

Teachers' Notes by Helen Sykes

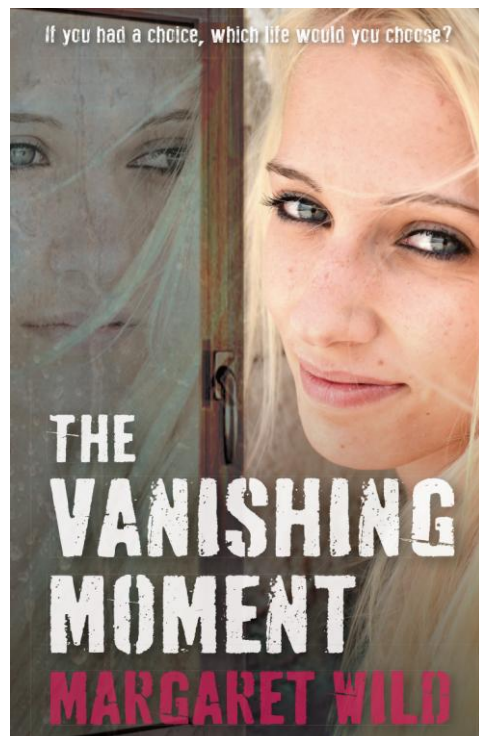
The Vanishing Moment by Margaret Wild

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Recommended for ages 14 – 18+ years

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INTRODUCTION

Set in contemporary Australia, *The Vanishing Moment* focuses on the lives of two young women whose fates are transformed by a single significant moment. We follow the stories of these women in separate chapters. For about a third of the novel, it is not clear how their lives are connected. There is a third perspective - a man called Bob who is remembering unhappy childhood experiences. His connection to the two young women, Arrow and Marika, is even less clear. Gradually pieces of the puzzle come together: Wild has constructed an intriguing plot that keeps the reader turning the pages until the heart-wrenching resolution.

Bob's story is about the past, leading to homelessness and gaol. Arrow's story is about the present, although her present is influenced strongly by a terrible trauma in her past. Marika's story is completely in the present. Her happy and successful life has been shattered by one single shocking moment.

Arrow and Marika are engaging characters with whom readers identify. Arrow, who has recently finished school, is just a little younger than Marika, who has been immersed in a tertiary-level art course for a couple of years. Both are bright, personable and attractive, but they become paralysed by sudden misfortune: in both their lives an unexpected and unforeseeable moment has changed everything. Both girls have loving and supportive families but the trauma each experiences causes great strain on family relationships. The coincidence of their meeting leads to a friendship that promises to bring healing to them both, until the shock of the climax of the novel.

The novel explores the way in which a moment in time can change lives. Margaret Wild also raises the possibility that there may be multiple universes and that it may be possible to choose, at a significant moment, to live an alternate life. The difficulty, as the novel reveals, is that there is no way of knowing whether that alternate life would be better.

Margaret Wild is a highly regarded Australian writer known mostly for her picture books and her verse novels. Although this novel is written in prose, Wild's experience in those media influences her writing in *The Vanishing Moment*. The writing is extraordinarily economical, each word having earned its place on the page. Wild's imagery is a joy—original and often surprising. The description of place is so vivid that each scene could be drawn with great accuracy. The style is so accessible and effortless that it is only on a second reading that the reader realises just how perfect the word choice is and just how well the text sounds read aloud.

RELEVANCE TO THE CURRICULUM

This is a perfect novel for whole-class study in the middle secondary years. While it will appeal particularly to girls, who will empathise with Arrow and Marika, the plot is strong enough to hold the attention of male readers and the exploration of that notion of parallel universes will intrigue all readers. The novel offers:

- strong student engagement;
- multiple narration in the form of limited third-person narration through the eyes of three different characters;
- strongly individual and credible main characters, including the eccentric Bob, with a cast of interesting and well-realised minor characters;
- a strong sense of place, with most scenes set in real locations in New South Wales;
- themes that are relevant to the lives of young people: themes like family, friendship, grief and loss, courage and endurance;
- challenging ideas of relevance to young people: Can a whole life be totally changed in just one unexpected moment? Is it possible that there are multiple universes or that parallel lives might exist? If you were offered the choice to change your life by choosing a parallel life, would you take it? Is it possible that a parallel life might involve loss as well as gain?

- a clever and well-constructed plot that brings together with great skill apparently unrelated plot strands;
- an intensely sad climax and resolution that are totally unexpected, yet have been cleverly prepared for;
- high quality writing that is worthy of close study by students and that can be used as a model for their own writing.

The novel is a valuable resource for all areas of the English curriculum: it is quality literature that offers opportunities for students to increase their understanding of how novels work; it is a beautifully written text using language in fresh and innovative ways, worthy of close study; and it can be used as a springboard to students' own writing.

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

Allow students some time to have a close look at the cover of the novel, including the title, the cover image and the back cover blurb. This can be done as a whole class activity but a pairwork activity ensures that everyone is fully involved. Ask students to speculate on what the title means and to make predictions about what kind of novel this might be. Ask them if they have read anything else by Margaret Wild.

Have students write a couple of paragraphs based on their discussion, summarising their expectations about the novel. This is informal writing that can be done quickly and that does not need to be shared with others. Encourage students to jot down their immediate thoughts and feelings.

THE QUOTATION FROM GWEN HARWOOD

Wild begins the novel with a quotation from the poet, Gwen Harwood (on the page facing page 1 of the novel). Read the quotation aloud to students and ask them what they think it might mean. Tell them that they will have the opportunity to look at this in more detail later.

Make sure that students know the technical term 'epigraph' to describe a quotation at the beginning of a text like this.

THE ORIENTATION OF THE NOVEL

Revise with students the term 'orientation' and the importance of the orientation in narrative. Tell them that you are going to read the opening chapters and that they should listen carefully for the *who?* *when?* and *where?* of the story. Who are the main characters? What do we learn about them in the orientation? Can they find anything that suggests that the setting is Australian? Is the story set in the present time?

