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AT SEVENTEEN

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Teachers' Notes

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SYNOPSIS (PLOT)

Catherine (Cat) and her brother have been sent to different boarding schools while their parents go to Barcelona to work for a couple of years.

Cat sees this as abandonment, is unhappy, and retreats into books and her richly imaginative inner life. At school she is an outsider, and in an environment where sport and scholarship are everything, she casts herself in the role of victim. A failure who will make nothing of her life.

The story opens with her returning from school to attend a funeral. Her grandmother, a world famous artist who has lived most of her life in Europe, has come home to die. Cat knows little of her grandmother's life, and attempts to draw her mother into the subject. But the message she receives is that there is nothing to learn.

However things conspire to suggest this is not the case. To add to it, Cat has imagined herself to be in love with a young man who is seen in the garden of her house. And who appears again at her grandmother's funeral. Who her mother knows but will not speak about.

Cat helps to go through her grandmother's effects. It is now that she finds a loose-leaf folder written in her grandmother's hand. And what she reads describes her, her response to things, her self-doubts and insecurities. What she is experiencing is what her grandmother experienced before her. What she feels and thinks, is what this woman felt and thought. The social background alone is different. At 17 her grandmother deemed herself to be a failure and now ...

At the funeral the whole of the art world in Australia and overseas gathered to mourn her passing. And pay homage to her talent. Her legacy. To her. Catherine's grandmother had come to believe in herself. And as Catherine reads the folder, she too, will come to believe in herself.

THEMES

- Belonging
- Identity
- Career and the future (finding your place)
- Family
- Past and present

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AUTHOR MOTIVATION

I'd always wanted to write something of this nature, in essence to lay the ghost of schooling past, but more; to celebrate difference and argue that one's dreams can become a reality. In consequence, it is semi-autobiographical.

During the process, I explored, what I believe to be a universal truth. That human response to behaviour and situation is constant. The social milieu alone changes. The extracts in the book are based on my experiences as a senior student in a certain boarding house. As well as my predictions and expectations for the future.

In my effort to compare same with the year 11/12 boarders of today, I returned to my old school. I was given freedom to explore all aspects of that world. The facilities are excellent, the staff/student interaction warm and based on mutual responsibility and respect. The students are involved in the day-to-day running of the house.

However, what had not changed was the sense of abandonment felt by some. And that impinged upon their attitude to work, friendships – everything. And in talking to a couple, I heard resonances of my past. Their concern for the lack of personal space, the inflexibility of the regime – the subsuming of identity. Their predictions and expectations for the future.

They were very keen to hear how it was.

STUDY NOTES

- Research so called 'individuals' from history. People like F Scott Fitzgerald, Jane Austen, Oscar Wilde, Marilyn Monroe, Virginia Woolf, - people who did not conform to the norm of society in their time. Oscar Wilde was openly gay in a society where it was not understood, Marilyn Monroe (and more recently, Madonna) was overly sexual in a society where it was considered best to hide this, Jane Austen wrote novels at a time when it was expected that women should marry and not have a career. Or perhaps more modern examples like Bono or Sinéad O'Connor. How did these people affect the society around them? Can you think of some other examples? Write a piece about an individual who has impacted change. What events shaped the life of this person? Does researching someone's life help you to better understand their circumstances?

FOR DEBATE

- Institutions breed conformity.
- 'The look' will get you further than intelligence.

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- Technology has stifled imagination.
- Human behaviour is changeless. Only the backdrop differs.
- The past is a different country. And a better one.

FOR DISCUSSION

- If it doesn't kill me it will strengthen me. Discuss in reference to the novel.
- Misfortune will break some and strengthen others. Why?
- Define 'charm.'
- Catherine shrinks from physical contact. Why?
- Catherine feels 'a dampness clinging to her face. .' at Presentation Night. Why?
- The family consists of strangers. True or false?
- Do we, like Catherine, judge people by their dress or what they read?
- We are all subjects for the microscope. Discuss with reference to the central characters.
- Catherine shares the sports mistress's guilt. Why?
- Describe Catherine's school as a character.
- Describe Clarissa's school as a character.
- The writer has set the story in a time of heat. Why?
- Describe the tone (emotional overlay) of the novel.
- The title of the novel was initially Lies and Silence. Why do you think? Which title is better suited to the book?
- Your loyalty can lie with your enemy and not with your friend. Can this be so?
- Compare your school experience with your parents and grandparents. Where have the greatest changes occurred? What do you think has changed for the better?
- Keep a journal for a school term with a view to examining a balance in life matters. How do different events affect your outlook? Are you more positive at certain times of year? What school events cause the most stress? What can you do to reduce it?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CELESTE WALTERS is the author of playscripts for children and adults, novels for younger readers, texts on developmental drama and three books of whimsical verse for all ages. She has written four highly acclaimed novels for young adults, *The Killing of Mud-Eye*, *The Last Race*, *The Glass Mountain* and *Deception*. Her other recent works are a picture book, *Only a Donkey* illustrated by Patricia Mullins, and a junior novel, *Treading the Boards*.

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Her young adult fiction is acclaimed for its unique style, free flowing qualities and above all, its integrity and originality.

Celeste divides her time between Melbourne and country New South Wales.