

Teachers' Notes
by Joy Lawn

The Cat at the Wall
by
Deborah Ellis

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Recommended for ages 11-14 yrs

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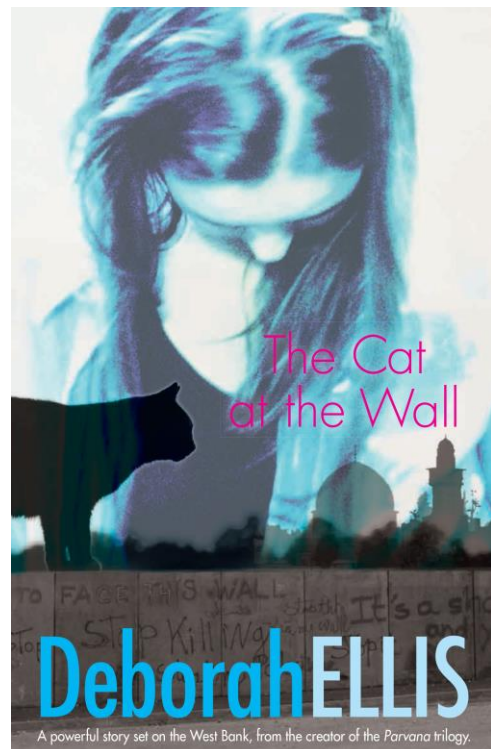
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INTRODUCTION

The world watches in horror as nations and terrorist groups fight and try to destroy those who are different. Islamic State (IS) was of particular concern at the time this book was published and the drawn-out conflict between the Palestinians and Israelis had no end in sight.

How can adults, let alone children, make sense of this enmity, destruction and loss?

Deborah Ellis makes the effects of conflict and war accessible in *The Cat at the Wall*. Her novel is based on an episode where Israeli soldiers hide inside a Palestinian house to undertake surveillance on terrorists. She uses a cat and a child to help children relate to this situation.

The structure of *The Cat at the Wall* is sophisticated, whilst still user-friendly for younger readers. The story moves seamlessly between the present where Clare is a cat (with both animal and human characteristics) and the past when she was a girl. It is an exceptional novel for close study or literature circles for upper primary and junior secondary students and could be a pivotal resource for study of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the West Bank.

It is dedicated to those who bring kindness to chaos.

Its main application will be for English lessons but it also has application for The Arts: Media Arts, Visual Arts and Music. Cross-curricular links are shown.

TOPICS AND THEMES

- War and conflict
- Terrorism and occupation
- Israeli / Palestinian conflict
- Children in war
- Punishment
- Bullying
- Difference
- Family
- Individual choice

PLOT SUMMARY

Clare died when she was thirteen and came back to life as a cat. As a girl she lived in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in the United States of America. As a cat she lives in Bethlehem in the Middle East, which is now not 'little' or 'still' like the Christmas carol, [*O Little Town of Bethlehem*](#), but a city under occupation.

She escapes from other cats by darting into a Palestinian house when Israeli soldiers open the door. The soldiers plan to use the house to spy on suspected terrorists nearby. Clare and then the soldiers realise that a little boy, Omar, is hiding in the house with them under a trapdoor hidden by a model cardboard city. The situation becomes fraught when Palestinians surround the house and a riot eventually develops.

Clare's backstory as a smart bully in America is told alongside her story as a cat. At school the new teacher, nicknamed Ms Zero, saw through her guile. As a result Clare has been punished by having to write out a poem, the *Desiderata*, multiple times.

The two interlinked stories form an exceptional whole.

LEARNING AREAS

The Cat at the Wall is recommended for study in Years 5 to 7.

ENGLISH

The suggested English Learning Intentions are from the three strands of the Australian English curriculum:

- Literature: understanding, appreciating, responding to, analysing and creating literature
- Language: knowing about the English language
- Literacy: expanding the repertoire of English usage

The Learning Intentions are either from one strand or integrated strands.

THE ARTS

The Australian Arts curriculum:

- Media Arts
- Visual Arts
- Music

The Australian Curriculum can be downloaded at <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/Home>.

Learning Intentions are highlighted in shaded boxes at the end of the section to which they refer and, unless otherwise stated, are from English.

CHARACTERS AND EVENTS

The setting and events in Bethlehem in the West Bank are very different from what most Australian children experience.