Read the first three chapters of the novel aloud to students, while they follow the text in their books.

A blackline master has been provided where students can fill in what they have learnt from the orientation. It is usually a good idea to have students work on questions like these either in small groups or in pairs, so that they can discuss their answers. See BLM 1.

(Answer to Question 7 - clues that the setting is Australian: Bob is wearing thongs; it is very hot; there is 'dense, grey scrub'; there are 'eskies' at the party and Nikki's friends are at 'uni'; the nights are 'bubbling hot'; there is the constant noise of the cicadas; finally, of course, there is the reference to moving to Sydney. Have students notice that some of these are language clues - that standard Australian English has a distinctive vocabulary.)

GUIDED READING

While a reading aloud of the opening chapters is highly recommended, each class and each teacher will have different strategies for reading the novel as a whole. In most cases there will be some time

given in class for silent reading and perhaps some more reading aloud, supported by a requirement for certain sections to be read for homework.

BLM 2 has been provided to ensure that students' attention is drawn to major developments in the plot as they read. This guides students' reading of Chapters 4-13; 14-21; and 22-27. The questions have been kept to a minimum. These are not designed as comprehension questions or as a test of any kind. It is suggested that, if written answers are required, that students be given the opportunity to work collaboratively. But written answers are not essential; oral answers are adequate. Students can be given the blackline master and asked to look for the answers, which can then be discussed in class.

BLM 2 tips:

Chapters 4-13. Page references relevant to Question 1: On page 22 there is a reference to 'a tragedy'; on p. 26 we learn that there was something wrong with the children's mother and that Arrow believes: 'I should have told someone.'

Chapters 22-27. Page reference for Question 1: Marika tells Arrow about Jasper on p. 131.

THE CLIMAX AND RESOLUTION OF THE NOVEL

The final chapters of the novel (Chapters 28-32) require special attention and BLM 3 has been provided to guide students' reading of these chapters. Revise students' knowledge of the terms 'climax' and 'resolution' in narrative. Ask them to decide where the climax of the narrative occurs and how the different plot strands are resolved.

Chapter 32 is unusual. Is it part of the resolution? Is it an alternative ending, albeit one that involves only some of the characters? Ask students whether they find this final chapter satisfying.

Introduce students to the concept of metafiction where an author makes clear to the reader that the work is a creation or construct and other pathways are possible. Is Wild, by adding that final chapter and by providing us with two different realities for Bob, experimenting with metafiction?

THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Wild has chosen to tell the story in 32 short chapters, each one written as limited third-person narrative through the eyes of one of the three characters: Bob, Arrow and Marika. Make sure that students understand the difference between limited third-person narrative and omniscient (all-knowing) narrative. Within each chapter, the reader only sees the world through the eyes of that specific character. As readers, we have access to the character's thoughts and feelings. Have students look closely at a chapter like Chapter 21, which is from Marika's point of view. This tells us what Marika is doing, but ask students to identify where it also tells us about her dreams, her thoughts and her feelings. It even quotes her thoughts directly: '*Jeez! I'm stuck. Help me. Help.*' (page 114) Contrast what we know about Marika from this Chapter to what we know about Arrow, who is here seen only from the outside: we know what Arrow does, but not what she is thinking or feeling.

Why did Wild choose limited third-person rather than first-person narration? The choice of limited third-person narrative is quite unusual, especially in young adult literature, where the choice of first-person narrative is common. Ask students to try to re-write parts of the narrative in Chapter 21 directly in Marika's voice. What would need to change? What would be lost? Make sure that they notice that first-person narration would need to be much more colloquial (like '*Jeez. I'm stuck.*') It's possible to re-write from Marika's point of view:

I dreamt that Jasper was scared.

But it's not possible to write:

For the rest of the morning, I walked quickly, swinging my arms, luxuriating in the suppleness, the wholeness of my body.

That just sounds pretentious. Wild's use of third person allows her to provide deeper insight into the characters than first person might have done.

Ask students to try re-writing other sections of the novel from different narrative perspectives. A good passage is the one describing Arrow's room: Arrow's bed, through her eyes, is 'a lovely nest' (page 9). Ask students to re-write this through the eyes of Arrow's mother and then to re-write it in the voice of an omniscient third-person narrator.

Other good passages for students to experiment with include the beginning of Chapter 9 (page 45), just after Jasper vanishes, and the account of Arrow making herself look at the Jacksons' house (page 84).

By experimenting with re-writing parts of the text from different narrative viewpoints, students should begin to appreciate the skill with which Wild uses limited third-person narrative and to understand that our knowledge of the characters would have been much more superficial if the more common first-person narrative voice had been chosen.

THE PLOT STRUCTURE

Students often have difficulty in distinguishing between story and plot, but the distinction is quite clear with *The Vanishing Moment*. Ask students to write a brief summary of the story (which will probably sound quite trite) and then ask them to look at how the plot is structured, with the three separate stories gradually coming together. Ask them to find these points in the plot:

- when do we first realise that Arrow and Marika are likely to meet
- when do they first meet
- when is Bob's first contact with Marika
- when is Bob's first contact with Arrow
- when do we first learn that Arrow had been exposed to some kind of tragedy as a child
- when do we first learn what that tragedy was?

It is always useful to attempt to represent the plot structure of a novel graphically. This is by no means easy with *The Vanishing Moment*, because of the complexity of the three strands (and the additional complication of the alternate worlds), but it is worth asking students to attempt it. Once the stories come together, there is the usual rising action leading to the climax - in this case, an abrupt and unexpected climax, and then the action falls to the resolution. Students will need to consider how to include the final chapter in their diagrammatic representation; there may well be disagreement about this.

