

FIRE SONG

TEACHER NOTES

SYNOPSIS

Fire Song is a novel for older readers, set in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney in the 1950s. Twelve-year-old Ingrid Crowe's family are desperately poor. Ingrid, her four-year-old sister Pippa and their mother have come to live at their late grandmother's house in Blackheath, near the highest point in the Blue Mountains. Ingrid's beloved brothers, Freddy and Charlie, have been sent to a foster home on the other side of the mountains at Wallerawang, because her mother simply can't support them.

The Blackheath house is one Ingrid has always loved. So when her mother tells her that she must help burn the house down to get the insurance money, it seems like a double betrayal: first, of Ingrid's sense of right and wrong; and secondly of her grandmother's memory, and all the magical times they have shared there in the past.

The action of the novel focuses on a twenty-four hour period when Ingrid is wrestling with her mother's instructions and her own conscience. She needs an adult to talk to and help sort out her feelings – but who?

Her father has been locked out of the house by her mother. The greengrocer, Mr Fratelli, might be ostracised by the town as a 'dago', but he shows some interest in her mother and Ingrid is friendly with his fourteen-year-old son, Dom. The Fratellis have even partnered Ingrid and her mother at the church dance. When Mr Fratelli says that he is expecting his fiancée to arrive from Italy, however, Mrs Crowe feels bitterly disappointed and loses interest in him. So Ingrid can't see any help coming from the Fratellis.

Maybe the family of the new girl at school, Ruth Klein, will help. Ruth is made fun of as a 'jew-girl', so once again Ingrid observes another group of outsiders in this community. But she experiences a loving, supportive family life whenever she visits the Kleins at home – so maybe Mrs Klein will help. With their relatively wealthy background and their obviously happy marriage and family life, though, how could the Kleins ever understand?

Next door, Mrs Harry Williams has been abandoned by her husband, so she might have some affinity with a family in financial distress and understand Ingrid's position. But although Mrs Harry Williams helps look after Pippa, Ingrid is like her mother in not wanting much to do with Mrs Harry Williams's 'god-bothering'. Further family secrets reveal to Ingrid how little anyone knows of what goes on behind any family's closed doors, however.

When Mrs Crowe has a mild stroke and lands in hospital, Ingrid feels more truly alone than ever and at the same time more aware of her mother's vulnerability and the need to do something decisive to help her out of it.

Ingrid learns that Mr Fratelli has lied about having a fiancée; he is running away from his past – the ostracism of his village back in Italy and an unjust accusation against him. The novel ends with Ingrid poised to make her decision. Is it a simple situation of need that can be fixed by abandoning moral principles in favour of practicality? Will she do as her mother wishes and burn down Grandma Logan's house? Or has she learnt by observing other families around her that everyone is running away from

some dark secrets in the past, and that the only way forward is to face those demons and, by staring them down, rob them of their power to control her? Ingrid's final decision demonstrates how quickly she has been forced to grow up and determine her own future.

THEMES

In some ways, the Blue Mountains setting of *Fire Song* is an important character, because it seems to stand outside the dimension of time. In the Blue Mountains the eroded plateau that creates spectacular views of valleys and tablelands dwarfs all human onlookers and their endeavours. And the power of the country of the Gundungurra and Darug people can be felt everywhere.

It is also a country that has been devastated by bushfire in the living memory of those who will read the book – at times the work of nature and at times, tragically, of arsonists.

So the novel sets up a contrast between the apparent timelessness of the natural environment, where change often occurs so steadily and slowly that to the human observer, there appears to be no change at all; and the human world and built environment, where passions and the vicissitudes of family life and work life cause humans to act quickly – often rashly and destructively – and give the appearance of violent and extreme action and change.

Fire Song is also a novel about the solitariness of the individual and the nature of community. In some ways, for non-Indigenous Australians the Blue Mountains has represented escape: escape from the heat and smog of Sydney's western suburbs to the cool clean air a thousand metres up; escape from the suburban sprawl to a vast national park; escape from work and responsibility to holidays and retirement; escape from the shiny materialistic and fast metropolis to a straggle of somewhat shabby weekenders and slow sleepy villages; escape from a complex multicultural society to a simpler Anglo-Australian monoculture.

The bush is also a place to hide secrets. It is a place to be anonymous, to escape from the past, to commit crimes.

Ingrid's family comes back to their own past as a retreat from financial distress in the present. But it's no solution. They may be able to live rent-free in Grandma Logan's house, but there is food to be put on the table, there are children to clothe and educate, and places outside Sydney like the Blue Mountains don't offer much in the way of employment.