- From the novel, *The Cat at the Wall*, students find examples of how life is different and more difficult under occupation. These could include the 'Big Wall' with checkpoints and barbed wire and the death of Omar's parents.
- Students then find connections between their lives and characters in the novel. Look at Omar, the traumatised Palestinian boy, other Palestinians who live in Bethlehem, and the two Israeli soldiers.
- Show these connections as a [mind-map](#).

Even though people in different places can be different, it is their humanity that connects them.

LITERATURE AND CONTEXT

To understand some of the background to this situation, students could view a map of Israel, Gaza and the West Bank to place the situation in geographical context. ([See map at end of these notes.](#))

Students could also view the ABC TV news report for children, *Gaza 12/8/2014* in *Behind the News*. (The situation in Gaza is similar to that of the West Bank.)

<http://www.abc.net.au/btn/story/s4062913.htm>

- Find and analyse how this situation is represented.

Extension Task:

Media Arts: Students could use techniques of pre-production, production and post-production to record an interview with other students who take on roles of Palestinians, Israelis and characters from the novel.

Make connections between students' own experiences and those of characters and events represented in texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts (ACELT1613)

Identify and explore ideas and viewpoints about events, issues and characters represented in texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts (ACELT1619)

Analyse how technical and symbolic elements are used in media artworks to create representations influenced by story, genre, values and points of view of particular audiences (ACAMAR071)

ENGLISH

RESPONDING TO LITERATURE

Desiderata Poem

When Clare was at school in the United States her teacher made the students write out the *Desiderata*, a long poem by Max Ehrmann, as their detention task. Clare called it the 'punishment poem'. What she didn't realise was that the powerful words of this poem would seep into her consciousness and eventually influence her thoughts and actions.

She is shocked when Omar, the Palestinian boy, recites it, especially in such a different place and circumstance; and then the Palestinian teacher, Ms Fahima, leads her class in a recitation of it with hand gestures outside Omar's house.

Parts of the *Desiderata* poem quoted in *The Cat at the Wall* are:

*Go placidly amid the noise and the haste, and remember what peace
there may be in the silence ...*

Be on good terms with all persons ...

*If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain or bitter, for
always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself...*

...everywhere life is full of heroism ...

You (WE) have a right to be here ...

*With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful
world. Be cheerful. Strive to be happy.*

- Read and view the whole poem at <http://allpoetry.com/Desiderata---Words-for-Life> (written text) and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHPJlwu1l9s> (written text, visuals and music).
- Students recite and possibly even memorise the *Desiderata*. Younger students could also incorporate hand gestures like the Palestinian class does. [p.105]

Interacting with others

- Compare and contrast the purpose, structure and topic of the *Desiderata* with Dylan Thomas's poem, *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night* <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/do-not-go-gentle-into-that-good-night/> and the song lyrics of *Turn! Turn! Turn!* (To Everything There is a Season) covered by The Byrds. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKP4cfU28vM>
- Students write a manifesto or creed for their class based on principles of belief from these (and possibly other) works and from their own ideas that relate to their situation and experience and could help and inspire them.
- Display this in the classroom as one or more [posters](#). Different styles of graphic design (layout, illustrative style and font style and size) could be used.

Extension Task:

Some students could set the words of their manifesto to music, as Pete Seeger did with the lyrics of *Turn! Turn! Turn!* from Ecclesiastes. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turn! Turn! Turn!](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turn!%20Turn!%20Turn!)

Reflect on ideas and opinions about characters, settings and events in literary texts, identifying areas of agreement and difference with others and justifying a point of view (ACELT1620)

Compare the ways that language and images are used to create character, and to influence emotions and opinions in different types of texts (ACELT1621)

Plan, rehearse and deliver presentations for defined audiences and purposes incorporating accurate and sequenced content and multimodal elements (ACELY1700)

Use interaction skills when discussing and presenting ideas and information, selecting body language, voice qualities and other elements, (for example music and sound) to add interest and meaning (ACELY1804)

Visual Arts

Plan the display of artworks to enhance their meaning for an audience (ACAVAM116)

Music

Rehearse and perform music including music they have composed by improvising, sourcing and arranging ideas and making decisions to engage an audience (ACAMUM090)

WRITING AND STRUCTURE

Deborah Ellis's writing in *The Cat at the Wall* is quite conversational in style. It addresses the reader. She establishes the setting, plot and characters quickly and keeps the pace of the story moving even though it is dense and full of ideas. Events and information unfold and flow into each other.

