inquiry designed to get conversations going:

Where did you grow up?

What were your parents like? Your siblings? _____

What do you remember about your grandparents? _____

Who were your friends? _____

What was school like? When did you start? When did you leave? _____

What did you do for fun when you were a child? _____

What movies and songs did you like when you were young? _____

(Don't try to write the answers down word for word during the interview. Use your list of prepared questions as a prompt for a guided conversation and perhaps jotting down quick notes.)

2) Think of some focus questions for any other line of enquiry you would like to explore.