As far as Ingrid is concerned, living here only makes her aware every day of Grandma Logan and what she would think about the plan to burn down her house. There is no escaping the past – and it is Mr Fratelli who makes her see this more clearly than anyone.

The isolation of the Blue Mountains also places great emphasis on the close-knit nature of the communities that have grown up there. The negative aspect of the support that this can offer is the exclusion of any outsider who appears to be different

– for whatever reason: different because she is not married, because he is from a different culture or class. Or just simply because she has a different way of seeing the world.

Ingrid's mother doesn't fit in. Neither does Ingrid. She is torn because she cannot see the world in simple terms. One subtext of the novel is that the society of the mountains in the 1950s is an image of the old monocultural Anglo-Australia – a remote island that does not take easily to outsiders or difference.

There is also the theme of adolescence as a time when many people experience isolation. Ingrid is neither a child nor an adult. If she were a child like Pippa, she might have no responsibilities and might be absolved of all her wrongdoings. Ingrid is being asked to play the role of parent by a childlike mother – and yet because she is to take instructions from her mother, she is not a fully independent adult. The result is a deep confusion.

Then there is the general theme of whether in life the end justifies the means. Mrs Crowe needs to support her children in extremely difficult financial circumstances. So is she justified in planning insurance fraud? Perhaps few readers will feel sympathy for insurers. If there is a general suspicion that they rip the public off, is the public entitled to rip them off in return?

Life might be simpler if Ingrid could suspend these moral considerations – but she can't. Are we wrong to expect simplicity in the first place?

STYLE

Although *Fire Song* is written in the third person, the narrative often feels like first person, because it is seen from Ingrid's perspective and moves in and out of what is close to stream-of-consciousness, as she tries to find a way out of her emotional dilemma.

The actions and words of other characters are constantly interspersed with Ingrid's own questions, snatches of song and rhyme, warnings and taunts. This gives an impression of a private or unvoiced turmoil that only the reader is privileged to witness. Sometimes the effect is almost claustrophobic. We are drawn into Ingrid's confusion and, powerless to reach out and communicate with her, we must simply accompany her on her journey to some hoped-for resolution.

FROM THE AUTHOR

The idea for *Fire Song* arrived when I was mid-air, travelling from Japan to Canada. A picture of the main character, Ingrid, with her terrible task of setting fire to their old home at her mother's insistence, was such a sharp and strong idea, I began writing the story before I knew quite where it would take me. As one begins the journey of any new novel, the same kind of question arises, I suppose subconsciously. In the case of

Fire Song – who is this young girl I’m seeing and listening to right now, and how do I best set down her story in a satisfying and believable way?

I’m interested in the idea of ‘the loner’, a young person facing the odds (as Lara is in *Thunderwith*) and searching for courage or hope or the will to go on, as Ingrid does. To some extent Ingrid is a pastiche of three girls in my own family; and her mother Elizabeth, is based in part, on bitter-sweet memories of one of my grandmothers, a woman obsessed by her own beauty and with a great need for recognition. Yet someone I admired and from whom I craved love and attention.

Fire Song needed no research as such, though I did look up references – for example, the music that was popular in the 1950s, and details of the way a fire guts a house. However, I did have to be as accurate as possible with details of daily life in the 1950s, raking my own memory, but sometimes not getting it quite right – and thank goodness for some sharp editing here.

The most challenging part of writing *Fire Song* was, without doubt, to get the ending right. The novel gathered pace and energy as I wrote it, and the first ending left the reader uncertain as to whether or not Ingrid takes an action that will change her life forever. Does she strike that match? When I re-read it, I didn’t want to leave it open anymore. I wanted to resolve the question for Ingrid, and for myself. So then I wrote an ending that was a little too neat, and on re-reading it, found that the mother had changed far too quickly. The ending I wrote finally, where Ingrid finds the strength to defy her mother and takes a life-altering step – as we can at certain momentous times in our lives – seemed far more satisfying for me, and I hope for my readers.

This novel was written over several months and at a faster pace than I’ve probably ever written. Each new idea became a chapter because of a ‘rightness’ about the characters and events, even the rhythm of the language that occurred. Perhaps the most stunning moment for me, and it was stunning, was on that plane between countries, when I knew I had a story set so firmly in my own country, I just had to get it down, and begin at once.

- Libby Hathorn

FROM THE EDITOR

I had published Libby’s award-winning book *Way Home* years ago and had enjoyed editing it with her, so I jumped at the chance to work on *Fire Song*. First, it was such an arresting idea for a story. I love novels that explore the emotional dilemmas of young characters anyway, but particularly when the adults they usually rely on for moral and ethical guidance let them down.