The story is structured as a major and minor narrative. The major narrative is set in the present with Clare as a cat in the West Bank. The minor narrative takes the form of flashbacks to her life as a girl and these are executed seamlessly.

Sometimes the [segue](#) between time and place occurs between chapters, such as when Clare the cat blocks the door at the end of Chapter 9 and the next chapter opens with Clare the girl preventing the boy in a wheelchair from passing [pp.60-61].

Alternatively, segues occur within chapters, such as when the soldiers' discussion about bird-watching leads to Clare's memory of how she tried to sabotage her sister's speech about birds. [pp.65-70]

- Students find more examples of segues from the text.

The author uses symbolism such as the 'wall' [pp.43, 98]; the 'City of Dreams' - the cardboard city above where the boy is hiding [p.37]; and the game of Monopoly [p.18].

- Students find examples of these and other symbols.
- Then they highlight their visual nature by depicting them as quick sketches using coloured pencils, pens or pastels.

[Binary Oppositions](#) (opposites) are used particularly well to contrast the different cultures of the characters, including the teachers and older relatives.

In the USA, Clare *decided it was going to be all-out war* against her strict teacher Ms Zero. Palestinian teacher Mrs Fahima took passive resistance with her class outside Omar's house and tried to stop the older boys from fighting.

Omar's Palestinian parents died violently and senselessly. Clare's Catholic grandmother, who worked in a soup kitchen, helped the homeless and urged her to look for the good in people, was killed by a druggie for the five dollars in her pocket. Even though people come from different backgrounds, there can be similarities in their lives.

- Students should find other binary oppositions in *The Cat at the Wall* and in other literature.

There are surreal or [magic realism](#) elements in the narrative. The most obvious is that the girl Clare died and is now living in Bethlehem as a cat.

Also, at Christmas in the church built where Jesus was born, time stopped when the clock chimed twelve. People's souls seemed to speak about their regrets: they should have been nicer to loved ones and *I had this precious thing and I wasted it*. Clare regrets not telling her parents that she loved them, and also that she wasn't with her grandma when she was killed.

Assessment Task:

Students write an episode from Clare's time as a schoolgirl that has not been explored in the novel or could be explored further, such as another situation when she bullied someone; time spent with her grandmother or friends; or more about her accident. They should incorporate some written and structural elements that Deborah Ellis has used, such as flashbacks, symbolism or magic realism.

Interpreting, analysing, evaluating

Analyse how text structures and language features work together to meet the purpose of a text (ACELY1711)

Experiment with text structures and language features and their effects in creating literary texts, for example, using imagery, sentence variation, metaphor and word choice (ACELT1800)

Examining literature

Recognise and analyse the ways that characterisation, events and settings are combined in narratives, and discuss the purposes and appeal of different approaches (ACELT1622)

Creating texts

Plan, draft and publish imaginative, informative and persuasive texts, choosing and experimenting with text structures, language features, images and digital resources appropriate to purpose and audience (ACELY1714)

CONVERSATIONS

Some conversations in the novel seem pointless to Clare. Tourists sound boring: *Did you see what they charge for a coke?...There's only so much junk we can pack in the carry-on, and I'm not paying extra for shipping, so get that in your head right now.* [p.26]

The soldiers have a pointless argument about whether a terrorist would grow ivy or honeysuckle on their house. [p.33]

- After reading some of these conversations, which seem 'pointless' to Clare but might be more fairly described as 'mundane', students in pairs hold some mundane, informal conversations. Decide on a topic beforehand. It may be useful to audio record their conversation.
- Next they write about the selected topic in a more meaningful way and in the slightly formal style that is generally expected in writing.
- What are some differences in content and style between these oral and written conversations?

[\(See BLM 'Writing with Meaning' at the end of these notes.\)](#)

A conversation that seems meaningful to one person may not be to someone else. For example, Clare as a cat was not interested in the soldiers 'going on and on about birds and the war and the bus stations with the best fast-food places'. [p.71] A discussion about punishment or war, however, could be quite profound. [pp.41-2]

- Students hold a debate about punishment or war.

Ideally these tasks will help students to be more considered in some of their conversations, as well as understanding some differences between spoken and written texts.

