

'Funny, smart and perfectly paced, I adore this book.'

NOVA WEETMAN

HOW TO SPELL CATASTROPHE



FIONA WOOD
AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

TEACHERS' NOTES



Pan Macmillan Australia



Pan Macmillan Teachers' Notes

HOW TO SPELL CATASTROPHE

by Fiona Wood

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Introduction

'Not everyone knows what to do in case of an emergency, disaster or catastrophe.

And that's okay because emergencies, disasters and catastrophes don't happen every day.

But they do happen occasionally.

So *some* people need to know.

I'm one of those people.' (p 7)

Nell (aka Eleanor Fry McPherson) is very happy with her life with her widowed mum and her Glaswegian grandmother, Map (via skype). But she has always been a worrier and her psychologist traces this to her father's death when she was a baby, so that her obsession with potential catastrophes needs special handling. But when a real catastrophe arises, Nell goes to pieces. How can she stop this from happening?

Nell McPherson is a catastrophe expert, but nothing has prepared her for the impending catastrophe of her mum's plans to merge families with boyfriend, Ted and his annoying daughter, Amelia. As if that's not dire enough, grade six is turning into an emotional obstacle course as Nell moves away from her old spelling bee friends and into some rule-bending with new girl, Plum.

When Nell decides to tackle the biggest catastrophe of them all, climate change, and campaigns for grade six to attend the School Strike 4 Climate, old friends and new will come together, and along the way plans to foil the family merge give way to an understanding that it might not be such a disaster after all.

As in her earlier novels, Fiona Wood has concocted a delightfully contemporary realistic novel which, although it deals with serious issues such as climate change, blended families, making and losing friends, and growing up, it is also an hilarious comedy, and a very entertaining school story.



Themes

- **Worrying and Strategies for Coping**

'A mighty worrier is someone who worries a lot.
A mighty warrior is one who goes into battles.
I am Nell, now.
Not Nelly.
But I'm still more a worrier than a warrior.' (p 1)

Discussion Point: Nell's life is fraught by worries which she endeavours to control with strategies such as being prepared for unexpected accidents; keeping lists of potential catastrophes and how to deal with them; instructing those around her with the knowledge she has gleaned; and visiting her psychologist when she really feels overwhelmed by her worries. (p 86) How do you deal with potential catastrophes?

Discussion Point: Some of Nell's worries are deliberately hilarious, since this is a novel which deals with serious issues in a light-hearted and entertaining way. Which of Nell's concerns did you find most entertaining?

- **Rite of Passage into Adulthood and Individuality**

'But my life is a big syrupy swamp of wanting different bits of everything at different times, not wanting to let go of anything, sometimes feeling strangled and wanting to escape, other times feeling stranded and alone, often being totally confused, and wanting everyone to like me whatever I do.' (pp 124-5)

Discussion Point: Nell has conflicting feelings: She is grappling with who and what she wants to be. Do your students experience similarly conflicting feelings?

Discussion Point: What aspects of growing up are canvassed in this novel?

- **Blended Families**

'Blended? Good word for it. Pulverised. Smooshed. No longer recognisable as separate ingredients. Mum and I are already a family. We do not need any blending.' (p 42)

Discussion Point: Nell is very negative about moving in with Ted and Amelia, but as the novel progresses there are key turning points leading to a resolution of this seeming impasse. Nell reflects on the concept of a nuclear family (pp 39-42); her plans to derail the move to Ted's house hilariously come to nothing (p 264); news of the baby (p 288) creates new feelings. How and why does Nell finally accept the new life her mother has planned for them?

Discussion Point: Although Amelia is much younger than Nell, she has adjusted to being part of her own mother's blended family using what



her dad calls an ‘agile approach’(p 223). How has she managed to make this adjustment? What part does her father’s parenting play in her adjustment?

- **Friendship and Peer Group Pressure**

‘Plum energy is what I’ve always imagined high school would be like. Plum is the next thing, the unknown, the unpredictable. Plum energy is fierce and free, like Lyra.’ (p 178)

Discussion Point: Making new friends can often jeopardise relationships with old friends. Nell and Cecily have always been inseparable but when Plum comes on the scene she disturbs that dynamic. How do they manage to resolve this tension?

