



My Unfortunate Past classroom ideas

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Rights World

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Outline

Violet Brown was kidnapped at six months old, and trapped in a sad, grand house in the middle of nowhere. Violet has only one dream – to find her real family. But she must first solve the mystery of her past. Who is the strange black cat that visits, and what is Arthur doing in his workshop? Who and what is Violet Brown? *My Unfortunate Past* is a darkly funny and magical tale for anyone who has struggled to find their true home and place in the world.

About the author

MAREE FENTON-SMITH grew up in Wagga Wagga in south western NSW. She always wanted to be a writer, partly because she enjoyed reading so much. She has been the companion to many cats. Maree is excited by the thought that children she will never know will read her book. She hopes they enjoy it so much they will be tempted to read it under the desk during class at school.

About the illustrator

JAMIE FERGUSON is an artist who lives in Violet Town with his wife and children. He paints pictures (which he sometimes exhibits in galleries). He also collects old books (some of which he reads). He has a large garden in which he and his wife – with the help of their children – have planted numerous pomegranates trees.

A note from the author

My Unfortunate Past is the prequel to *Creatures of Magic*. I started writing it before I wrote *Creatures of Magic*, but abandoned it and wrote *Creatures of Magic* instead. At the time, I struggled to find Violet's voice, and found it easier to write as her friend, Anna. I think I needed to write *Creatures of Magic*, and let Violet find her voice without the pressure of narrating her own story. She is a character that likes to fly under the radar, and it was difficult to write the story of someone who was reticent to tell it!

My father grew up in Manilla, in regional New South Wales. He had cousins that lived on a property outside Manilla, and they had a platypus rug, and a collection of taxidermic animals. I grew up hearing stories of Dad's childhood, including about his cat Misty, whose kittens had been rehoused at his

cousins' house. Misty had rescued them, carrying them across the Namoi River, one by one. These stories, along with a visit to the property with my own children during a drought were all experiences and stories that found a voice in *My Unfortunate Past*.

The house on the property I visited was very different to the house described in my father's stories. It was still a grand house, but only one person was living there, and it felt empty. The country around the house also felt empty – the livestock had gone, and the tennis court was overgrown. This made me think about history and the changing fortunes of families; and on a larger scale countries, and Australia's First Nations People. The impact of colonisation on land and its traditional owners, the consequences of land clearing on the environment and the wildlife are also an undercurrent in *My Unfortunate Past*. The platypus in the book is a symbol of hope, just as this species had survived, the rain came and Violet escaped (spoiler!) I wanted the book ultimately to have a message of optimism.

How to use these notes

This story works on many levels. The suggested activities are therefore for a wide age and ability range. Please select accordingly.

These notes are for:

- Primary year 3-6
- Ages 8+

Key Learning Areas:

- English

Example of:

- Illustrated fiction

Themes and Ideas:

- Prejudice
- Friendship
 - Magic
 - Family
 - Trust
 - Loss
- Diversity

National Curriculum Focus* English content descriptions:

Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6
ACELA1476	ACELA 1488	ACELA1507	ACELA1516
ACELA1477	ACELA1489	ACELA1508	ACELA1523
ACELA1480	ACELA1491	ACELT1610	ACELT1618
ACELA1482	ACELA1494	ACELY1698	ACELY1709
ACELT1594	ACELA1495	ACELY1699	ACELY1710
ACELT1599	ACELT1603	ACELY1796	ACELY1712
ACELT1791	ACELT1604		ACELY1711
ACELY1675	ACELT1605		
ACELY1682	ACELT1606		
	ACELT1607		
	ACELY1690		
	ACELY1694		

*Key content descriptions have been identified from the Australian National Curriculum. However, this is not an exhaustive list of National Curriculum content able to be addressed through studying this text.

Pre-reading questions

1. Before reading *My Unfortunate Past*, view the cover, spine and back of the book. Identify the following:
 - The title of the book
 - The author
 - The illustrator
 - The publisher
2. What clues do the title and cover give about the story?
3. What kind of feeling does the cover evoke? What mood does it create?
4. Read the back cover blurb – does this make you curious about Violet’s story? Why? Why not?
5. Read the prologue on page one. What do we learn about Violet’s character and situation in the prologue? What questions are created in the reader’s mind?
6. What changes in the last paragraph of the prologue? Why do you think the author chose to do this, and what impact does this have on you as a reader?

Setting

1. Where is the novel set?
2. Research some statistical information about the town Manilla in regional NSW such as size, population and climate.
3. Research the history of Manilla. What First Nations People lived in the area and what language did they speak? What are the origins of the name ‘Manilla’?

Class discussion

Do you live in a city or a town in the country or neither? How is where you live different or similar to Manilla? Do you have friends or family that live in the city/country? Discuss some of the advantages of living in either the country or city, and some of the challenges.

Activity

Read Chapter 2 ‘Rules are made to be broken.’

1. What clues are there in the text about how Windyfield Court had changed over the years?
2. Name three rooms/structures at Windyfield that are referenced as being repurposed. What does this tell us about the history of Windyfield Court?
3. Identify three adjectives used in this chapter to describe the contents or structure of Windyfield Court – how does Violet’s description of Windyfield Court influence the mood of the story?

Writing activity

4. Write a narrative about a house you have visited that inspires you in some way. Use adjectives and other literary devices to show how you feel about the house (show not tell).