The plot of *The Vanishing Moment* has many of the qualities of a thriller. There is extensive use of foreshadowing, where later plot developments are anticipated without the reader realising immediately the significance, such as that moment of panic Marika feels when Jasper runs off at the zoo (page 16). Ask students to find other examples of foreshadowing in the novel (the final line of page 131 is a good example). Similarly, as in all good thrillers, the author has provided us with clues that we may miss as we read but that make sense later, such as the repeated reference to the middle-aged woman who was nearby when Jasper vanished (page 45 and 151). The reader is shocked at the climax of the narrative to discover that it is Mrs Jackson who has kidnapped Jasper, but we cannot accuse Wild of not preparing us for the discovery. The dropping of clues is especially important in the climactic Chapter 29: there is the 'Child on Board' sign on the old car (page 161), the small boy with the 'doleful' eyes (page 161) and hair sticking up at the back (page 162), Arrow's sense that she has seen him before (page 162), the name 'Aunty Mo' - 'Mo' is a common abbreviation of 'Maureen' (page 162), the fact that the woman is competent at fishing (page 162), the smoker's voice (pages 162 and 23), the fact that the woman seems vaguely familiar (page 163) and the reddish hair (page 163).

THE USE OF SUB-PLOT

Have students notice that Wild has included a sub-plot: the story of Mr Watts and 'Killer'. Could the novel have worked without the sub-plot? Does its inclusion enrich the narrative?

A further sub-plot is that involving Marika's father. He too could have been left out without affecting the main story. How does his inclusion enrich our understanding of Marika?

THE CHARACTERS

Ask students to go back to their answers to Question 8 of BLM 1 where they brainstormed some adjectives to describe Bob, Arrow and Marika. These adjectives were based just on the first three chapters. Do they want to change any of them in the light of their further knowledge of the characters? Are there other adjectives that they would like to add?

Ask students to have a look at the way Marika makes lists of word associations, especially synonyms, to help her in her art work (pages 13-14). Ask them to begin with their brainstormed adjectives and to develop the lists with further word associations. This could be done in groups, with each group responsible for one character. Ask each group to write a half-page description of their character, drawing on the words they have collected.

Then have students consider how they arrived at their impression of the character. All they have is words on the page: how has Wild used those words to create for the reader a representation of a credible human being? Look at the techniques she has available: she shows us the character doing certain things; through her narrative technique she lets us into the character's thoughts and feelings; we see the character interacting with others; we listen to the character speak.

Ask students also to consider whether we know as much about Bob as we do about Arrow and Marika. Do we empathise with Bob in the same way as we do with Arrow and Marika? Why, or why not? The chapters from Bob's point of view are shorter than the others, but is that why our knowledge is different? Are Bob's chapters different in some other way?

Ask students then to consider the use of minor characters in the novel. Which minor characters are drawn in the greatest detail? Why?

THE SETTING OF THE NOVEL

Wild's descriptions of place are so vivid that we could draw them accurately. The novel is set mainly in real locations: Taronga Zoo, the Sydney Aquarium, the upstairs room at Gleebooks, the car yards on Parramatta Road, the road from Sydney to the south coast. Students who live in Sydney can probably come up with some suggestions as to which 'solid' suburb Arrow lives in (page 12); students living in other capital cities may be able to nominate comparable suburbs in their city.

Shelley Beach and the beach at Black Rock are not the names of real places on the south coast of New South Wales, although people who know the area may have a fairly good idea of the areas Wild was thinking about. Ask students why they think Wild was so specific with most of her locations but decided to give false names to Shelley Beach and Black Rock.

Have students choose a favourite description of place and use it as a model for their own descriptive writing. Possibilities include the description of the car yards on Parramatta Road (pages 42-3), Nikki's party (page 7), Shelley Beach as it used to be (page 12), or the 'incredibly ugly club' (page 125).

THE THEMES OF THE NOVEL

Family is an important theme of *The Vanishing Moment*. The novel introduces us to three very different families. Students can use BLM 5 to sort out the family relationships. All three families are under stress and relationships are strained as a result. Using their tables as a guide, students could discuss how each family copes with stress and tragedy. Which strategies seem to be the most effective?

The novel also has a central focus on loss, grief and guilt. Ask students to collect examples of characters expressing guilt, even though they cannot really be held accountable for the tragedies in their lives. In response to their grief, Bob and Arrow choose to elect different lives; Marika tells Bob that she 'turned down' Interchange (page 155). Is one choice better than the other? Is there a better way of coping with grief and loss than swapping lives? Ask students to consider what they would choose.

THE IDEA OF MULTIPLE WORLDS

This idea is central to the novel. It is treated in depth at the time Bob and Arrow talk about the 'Interchange' (pages 139-141) and she admits that she too heard the voice (page 76); there is further exploration of the idea when Arrow tells Marika about it and they realise that they would make different choices (pages 142-4). But the idea is prepared for from the very beginning with the epigraph from Gwen Harwood. Ask students if they can add to these examples:

- the epigraph at the beginning of the novel
- the boy at the party who refers to the multiple universes in Dr Who and suggests that in a different universe, Arrow would fall in love with him. (page 8)
- Arrow's moment of déjà vu (page 11)
- Marika thinks that what she needs is 'a new reality for myself' (page 51)

Ask students to consider as well the relevance of the discussion of 'ethical dilemmas' (pages 58-60). Bob feels 'guilt but not regret' (page 177) when he thinks about the other Bob living a miserable life. Both Bob and Arrow (in the final chapter) have escaped from great pain by choosing the 'Interchange', but both have lost things they valued as well. Ask students to consider what has been lost.

THE LANGUAGE OF THE NOVEL

The Vanishing Moment is a very rich text for close study of language. Wild is best-known as a writer of picture-book text and as a verse novelist, so she is used to writing very concisely and to choosing words that have maximum impact. Here are a few suggestions as to aspects of Wild's language use that could be explored by students. See as well BLM 4.