Discussion Point: When the three grade six girls are squabbling, Lily, their grade two ‘buddy’ points out that ‘The number one friend-mend strategy on the poster is saying something nice about a person, something you are grateful for.’ (p 203). Discuss the efficacy of this technique.

- **Climate Change**

‘One catastrophe is banned: climate change. It’s just too big for me. Or I’m too small for it. I like a disaster that I can do something about.’ (p 7)

Discussion Point: Climate change is referred to throughout this novel. (See p 31 on sustainability; p 63 on Extinction Rebellion; pp 229–30 on Greta Thunberg.) What does the novel suggest about climate change and society’s response to it?

Discussion Point: Nell comes up with the perfect action (pp 145–6) to tackle climate change. (See also pp 148–150 for her bullet points for Alex; pp 170–2 for her talk on School Strike 4 Climate; p 292 for a discussion of political action, pp 305–306 for climate action strategies.) Discuss forms of political action and their effects.

Discussion Point: Nell expresses the fear many people have that the problem of climate change is just too big for anyone to tackle. Can small actions really make a difference?

Discussion Point: Research the topic of climate change using other non-fiction and website resources and discuss your findings. [See **Further Reading**.]

- **Honesty, Integrity and Moral Values**

‘Does everyone have private mean thoughts, or am I a meaner than average person?’ (p 136)

Discussion Point: Nell goes to Plum’s home after school without telling her mum, and hence breaks the rules set down in her household. (p 74) Have you ever been tempted to break family rules about outings, and how did that work out for you? Is Nell’s guilt something you can



identify with?

Discussion Point: Discuss the following quotes from ancient philosopher, Marcus Aurelius which the Spelling Bee group discuss: 'If it is not right, do not do it. If it is not true, do not say it.' 'Waste no time arguing what a good person should be. Be one.' (p 266); 'You have power over your mind – not outside events. Realise this and you will find strength.' (p 267).

Plot & Structure

1. The novel is structured chronologically beginning with a Prologue. This account of events is from Nell's present tense point of view. Some chapters end with an excerpt from Nell's catastrophe notebook detailing the possible catastrophes which she might encounter each day and how to deal with them.

Discussion Point: How might the novel have been structured differently?

2. The plot of a novel is generally in five parts: Exposition (introduction of the main characters and setting); **Rising Action** (one or more characters in crisis); **Climax** (turning point); **Falling Action** (resolution of characters' crisis); **Denouement** (resolution). **This novel works as a series of narrative arcs, with small climaxes and then a major turning point.**

Discussion Point and Activity: What were the other key turning points in story? Draw a narrative map or chart showing the key points at which the narrative rises, falls, and then rises again to this final turning point.

3. Narrative structure can consist of a range of internal devices.

Discussion Point: What other elements of the structure of this novel did you observe when reading it?

4. Pacing, Tension and Suspense are integral to a novel's structure. Each chapter begins with a tempting statement, or 'hook' for example, 'The invaders have made themselves comfortable at our kitchen table.' (p 39) Each ends with a cliff hanger, for example, 'It's possible that Plum and I have exactly nothing in common.' (p 26)

Activity: Consider the ways in which the pacing is determined by these structural exclamation points.

5. The events which make up the **plot** of a novel are designed by the writer to flesh out characters and themes.

Discussion Point: Which were the key events in terms of the theme of 'catastrophe'. What were the key events which revealed the nature of each major character?



Characters

1. Action in this novel revolves around several central characters and several minor ones.

Activity: Discuss the following quotations in relation to each of the major characters.

Central Characters	Quotation
Nell (Nelly) (Eleanor)	<p>'Nelly, a Mity Worrier' (p 1).</p> <p>Map compares her deceased father's character to Nell's (p 131).</p>
Anne, Nell's mother	<p>'My mum is a wide-awake super-efficient morning type, who clears up, washes up, wipes up while you're still eating - and by the time we leave there will be no sign that humans had breakfast in this house on this day.' (p 11)</p> <p>'Mum is the sort of parent who is a parent first.' (p 64)</p>
Cecily Smart, Nell's best friend	<p>'One amazing thing about Cecily is that she cannot stay cross. She is a sunny person. Optimism is her superpower.' (p 19)</p>
Plum Clarkson, the new girl in her grade	<p>'Plum Clarkson has style. You could easily believe she was a year or even two years older than the rest of us. Gus is so right when he says that Plum is fashion-forward.' (p 18)</p>
Ted, her mother's boyfriend	<p>'My mother is dating Jesus, and I hate him.' (p 261)</p>
Amelia, Ted's daughter	<p>Amelia's acceptance of Nell's treatment of her indicates her sweet and loving nature; her balanced response to this new family also makes it clear that she is wise beyond her years.</p>
Map, Nell's paternal grandmother	<p>See pp 62-4.</p>