Interacting with others

Participate in and contribute to discussions, clarifying and interrogating ideas, developing and supporting arguments, sharing and evaluating information, experiences and opinions (ACELY1709)

Use interaction skills, varying conventions of spoken interactions such as voice volume, tone, pitch and pace, according to group size, formality of interaction and needs and expertise of the audience (ACELY1816)

Language for interaction

Understand that strategies for interaction become more complex and demanding as levels of formality and social distance increase (ACELA1516)

Creating texts

Plan, draft and publish imaginative, informative and persuasive print and multimodal texts, choosing text structures, language features, images and sound appropriate to purpose and audience (ACELY1704)

RESOURCES & FURTHER READING

AUTHOR WEBSITE

<http://deborahellis.com>

ONLINE RESOURCES

Hyperlinks are included where helpful or where their use is suggested in these notes.

FURTHER READING

***Crossing* by Catherine Norton**

Cara lives beside a Wall that separates her community from another place. Eventually she makes the decision to take a leap of faith and cross the wall. This novel was the dual winner of the 2015 NSW Premier's Award – Patricia Wrightson Prize.

***A Little Piece of Ground* by Elizabeth Laird**

Like *The Cat at the Wall*, this novel shows what it is like to live in occupied territory from the point of view of a Palestinian boy, Karim.

***The Wall* by William Sutcliffe**

Joshua lives in a community surrounded by a wall with checkpoints that keeps them safe. The situation resembles that of Israel's West Bank.

***The Kites Are Flying!* by Michael Morpurgo, illustrated by Laura Carlin**

A reporter travels to the West Bank to find out what life is like for the Palestinians and Israelis who live on either side of the wall. He befriends mute Palestinian boy, Said, who makes kites.

The *Through My Eyes* series edited by Lyn White

A series of fictional books, inspired by the *Parvana* books by Deborah Ellis. Each book is set in a contemporary zone of war or conflict and tells the story of a young person living there, desperately trying to survive as their family and their whole way of life is being destroyed. The series is a tribute to such children and the themes of courage, determination, triumph and perseverance should inspire, challenge and engage young readers. <http://throughmyeyesbooks.com.au/>

***Paper Planes* by Allayne L. Webster**

This Australian novel for middle readers depicts the Serbian invasion of Bosnia from the point of view of a young boy. It is based on a true story.

The *Once* series by Morris Gleitzman

This hard-hitting series which begins with the novel *Once* follows young Jewish boy, Felix, and the horrors he faces during the holocaust and afterwards.

***Frindle* by Andrew Clements**

Clare, in *The Cat at the Wall*, is thwarted by her strict teacher who actually wants to help her transform. In *Frindle*, a boy is challenged by his strict teacher. She is actually his champion.

***Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak* by Deborah Ellis**

These interviews give an insight into some similar children to those Ellis portrays in *The Cat at the Wall*.

Parvana and other novels in the 'Breadwinner' or 'Parvana' series by Deborah Ellis

These stories are about a girl growing up in Afghanistan trying to find fairness and equality. (The first novel was published in Canada as *The Breadwinner* and in Australia as *Parvana*.)

Kelsey and the Quest of the Porcelain Doll by Rosanne Hawke

Rosanne Hawke is Australia's comparable writer to Canadian Deborah Ellis. Both write insightful stories about other cultures under duress. *Kelsey* is for primary aged students and is set in Pakistan.

ABOUT THE WRITERS

DEBORAH ELLIS

Deborah Ellis has achieved international acclaim with her courageous and dramatic books that give Western readers a glimpse into the plight of children in developing countries. She has won the Governor General's Award, Sweden's Peter Pan Prize, the Ruth Schwartz Award, the University of California's Middle East Book Award, the Jane Addams Children's Book Award and the Vicky Metcalf Award. A long-time feminist and anti-war activist, she is best known for the Parvana trilogy, which has been published around the world in seventeen languages, with more than a million dollars in royalties donated to Street Kids International and to Women for Women, an organization that supports health and education projects in Afghanistan. In 2006, Deb was named to the Order of Ontario.

JOY LAWN

Joy Lawn is a freelance writer and reviewer for *The Weekend Australian*, *Books+Publishing*, *Magpies Magazine* and [Boomerang Books blog](#), specialising in children's/YA and literary fiction. She judges the Aurealis and Queensland Literary awards and is a former CBCA judge. Joy has been a classroom teacher, has worked for indie bookshops as a literature consultant and has an MA in Children's Literature & Literacy. Joy is fascinated by ideas and images and how authors and illustrators express these with truth and originality.

Map of Israel, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank



Writing with Meaning

After your 'mundane' conversation, write about the same topic that you talked about – but this time in a more meaningful way and in the slightly more formal style expected in a written text.

Topic _____

What are some differences in content and style between these oral and written conversations?