Wild's language often surprises. Right from the start, at the beginning of Chapter 1, Wild writes:

This he remembers.

Ask students why this is unusual. This is, of course, an example of inversion - that is, the normal word order has been reversed. Wild could have written: 'He remembers this', which would be more normal, or even: 'Bob's memories'. Is there any particular effect achieved by the use of the inversion?

Wild's word choice also constantly surprises and delights. Draw students' attention to 'The weeks snail by' (page 36), where she has used a word that is normally a noun as a verb. On page 13 she describes the morning as 'bird-bright', a compound adjective worthy of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Ask students to collect other examples of interesting word choice.

Wild's use of imagery is also fresh and original. On page 47 she describes the autumn leaves as 'as big as rounds of Turkish bread'. Arrow has coffee in a café 'clinging like a barnacle to a table that

threatens to slide down the steep pavement into the sea' (page 93). The bonnets of the cars in the car yards are 'wide open like the gaping beaks of baby birds, all waiting for a sucker to choose them and take them home' (page 43). The giraffes at the zoo have 'necks as long as the masts of ships' (page 16). The security officer is 'only a boy, his fingers peeping like mice from the sleeves of his oversized jacket' (page 45). Ask students to collect other examples of Wild's imagery.

One word that can be used to describe Wild's writing style is 'economical': there are no words wasted; every word has weight. Have students look at the brevity of Chapter 1. It is almost as if it has been condensed. Have students find examples of fragmentary sentences: 'Not a good sign', 'Mistake' and 'Burst into tears'. Ask them to replace those sentences with a complete sentence in each case and then to re-read the sections, seeing if the change makes a difference to the impact of the passage; for example, 'That was never a good sign.' Have students notice as well the very short paragraphs.

Ask students to look at the description of Arrow sleepwalking on page 3, the second paragraph. Wild uses a series of commands: 'unhook', 'brush past', 'breathe in' and so on. It would be more usual to write: 'she unhooks the chain', 'she breathes in' ... What is the effect? Does the way Wild has written this help the reader to share Arrow's experience? Does it help us to understand the experience of sleep-walking? (Arrow is not choosing what she does; she is driven by commands from her unconscious mind.)

Have students re-read page 6, where Arrow is remembering her former self. Wild uses a series of present participles to emphasise the sense of activity: 'vaulting', 'swinging', 'swarming', 'revelling'. Ask them if there would be the same effect if Wild had written: 'She remembers how she used to vault over coffee tables, swing on door frames ...'

An interesting issue is raised by Jasper's use of offensive language on pages 17-18. A discussion of this scene allows an exploration of questions of appropriateness in language.

ACTIVITIES TO CONCLUDE THE UNIT OF WORK

THE EPIGRAPH: A CLOSER LOOK

Have students look again at the epigraph that precedes Chapter 1. Ask them to discuss the relevance of the quotation to the novel.

Show students a copy of Gwen Harwood's poem, 'The Twins', from which the quotation is taken. It is one of a suite of poems that Harwood wrote called 'Class of 1927' in which the persona, who is probably based quite closely on the poet herself, remembers her childhood in a small rural school. The twins were very bright girls whose mother died in childbirth when they were three. Their father meant well but did not cope with single parenting and his ongoing grief for the girls' mother. The persona contrasts their deprivation with her own privileged existence. Despite their intelligence, the girls left school early and came 'to grief'. The quotation expresses the wish that there may be 'multiple worlds' in which the twins might have had a more deserving future.

EVALUATION

Ask students to go back to those quick notes that they made at the beginning of this unit of work when they wrote down some predictions about the novel. What do they think now about those predictions? What predictions did they make about the title and how satisfactory do they consider the title now they have read the novel? The word 'vanish' is echoed twice in sections about Marika: we are told that she is trying to sculpt 'a vanishing' (page 14) and, when Jasper is taken: 'That's all it is. A moment. Just a moment. ... he vanishes' (page 34). However, is 'the vanishing moment' only about Jasper?

This activity could be done as a pairwork exercise, ensuring that everyone in the class has the opportunity to express a view.

Ask students to again jot down some ideas quickly: in this case, their thoughts and feelings now that they have read the novel. These rough notes could be the basis for the writing of formal reviews.

SOME RESEARCH

Marika is clearly a talented artist and she is intensely interested in her studies. Students could research the stories behind Marika's sculptures, as well as the frequent references to works of art. An obvious way of presenting the research would be some kind of visual presentation, such as a PowerPoint - or even a wall display. Topics for students to research include:

The ideas behind Marika's sculptures:

- the Greek nymph, Echo, and Narcissus (pages 13-4)
- the Little Mermaid (page 27)
- Icarus (page 29)
- Niobe (page 115)

References to works of art:

- Brâncuși's *Sleeping Muse* (page 27)
- a Munch painting (page 45)
- Picasso's portrait *Weeping Woman* (page 62)
- the Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti (page 66)
- Rosalie Gascoigne's sculptures (page 101)
- Rick Amor (pages 101-2)
- Chagall's flying people (page 170)
- Paul Gauguin's later works (page 174)

IDEAS FOR STUDENTS' OWN WRITING

Through other eyes

1 Ask students to tell part of the story through the eyes of one of the elderly couple who are gardening outside their house at Black Rock beach when Arrow realises that the little boy on the beach is Jasper. See BLM 5.

2 Mr Watts, lonely and ill, is clearly a kind, gentle man who is concerned about Arrow. Ask students to tell part of the story through his eyes: they could choose the incident where Mr Watts discovers Arrow sleepwalking and threatened by the three drunks (pages 4-5), the incident when Arrow squeezes through the hedge into his backyard when threatened by the muggers (pages 56-57) or the incident (which is not narrated directly in the novel) when he finds his dog Lucy on his doorstep (page 144).