Activity: Discuss any of the characters below and write a short description of them.

Minor Characters: Gus Li, Omar El Khoury, two students in the Spelling Bee team with Cecily and Nell; Alex, their teacher; Romi Lethlean, Nate Matsouka, Rhianna Gupta, other students; Cecily's mum, Heather, and father, Rob; Cecily's twin brothers Stu and Ben; Dr Grace Leong, Nell's psychologist; Monty Soda, a star runner at Nell's school; Viv, Plum's mum; Suzanne, the babysitter upstairs to Plum's home; Mr and Mrs Gruber; Sofia, the school Principal; Dev, the Principal's assistant; Addison who works in Ted's café; Ivy, Ted's sister.

Activity: Select a quotation which accurately describes any of the characters above.

Discussion Point: Were there any 'minor' characters you would like to have seen feature more in the action? Might one character figure more prominently in a sequel?

Discussion Point: Some characters invoke sympathy in the reader, others don't, and generally feelings for them can be ambiguous. Which characters did you have sympathy for and why? Which ones were unattractive, annoyed you, or were puzzling? Examine, for example, the character of Plum who seems unreliable and mean but later proves to be a good friend not only to Nell but also to Cecily.

3. Characters are often described in terms which relate them metaphorically to someone or something else.

Activity: Write a description of Nell using metaphorical language.

4. The detail used to create a character often includes aspects of their setting which 'echoes' their characters.

Activity: Find an example of this in the novel.

5. Dialogue can also add to the characterisation established by a description.

Discussion Point: Discuss this dialogue between Cecily and Nell: 'Cecily and I... *The Parent Trap* plot.' (pp 100-1) What does it reveal about each of them?

Style and Use of Language

1. The narrative voice is first person subjective, present tense, from Nell's point of view.

Activity: Choose a section in the narrative and re-write it in third person. How does this change the narrative?

2. Voice is created by a range of devices including syntax, choice of



words, literary devices such as metaphor and simile. For example, metaphor – ‘little aeroplanes’ (p 255); simile – ‘Her smile shines like sun cracking a rain cloud in two.’ (p 278).

Activity: Choose and discuss some quotes from the novel which employ such devices.

3. This novel falls into the genres of issues-based realistic novel, rite of passage novel, comedy and school story.

Activity: Discuss the links between the tropes of the traditional school story and this novel.

Activity: Read and compare this novel to other examples of the ‘rite of passage’ novel. [See **Further Reading** below.]

Discussion Point: How well would this novel translate as a movie?

4. Word Play is employed throughout the novel, for example, Nell reflects on the differing meanings of dessert and desert (p 28); Nell contemplates the alternative meanings of ‘nuclear family’ and ‘nuclear catastrophe’ (pp 41–2); she also reflects on the word ‘homeostasis, a state of balance and stability (p 34); the Spelling Bee team learn about etymology (p 84) or the origin of words as part of the lessons taught by their teacher Alex.

Discussion Point: What other examples of word play did you notice in this novel?

5. Humour is a device used in each of Fiona Wood’s novels. She employs it to deal with her characters’ feelings and with the issues which concern them, in an oblique way, for example, Nell’s ‘Favourite Catastrophes’ (pp 82–3).

Discussion Point: What examples of humour did you notice in this novel?

6. Literary and Popular Cultural References are used; students might be encouraged to discuss any one of these references and to engage in related writing tasks, for example, the character of Lyra from Philip Pullman’s *Northern Lights*; or quoting from L. M. Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables* with the phrase ‘Depths of Despair’ (p 268).

Discussion Point: What other literary references did you notice in this novel?