Literary devices and writing style

1. What is the book's writing style? What are the limitations of having a first person narrator and how does this impact on the information being given to the reader?
2. Conflict is one of the devices used in the book to mobilise the narrative. Identify some of the conflicts in the story used to move the plot along.
3. What is your favourite illustration in the book and why? What does it tell you about the characters portrayed?
4. How you would describe the way Rita Raton speaks? Compare the way Rita speaks to the way Daisy Downey speaks – what features of Daisy Downey's language make her language more informal?
5. Identify the orientation, complication and resolution of the story.

Activity

Read Chapter 6 'Tell no tales out of school'.

Discuss as a class:

1. What are proverbs?
2. What do you think this proverb means in the context of this chapter?
3. Choose a section of the chapter and rewrite it from the perspective of Davey Downey or Archie Davenport.
4. How would you describe Violet's attitude towards Archie Davenport? Do you think she treats Archie fairly? Discuss this in small groups or as a class.
5. The story is told through Violet's eyes – do you think Rita sees what Violet describes as her imprisonment in the same way as Violet. What do Rita's comments at the end of this chapter reveal about her?

Writing activity

6. Rewrite part of this chapter from Archie's perspective or choose another scene in the chapter and rewrite it from the perspective of another character.
7. Create a comic strip based on this chapter, or from another scene in the novel that you like.

Characterisation

Violet is nine years old at the start of the book. She appears older than her age and is self assured but secretive.

1. What does Violet learn about herself in the novel?
2. At the end of each chapter she makes an affirmation about her character – what does this tell the reader about Violet’s self perception? In your view, is this accurate?
3. How does Violet demonstrate resilience in the novel?
4. Discuss Violet’s character arc and how it develops throughout the novel.

Activity

1. Make your own affirmation about yourself.
2. Make a timeline charting the major events of Violet’s life as recounted in the novel.
3. Create your own portrait of Violet or another character and write a series of words or phrases that describe their character. List some instances in the novel where behaviour has been demonstrated that illustrates this personality trait in the character.

Themes

What are the themes in this novel? As a class or in small groups identify and list the themes. Discuss why, and identify specific points in the narrative that highlight these themes.

Some ideas and prompts are listed below.

Family and history

In this novel, Violet’s quest is to find her parents.

1. What is Violet’s initial reaction to the discovery that her brother is a cat?
2. How does Violet feel about Rita being her aunt and does this change her attitude towards Rita at all?
3. Can you think of any similarities between Violet and Rita?
4. Family history and preservation of the past is something that both Rita and Arthur share (for example through Rita’s quest to have her family home listed with the National Trust, and Arthur’s occupation as a taxidermist). How is family history important?
5. How is Davey’s family different to Violet’s family?
6. What is the overall message about family and family history in the novel?

Activity

1. Draw a family tree of Violet's family. Write what you know about each of these characters next to their name. Draw your own family tree.
2. Bring something to class, or talk about something that is special or unique to your family and explain to the class why.

Loss

Violet's kidnapping and loss of her parents is central to the novel, however loss is also an underlying theme for other characters. Rita has effectively lost her brother, and her parents have died. The landscape surrounding Windyfield Court also speaks to loss – trees have been cleared, animals like platypuses are mostly lost to the surrounding rivers. Rita has lost her cattle, Arthur his taxidermy business and the country is in drought.

1. How does Violet's kidnapping and the absence of her family affect her perception of herself and those around her?
2. How do you think loss has impacted on Rita?
3. Describe Violet and Rita's relationship. How does Rita behave towards Violet and why? Do you think this question is answered in the novel?

Friendship

Violet sees her friendship with Davey as being one (possibly the only) positive part of her life in Manilla.

1. How does Violet and Davey's relationship change throughout the novel? What plot points affect their relationship?
2. How are Violet and Davey different, and what do they share?
3. Discuss as a class what makes a good friendship – find examples in the text of Davey and Violet demonstrating respect and care for each other.

Writing activity

4. In pairs, take the role of Violet or Davey and write letters to each other with an update on what has happened since the night when Violet flew away on the Platypus rug.

Prejudice and diversity

Rita and the Inquisitors are deeply prejudiced towards *Creatures of Magic*.

1. What is the impact of this prejudice?
2. What are the roots of this prejudice? Do you think fear and lack of understanding and knowledge plays a part in this prejudice?

Problem solving and overcoming adversity

At the beginning of Chapter 5 Violet asks: 'How do you find people when you don't know the world?'

1. How does Violet approach this problem of finding her family – would you have approached this problem in a different way?
2. Violet's first escape attempt fails. What do you think enables her second attempt to succeed?

Magic

1. Describe a stereotypical witch and compare it to how witches are portrayed in *Creatures of Magic*. List several other books and films that have witches in them and describe the different ways that witches are portrayed.

Moral questions

Read Chapter 18 'The end justifies the means'.

Violet says: 'Look Davey, sometimes in the fight of good against evil there are tough choices that you need to make. Lying to your parents and breaking the lock on the garage door are examples of tough decisions to be made.'

1. What does this chapter show the reader about Violet and Davey's view of right and wrong?

Violet uses her powers to destroy Windyfield Court and its contents.

2. Do you think this was the right thing for Violet to do? Give reasons for your answer.
3. Could Violet have escaped without destroying Windyfield Court?
4. What does this action tell us about Violet?