Another life

1 Ask students to plan and write a short story that is based on the idea of multiple worlds or alternate lives. Wild has suggested several possibilities. A life can be changed dramatically by a person's choice (such as Arrow deciding not to tell anyone about Mrs Jackson's behaviour) or by an unforeseen event (such as the kidnapping of Jasper). Wild, however, goes further, exploring the possibility that there may be multiple universes and it may be possible to cross from one to another, as Bob claims to have done and as Arrow appears to have done in the final chapter of the novel. These multiple universes can be other worlds very much like our own, or they could be more exotic:

parallel worlds where someone crosses from the present into the past, or parallel worlds where someone crosses from one planet to another. There are all kinds of possibilities for students to explore as they write their stories.

Make sure to provide an opportunity for students' writing to be 'published' in some way, such as online publication that allows students to read each other's work. Old-fashioned publication has its place, too: a printed and bound anthology of students' stories can be donated to the school library.

2 'Be careful what you wish for.' King Midas was granted his wish that everything he touched would turn to gold - with tragic consequences. Have students write a story about a contemporary Australian teenager who is discontented with life and wishes for something different. The wishes are granted, but the changed life has some surprises.

FURTHER READING AND VIEWING

You will find below some recommendations for further reading and films, grouped under headings relevant to *The Vanishing Moment*. The brief summaries of each title have been written for a student audience.

GREAT NOVELS ABOUT FAMILIES

***The 10PM Question* by Kate de Goldi. Allen & Unwin, 2009.**

This Australian novel is written for slightly younger readers than *The Vanishing Moment*, but if you haven't yet read it, have a look at it. Frankie, like his mother, is a terrible worrier - even worse than Arrow's mother. You'll love his eccentric family and his terrific friends, Gigs and Sydney. This is a warm and positive story about family and friendship.

***The Convent* by Maureen McCarthy. Allen & Unwin, 2012.**

This is a joy for readers who love satisfyingly long novels that allow you to immerse yourself in the characters. It follows the lives of four generations of Australian women, all of whom have some connection with the Convent - once a harsh workplace for girls who were regarded as social misfits and an orphanage for abandoned children. In modern times it has been transformed into a cultural centre with studios for artists and writers and a trendy cafe. The characters include Cecilia, who entered the convent to become a nun in the 1960s, and Peach, whose best friend Det has one of the artists' studios. Det is a highly talented artist but hopeless at life. Peach, who has grown up very happily in the family that adopted her as a baby, takes care of Det but is much less capable of looking after herself when faced with the prospect of meeting the mother and grandmother she has never known.

***The Devil You Know* by Leonie Norrington. Allen & Unwin, 2009.**

Set in Darwin, this is the story of a troubled teenage boy whose self-esteem is very low. Damien's relationship with his violent father will remind you of Bob's relationship with Dean, although in Damien's case - unlike that of Bob in one of his worlds - there is some hope of a positive outcome at the end of the novel.

***Preloved* by Shirley Marr. Black Dog Books, 2012.**

Amy's Chinese mum fits all the stereotypes, particularly in her possessiveness and her constant stream of advice. Amy particularly resents her mother's dependence on old superstitions, especially about the ghosts that threaten daily life. Amy's view of the world is challenged when a real ghost - the ghost of an attractive teenage boy - enters her life - and refuses to leave. This is a warm and funny ghost story and a celebration of the fact that even embarrassing and difficult mothers can be loving and supportive.

NOVELS ABOUT LIVES THAT ARE CHANGED BY ONE FATEFUL MOMENT

***The Accident* by Kate Hendrick. Text Publishing, 2013.**

This gripping novel by a new Australian author has quite a lot in common with *The Vanishing Moment*. It too tells three separate stories - the stories of three characters who appear to have no connections. At the centre of all three lives is one terrible moment: an accident that changes everything for all three of them.

***The Adoration of Jenna Fox* by Mary E. Pearson. Allen & Unwin, 2009.**

This American novel is a science fiction thriller. Jenna wakes from an eighteen-month coma with no memory of who she is. One moment - a moment that she knows nothing about - has completely changed her life. Bit by bit both Jenna and the reader discover the clues as to what has happened.

***Beauty Queens* by Libba Bray. Allen & Unwin, 2011.**

What happens when a plane load of teenage beauty queens, on their way to the finals, crashes on a desert island? Not surprisingly, this moment in time has an impact on their futures - and their beauty routines. This novel is outrageous satire: you will never be able to watch a beauty pageant with a straight face again. It gets even more outrageous when a film crew of pirate hunks also arrives on the island. And of course there is also the corrupt president of a huge evil business corporation who just happens to be a hopelessly committed Elvis fan.

***Guantanamo Boy* by Anna Perera. Angus & Robertson, 2008.**

Khalid, a British boy visiting family in Karachi, just happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. When he is arrested and charged with terrorism, his world descends into nightmare. Not only are his pleas of innocence dismissed, but his captors refuse to accept that he is only fifteen or that he was only using his computer to play an online game with his cousins. Refused legal representation or any contact with his family, Khalid eventually finds himself imprisoned in the notorious Guantanamo Bay.

***Into That Forest* by Louis Nowra. Allen & Unwin, 2012.**

In the remote Tasmanian wilderness in the 1830s Hannah's parents take six-year-old Hannah and Becky, her eight-year-old friend, on a boat ride and picnic. They are overtaken by a freak storm. Their boat breaks up, Hannah's parents are swept away and the two girls are rescued from the river by a thylacine (a Tasmanian tiger, now extinct). This extraordinary novel tells the story of the little girls' lives as they survive by becoming part of the thylacine family.

***The Killing Sea* by Richard Lewis. Simon and Schuster Children's Books, 2006.**

When the tsunami hits Aceh in Indonesia in 2004, spoiled and wealthy American girl Sarah is holidaying on a yacht just off the coast. Muslim boy, Ruslan, is at home in his village. The moment when the tsunami hits changes everything for both of them and leads, eventually, to an unlikely friendship.