This is why I love Ivan Southall’s work, which changed forever Australian fiction for young readers. He was honest enough to acknowledge that adults do not always have the answers, and that sometimes their own children will turn out to be their moral teachers.

That irony at the heart of *Fire Song* immediately drew me in. Ingrid’s mother is a mess. Her anger comes from desperation, not from cruelty or lack of care for Ingrid’s

feelings. Her family has fallen apart and she is scrambling to pull the pieces together. As both a child and a parent I understood their complex relationship.

As a longtime resident of the Blue Mountains, I have been fascinated by its appeal to artists of all kinds, so that drew me to *Fire Song* as well. Although it is a beautiful and sleepy part of Australia, like Irini Savvides in *Sky Legs*, Libby Hathorn identifies the prejudice and torment that can hide in an apparently quiet community. That interested me. And of course the terrible power of fire that is unleashed from time to time in the Blue Mountains – here with the added obscenity of arson. In what at first looks like a slim novel, there are many topical questions to think about and I would love to be discussing them with young readers.

One challenge in editing the book was to make sure it was not locked up in the past. Libby had set it in the 1950s, and yet our impressions of the 1950s in popular culture derive from rock music, retro fashions and furnishings, and ‘Happy Days’ – altogether a much livelier set of images than those in *Fire Song*. It seemed a much slower world. As I read the first draft, I had to keep reminding myself that the novel was not set in the 19th century. The sometimes dreamlike atmosphere of what were effectively isolated small country towns seemed so far removed from the Blue Mountains today, which increasingly feels outer-suburban. So we worked hard at making the dialogue and narrative appropriate.

- Mark Macleod

STUDY NOTES

- Compare the treatment of fire in Ivan Southall’s *Ash Road* and Libby Hathorn’s *Fire Song*.
- Choose another novel by Libby Hathorn e.g. *Thunderwith* or *Rift* in which the main character struggles with a dilemma and compare the role played by adults in that novel with their role in *Fire Song*.
- Which developments in the plot of *Fire Song* surprised you and why? How were you expecting the novel to end?
- How is Australia today different from the way *Fire Song* suggests it was in the 1950s?
- Which features of the language in *Fire Song* suggest that Libby Hathorn is a poet as well as a novelist?

REVIEWING

‘Fire Song is a gripping portrayal of life in the 1950’s and the pressures facing families. It draws on the influences and experiences of migrants, and the bigotries, misconceptions and kindnesses of a small community. Hathorn’s characters, their situations and their idiosyncrasies are the lifeblood of her storytelling.’

Aleesah Darlinson Sun Herald 7.6.09 (from *Myriad Tales* offer worlds of vision)

Find other reviews of *Fire Song* and note that the reviewer usually tells something of the story of the book being reviewed and may then make comments on characters, setting and the author's style of writing.

How would you review *Fire Song*? Review it in three paragraphs.

POETRY WRITING

Because Libby spent some of her childhood holidays with her grandmother in Megalong Valley, the Blue Mountains have great significance for her. An uncle who was interested in rock formations discovered some Aboriginal carvings by the river in Megalong, and showed Libby and her brother and sisters, explaining how ancient they were.

Libby has written another Blue Mountains novel entitled *Valley under the Rock*. (Hodder Headline 1999) set in Megalong Valley in the Blue Mountains. She has also written a poem that was first published by the ABC in her book *Talks with my Skateboard*.

Valley under the Rock

The Gun-dun-gurra are the Aboriginal people who summered in Megalong Valley where it was cool and where there was good hunting.

We from far away
Took a bush walk there,
Narrow descent,
Steep stone stair.

Found a rock cathedral
In mansions of green
Ancient secret cavern
Glistening serene.
The song of songs was there,
The heartbeat of the earth,
The oldest story known
Of life, of death, rebirth.
The song of song was there
Where beauty rules supreme,
Enfolded in its splendour
We dreamed with a dream.

There was another voice we heard
Plaintive, distant, hollow,
Echo from those shimmering walls,
Gun- dun-gurra

Using this poem as a guide or **model**, write about landscape that you particularly like. Write it from the point of view of being someone from far away seeing a certain place for the first time, and imagining the first people who lived there long ago. Remember your **five senses** when you describe the landscape. I see, I touch, I taste, I touch, I hear... and also write about how the sight of the land made you feel. Then think back in time as to others who may have camped here, lived here, built here.