Discussion Point: This novel is also peppered with media references, for example, the films Nell and her mother like (p 33); the Cure concert that Map attended with her son, Nell’s dad (p 191).

Discussion Point: What other media references did you notice particularly?

7. List Making is another device used in the novel, for example, things about Amelia Nell doesn’t like (pp 10–11); Six Signs (p 46); list of things



to delay the move (pp 58–9); humorous list of ‘Strange and interesting accidental deaths’ (p 89); plans to prevent them moving and how her mother has all the power (pp 205–6); humorous fashion catastrophes (pp 234–5).

Activity: Nell writes a list of ‘If onlys’ (pp 141–2). Invite students to write their own list of ‘If onlys’.

Setting

1. A vivid and convincing setting depends on description which makes it visually come alive for the reader. This novel is set largely in Nell’s home and school, with visits to Plum’s apartment, Ted and Amelia’s home, and to Ted’s café, Oliver and the Bean.

Activity: Choose a passage which really makes any of these places seem real to you.

2. Setting can also be enhanced by contrasting one location to another.

Discussion Point: Read and analyse description of two places in this novel which are in sharp contrast to each other, for example, Nell’s extremely tidy and ‘organic’ home and Cecily’s chaotic household.

3. Description should also be informed by all the senses – sounds, tastes, smell as well as vision.

Activity: Write a piece describing Oliver and the Bean, based on hints in this novel, using all your senses, for example, the smell of roasting coffee is a crucial aspect of this place, and of Ted!

4. Place is evoked by description, employing a range of literary devices.

Discussion Point: Analyse how any passage in this novel works to create a sense of the place.

5. Descriptions evoke different images in the mind of the reader.

Activity: Draw or paint the converted warehouse that Ted and Amelia live in based on how it is described in the novel. Compare your various images.

Writing Exercises

1. Alex gives Grade Six Blue **a creative writing exercise using numbers** (p 241). Write something based on this exercise.

2. Acrostics are used by Alex, their teacher, to reflect on some of their activities, for example, see p 68, pp 267–8 and Nell’s handout,



the CATASTROPHE composition (pp 305–6). Invite students to create an acrostic poem on Climate Change.

3. Examine the **Blurb and Cover** of this book. What insight into the contents do they offer? After reading the novel, design your own cover and then write your own blurb.

4. Write an argument for the affirmative or negative: ‘Kids can influence governments to address climate change.’ Then conduct a debate on the subject.

5. Read Nell’s recollection of a nightmare (p 154) in which she escapes from bushfire by going into the ocean, but then fears that she will drown. Note the briefly sketched images used. Invite students to write a poem in response to a dream or a nightmare they have had, in this format.

6. Nell writes a ‘friday note from under the doona’ (pp 48, 109, 179, 272, 297), a brief summary of each week as a way of checking in on herself using the headings ‘word’, ‘problem’, ‘plan’, ‘fruit ranking’ and ‘gratitude’. Write a summary of your week using these headings.

Quotes for Discussion after Reading the Novel

1. ‘They have each other but I’ve only got me.’ (p 258)
2. ‘Fierce and free apparently live well outside my comfort zone.’ (p 74)
3. ‘She’s obsessed with young people acting young.’ (p 193)
4. ‘When you have Nelson Mandela in your corner you have a good chance of winning’ (p 292)
5. ‘Plum is more – careless – than mean, I think. She needs practice at being a friend, like I need practice at being a sister.’ (p 300)

Further Reading Ideas for Class Discussion

1. Do you have an ‘under the table land’ (p 141) to retreat to like Nell’s?
2. What would your perfect daemon be? (Nell’s is a dog called Kite.)
3. Re-read the novel and see if there were things you had not noticed in the first reading which become more significant having re-read it.
4. Research the activism of Greta Thunberg and how she has influenced governments regarding climate change. [See **Further Reading**.]
5. Read other picture books and fictions about climate change



and compare the messages contained in them and in this novel. [See **Further Reading**.]

Further Ideas Using Technology

1. Research the author and her writing of this work.
2. Visit this website: 'Poetry and the Environment' *Poetry Foundation* <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/146462/poetry-and-the-environment>>
Discuss with students some of the poems featured there and what they revealed to them about the environment.
3. Research any of the topics or themes explored in this novel, online.
4. Create a Book Trailer about this novel.
5. Design a poster on screen like the ones the School Strike 4 climate class do (p 287). Use a simple computer drawing program to create your design but use recyclable card or paper.