NOVELS ABOUT CHOICES

***The Bridge* by Jane Higgins. Text Publishing, 2011.**

From New Zealand author Jane Higgins, this post-apocalyptic thriller is in some ways very different from *The Vanishing Moment*, but both novels are about choices and their consequences. Nik has grown up as one of a privileged elite, the occupants of Cityside, on the right side of the river. But all is not what it seems and Nik will need to make some difficult choices about his loyalties and his values.

***Erebos* by Ursula Poznanski. Allen & Unwin, 2012.**

'Enter, or turn back. This is Erebos.' Erebos is a fantasy role-playing game offered to only a select few. Those who wish to play it have to make some hard choices: they must play it alone and they must never talk about their experiences to anyone, even other players of the game. Once the choice is made and the terms accepted, the game becomes addictive and dangerous, spilling out into the real world and demanding that participants behave in ways that contradict all their beliefs. This is an absorbing thriller.

***Girls Don't Fly* by Kristen Chandler. Penguin Books, 2011.**

Being dumped by a perfect boyfriend is not normally thought of as a positively life-changing moment, but for Myra it is liberating. For the first time she acknowledges that she has let herself become a doormat - for her family as well as her ex. Her decision to challenge him for the scholarship he was confident was his is even more liberating. This is a great book for girls.

***Jasper Jones* by Craig Silvey. Allen & Unwin, 2009.**

Charlie is thirteen and living a very uneventful life in a quiet country town in Australia in the 1960s. Late at night the town ne'er-do-well - an Aboriginal boy a few years older than Charlie - knocks on his bedroom window and begs for Charlie's help. There is a body in the bush and Jasper knows, from experience, that the police will unquestioningly blame him for the death. Charlie's decision that night to follow Jasper into the bush changes everything. This is quite a big book but you'll keep turning the pages, desperate to know the story behind that body. You'll also find yourself laughing aloud at Charlie and his best friend Jeffrey Lu, who is a total cricket tragic and determined to play in the town's cricket team, despite the best efforts of the team's racist players to keep him out.

This is an adult novel and some readers may find some of the language offensive.

***Mice* by Gordon Reece. Allen & Unwin, September 2010.**

This superb thriller features two quiet, mild-mannered women: teenager Shelley and her mother. When Shelley is viciously bullied at school by girls who had once been her friends, both she and her mother are too mousy to convince either the police or the school authorities that such 'nice' girls could have done such a thing deliberately. But everyone, it seems, has a limit. Pushed just one step too far, mother and daughter make choices and take actions that are chillingly effective. You might find the ending of this novel totally immoral but you might also find yourself cheering the victors nevertheless.

NOVELS ABOUT COPING WITH GRIEF

***Broken Soup* by Jenny Valentine. HarperCollins Children's Books, 2008.**

If you like stories that make you cry, this one, from British author Jenny Valentine, should not be missed. Rowan's family life has been devastated by the death of her older brother two years before. Her mother is so deeply depressed that she scarcely functions and her father has left the unhappy home. The discovery of a mysterious photo is the key to revelations that will lead to closure.

***Bye, Beautiful* by Julia Lawrence. Penguin Books, 2006.**

Set in rural Western Australia during the 1960s, this novel begins with an intensely moving prologue in which we see the body of a young man being brought home to his mother. The reader is then taken back to the beginning of the love story that resulted in such a terrible tragedy. This is an unsettling story about racial prejudice in Australia.

***The Dead I Know* by Scot Gardner. Allen & Unwin, May 2011.**

Aaron seems to be a total loser: he is completely antisocial and he has failed every subject at school. He has been given a job in the local funeral parlour only because the owner is the school counsellor's friend. The story is narrated in the first person, so the reader comes to discover a young man who is very different from the image he presents to the world: a young man who has been traumatised by events that he cannot remember.

***Deadline* by Chris Crutcher. Greenwillow Books, 2007.**

Ben is eighteen and in his last year at high school when he is told that he is terminally ill. He refuses treatment and decides not to tell anyone, even his parents. Instead, he is determined to live his remaining time to the full, including trying out for his school's American football team, despite the fact that he is a hopeless athlete. He refuses to be bullied by his social studies teacher, because the teacher's threat to fail him no longer matters. While very sad at times, this novel is sometimes wonderfully funny.

***The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green. Penguin Books, 2012.**

This American novel is probably the best book ever written about teenagers facing terminal illness. It will break your heart but you will also love the warmth and the positivity and, when you have finished, you will be glad that you have shared the special relationship between Hazel and Gus.

***A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness. Walker Books, 2011.**

This beautifully illustrated story is about thirteen-year-old Conor who is refusing to accept that his mother is dying. So when, just after midnight, Conor hears his name being called and finds that the yew tree from the graveyard on the hill has transformed into a huge and threatening monster at his bedroom window, Conor isn't even frightened: this real-life monster is much easier to deal with than the nightmare he has each night about losing his mother. This is an unforgettable story about learning to come to terms with grief.

SOME FILMS TO EXTEND THE STUDY OF *THE VANISHING MOMENT*

Stories of lost children

There are of course many real life stories about abducted children, including a few stories of eventual reunion, sometimes many years later. Many of these stories are quite disturbing and exploring them in the classroom is probably unwise, although it could be helpful to look at the remarkable work of the Daniel Morcombe Foundation, where grieving parents channelled their pain into a determination to educate children to reduce the risk of abduction.

It is important to keep Jasper's story in proportion, as Wild points out very clearly on page 48. While abduction is 'Every parent's worst nightmare', many other dangers to children are statistically more likely than that of abduction by a stranger.

While today parents' great fear is of a child being abducted, the predominant story in Australia since European settlement has been of children lost in the bush, as recorded in Henry Lawson's maudlin poem 'Babes in the Bush'. Rachel Perkins' short film, ***One Night the Moon***, is a superb representation of the myth of the outback and its mysterious power to draw children to their doom. The film takes less than an hour to screen and could be a useful companion to the study of *The Vanishing Moment*. However, please note that it is rated M.

Films about parallel lives

The idea of alternate lives has been a popular one in film culture. Students will probably be able to volunteer some that they have seen, such as the 1998 romantic comedy ***Sliding Doors***, starring

Gwynneth Paltrow as a woman whose life hinged on a decision whether or not to take a train. Another very interesting film about parallel lives - also from 1998 - is the German film **Run, Lola, Run**, directed by Tom Tykver. Note that this is also rated M.

ABOUT THE WRITERS

MARGARET WILD

Margaret Wild was born in South Africa and came to Australia in 1972. She has been a journalist on newspapers and magazines, and she worked as a book editor in children's publishing for sixteen years, responsible for managing and commissioning a large range of titles. She lives in Sydney and now writes full-time.

Margaret has written more than 70 books for children and is regarded as one of Australia's foremost authors of picture books. Her books are published around the world and have won numerous awards. However, as *The Vanishing Moment* shows, she also writes for teenagers. Her books for Allen & Unwin include the two teenage verse novels, *Jinx* and *One Night*.

'[When I worked for a wage] my writing was done in snatches, or at night when I wasn't too tired. Once I turned to writing full-time I felt ready to attempt much longer books for older readers. In 2001 my first young adult novel, *Jinx*, was published. It was a new challenge for me - all those words! - but I also had a feeling of freedom as I could write about subjects that are not suitable for younger readers. However, as I have a baby grandson, I am seeing the world through his eyes, so I am still enjoying writing books for the very young as well.

'I work at a desk in my bedroom, because from my window I can see two bridges, reflections in the bay, sparrows on the telephone line, and city buildings in the distance. I like having my bed so close-by - if I get stuck when I'm writing, I simply have a bit of a lie down, and somehow the problems sort themselves out. On the wall near my desk, I have one of Ron Brooks' beautiful, tender pictures from *Rosie and Tortoise*. I love looking at it, and it inspires me to keep on trying to write better.

'Although I mainly work on computer, I always carry a small notebook wherever I go. I jot down ideas, images, bits of stories. I hardly ever refer back to my notebooks, but writing things down helps to fix them in my memory.

'I feel very lucky to be a writer. As long as I have pen and paper, I can write anywhere, anytime - for me, it's the best job in the world.'

Requests for school visits by Margaret within Australia can be forwarded to publicity@allenandunwin.com.

HELEN SYKES

Helen Sykes has been involved in children's and young adult literature for many years as a manuscript assessor, teacher, editor, writer and presenter. She has written more than 20 books for teachers and students of secondary English and produced units of work on fiction texts for textbooks. She presents regularly on new titles at conferences of English teachers and librarians, including presenting on young adult literature at the NSW English Teachers' Association Conference every year for more than thirty years. The notes she prepares for participants at such conferences are highly valued. Helen also conducts a course in young adult literature for the English classroom as part of the Masters of Education at the University of Western Sydney.

The orientation of *The Vanishing Moment*

Chapters 1-3

1. How do you know that Dean's stepfather, Bob, is a violent man? What little details in Chapter 1 tell us this?
2. Take a quick peek at Chapter 4 and find out how old Bob is there. The chapters about Bob are in chronological order - that is, he gets older in each one. That means he was younger than this in Chapter 1. How do you feel about Dean leaving a child of that age on the side of a deserted road on a very hot day?
3. How does Arrow feel about her parents?
4. What do you learn about Marika's family in Chapter 3?
5. Two of the chapters are quite sad. Which one is different - and how?
6. Of the three chapters, one is set in past time and the others are in the present. Which one is in the past?
7. What clues are there in Chapters 1 and 2 that the story is set in Australia?
8. Brainstorm some adjectives to describe each of the three characters: Bob, Arrow and Marika.

Chapters 4-13

1. We know Arrow is depressed, but we don't know why. Watch out for little clues and write down the page numbers where these clues appear.
2. What happens to Arrow as she crosses the park in Newtown?
3. What is the sudden shocking moment that changes Marika's life?
4. Arrow decides to go back to the place where she grew up. What is its name?
5. Why does Arrow squeeze through Mr Watts' fence instead of going to his front door? What does he do?
6. Marika is going to stay in the family holiday house. Where is it?

Chapters 14-21

1. Arrow is angry when she realises that her parents have kept something from her all these years. What didn't they tell her? See page 71.
2. What terrible discovery did Arrow make as a child at Shelley Beach?
3. When and how do Arrow and Marika meet?
4. What tragedy almost occurs in Chapter 15? What prevents it?
5. When do we learn the identity of the man on the beach?
6. What's your impression of Bob, when we see him at Shelley Beach? How does Arrow feel about him on page 94?
7. What is going to make Mr Watts chuckle (page 99)?
8. Where does Arrow decide to stay?
9. What happens when Arrow sleepwalks at Shelley Beach?

Chapters 22-27

1. Arrow confides in Marika in Chapter 23, telling her about the murders. When does Marika tell Arrow about Jasper?
2. What is so surprising about Roberto the Magnifico?
3. What does Bob say when Arrow invites him into the house (page 137)?
4. What is the 'Interchange'? Bob and Arrow have both heard the voice. When? Re-read page 76 as well as page 139-140.
5. What is Bob's explanation as to why they both heard the voice in the Jacksons' house (page 141)?
6. What does Arrow's father tell her about Mr Watts?
7. When does Marika stop crying? Can you work out why?

BLM 3

THE VANISHING MOMENT

The Climax and Resolution: Chapters 28-32

1. How are Bob's memories in Chapter 28 different from those we have read before?
2. There are lots of clues in Chapter 29 that the little boy is Jasper. Did you realise before Arrow? What are the clues?
3. A satisfying resolution brings all the characters and plot strands together. Does that happen in Chapter 30?
4. Bob, although he has escaped his old life, has still seemed to be quite a damaged person, unable to forget his memories of that other life. What final impression are we left of Bob in Chapter 31?
5. Why do you think there is a blank page before Chapter 32? How is Chapter 32 different from the rest of the novel?

The language of *The Vanishing Moment*

Margaret Wild uses language in original and innovative ways. Look at the examples below.

1. This is how she describes the Sydney suburb that Arrow's mother has chosen:

But her mother packed them off to Sydney, to a solid middle-class suburb with solid brick houses peopled with solid professionals driving solid four-wheel tanks, their solid, obedient children kept busy with tennis, ballet, soccer, clarinet and violin lessons.

- a) You have probably been told to vary your vocabulary. It is usually not a good idea to repeat a word if other synonyms are possible. How many times has Wild used the adjective 'solid' in this paragraph? Do you think it is because she did not know any alternatives? What is the effect?
- b) Use a thesaurus to find synonyms for 'solid' and re-write the paragraph, substituting each use of 'solid' with an appropriate synonym. Re-read both paragraphs aloud. Which is more effective? Why?

2. There is a similar use of repetition with the word 'weep' on page 63, in the paragraph after the break on the page.

Should Wild have looked for synonyms here? Why, or why not?

3. Read page 45, the opening of Chapter 9. This is about what happens immediately after Jasper's disappearance.

- a) What is the major impression you get? Is it panic? Is it events whirling past?
- b) You have probably been told to always write in complete sentences. There are a great many incomplete sentences on this page. Can you find them?
- c) If you re-write the final paragraph in complete sentences, it becomes something like this:
She had to make phone calls. First she rang Mum and then Steve. They arrived, shaky disbelieving, terrified.

Is that as effective as what Wild has written? Why, or why not?

- d) Look at the sentence that begins the second last paragraph:

Bring in the dogs, fan out, question, search the aquarium, forecourt, playground, shopping precinct.

Those verbs are commands. It would have been more normal to say: 'The police bring in the dogs, fan out ...' Is one version more effective than the other?

- e) There is a continued use of fragmentary sentences on the pages that follow, pages 46-47. Can you find them? Try re-writing some of them as complete sentences. Are they as effective?

4. While Wild usually has short sentences and short paragraphs, she occasionally writes long compound sentences with a string of actions, such as this one on page 63:

She knocks down cobwebs, sweeps the floor, scoops a dead frog out of the toilet, collects logs of wood from the garage, crumples newspaper, ignites a fire in the combustion stove, makes up a bed with fresh sheets, and falls asleep, exhausted.

That could have been written something like this;

Her first job is to knock down the cobwebs. Then she sweeps the floor and scoops a dead frog out of the toilet. The combustion stove needs to be lit. She collects logs of wood from the garage and then crumples newspaper, before igniting a fire in the combustion stove. Finally, she makes up a bed with fresh sheets, and falls asleep, exhausted.

Which version is better? Why? What is the effect?

The Vanishing Moment

Families

Complete this table by listing under the character's names all the family members we know about. Write for each family member a brief statement about that person's relationship with the character.

Bob	Arrow	Marika
Mother		
Dean is abusive to Bob who lives in constant fear of his violence. Dean constantly puts Bob down.		

The Vanishing Moment

Through Other Eyes

Try writing part of the story of *The Vanishing Moment* through the eyes of the elderly couple who live in the house overlooking Black Rock beach. They appear in the novel twice: in the climactic chapter 29 when Arrow realises that the little boy on the beach is Jasper (pages 160-167) and, very briefly, in Chapter 14 when Arrow pauses at Black Rock beach on her way to Shelley Beach (page 78). There is one other reference to them as Marika, at Arrow's funeral, remembers that the newspapers reported 'how the old man had to beat Mrs Jackson off with a spade' (page 168).

1. Re-read all three sections carefully, noting every detail you can about the couple and their involvement in the story.
2. Talk to a partner about what this tragedy must have been like for this elderly couple, leading orderly, uneventful lives in a quiet, safe environment. What must it have cost the old man to pick up a spade to beat off Mrs Jackson? What must it have been like waiting for police and ambulance for twenty or thirty long minutes with a terrified, traumatised little boy and the body of a dead girl? Would they ever feel the same again about their pristine house and carefully tended garden?
3. Invent a back-story for the couple. They are obviously retired, spending their days in their garden. Have they always lived at Black Rock, or have they settled there in their retirement? They are probably newcomers, otherwise Arrow and Fergus would probably have known them in those years when Black Rock was Fergus's favourite beach. The great care they are taking to keep their house and garden so immaculate seems like the behaviour of proud new homeowners. What work did they do? Have they always perhaps lived and worked in the city and have dreamed for years of a peaceful place on the coast with a garden for them to look after? Do they have children and, if so, where are they? What are their names? What has been the lasting impact on them of the tragedy? Not only did they experience those terrifying moments of the attack on Arrow but their lives since have been disrupted by a media frenzy. You can let your imagination run free, as long as you remain faithful to the few details that are provided in the novel.
4. From whose point of view are you going to tell the story: the wife or the husband? Are you going to use Margaret Wild's technique of limited third-person narration or are you going to try first person - writing as 'I' or 'we'? What is the time frame: immediately after the terrible ordeal or perhaps a reminiscence twelve months later? What form are you going to use: a chapter from a novel; a short story; a letter the person has written to a family member; an interview with a newspaper journalist; something else?
5. Write a first draft and then exchange your work with a partner. Talk about what has impressed you most in what you have read. Do you have any questions or recommendations: something that wasn't quite clear, or something that could be made more effective if handled slightly different?
6. Re-read your work and make any revisions you think will improve it, taking account of your partner's feedback.
7. Swap work once more with your partner for a proofreading check.
8. Publish your work in some way, such as posting everyone's writing online.