Conclusion

How To Spell Catastrophe is a warm-hearted, very charming narrative about a young girl's fears and worries and her resistance to change, until change 'finds' her anyway, and carries her into an unpredictable but exciting new future.

Author Note

Fiona Wood's first YA novel *Six Impossible Things* was shortlisted for the 2011 CBCA Book of the Year, Older Readers. Her second, *Wildlife* won the 2014 CBCA Book of the Year Older Readers award and was shortlisted for several other awards. Her third *Cloudwish* won the CBCA award and the Indie Book Award for young adult fiction in 2016 and was shortlisted for the Gold Inky and ABIA awards. *Take Three Girls*, co-written with Cath Crowley and Simone Howell, won the CBCA award in 2018, was shortlisted for the Gold Inky and Indie awards, and was honoured by the International Youth Library as a White Raven. Fiona's books are published internationally. She is also a screenwriter. Fiona lives in Melbourne/Naarm with her family. Visit her website for more information: <http://www.fionawood.com>



Further Reading

Picture Books on Climate Change

- Baker, Jeannie *Where the Forest Meets the Sea* Walker Books, 1987.
- Blackall, Sophie *If You Come To Earth* Chronicle Books, 2020.
- Bunting, Philip *Your Planet Needs You!* Hardie Grant Children's Publishing, 2020.
- Cheng, Christopher *One Tree* Ill. by Bruce Whatley. Puffin Books, 2019.
- Jamieson, Trent *The Giant and the Sea*. Ill. by Rovina Cai. Hachette, 2020.
- Jeffers, Oliver *Here We Are: Notes for Living on Planet Earth* HarperCollins, 2017.
- Joyner, Andrew *Stand Up! Speak Up!* Random House USA, 2021.
- Kirby, Loll *Old Enough To Save the Planet*. Walker Books, 2020.
- Layton, Neal *A Planet Full of Plastic and How You Can Help*. Wren and Rook, 2019.
- Layton, Neal, *A Climate in Chaos and How You Can Help* Wren and Rook, 2020.
- Layton, Neal *A World Full of Wildlife and How You can Protect It* Wren and Rook, 2021.
- Martin, Marc *A Forest* Penguin Books Australia, 2015.
- Serres, Alain *I Have the Right to Save My Planet* (I Have the Right, 2) Ill. by Aurélie Fronty. Groundwood Books, 2021.
- Wilkinson, Carole *Earth Matters: Loving our Planet* Ill. by Hilary Cresp. Simon & Schuster, 2021.
- Winter, Jeannette *Our House is on Fire: Greta Thunberg's Call to Save the Planet* Beach Lane Books, 2019.

Junior Fiction on Climate Change

- Bradman, Tony, editor *Under the Weather: Stories about Climate Change* Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 2010.
- Harry, Pip *Are You There, Buddha?* Hachette, 2022.
- James, Simon *Dear Greenpeace* Walker Books, 2016.
- MacDibble, Bren *How to Bee* Allen & Unwin, 2017.



Junior Non-Fiction on Climate Change

Haworth-Booth, Alice and Haworth-Booth, Emily *Protest! How People Have Come Together to Change the World* Pavilion Children's GB, 2021.

HOPE: 50 Ways to Help Our Planet Every Day Puffin, 2020.

Healey, Justin, ed. *The Climate Change Crisis* (Issues in Society, Vol 375) The Spinney Press, 2014.

Kirby, Lolly and Taylor, Anna and Lirus, Adelina *Old Enough to Save the Planet: Be Inspired by 12 Real- Life children who have made a difference.: With a foreword from the leaders of the School Strike for Climate Change* Magic Cat Publishing, 2020.

Lerwill, Ben *Climate Rebels* Penguin Books Australia, 2020.

Marsden, Polly *The Australian Climate Change Book* Ill. by Chris Nixon. Hachette, 2021.

Spilsbury, Louise *Protecting the Planet* (Children in Our World series) Ill. by Hanane Kai. Wayland, 2021.

Stevens, Georgina *Climate Action: The Future is in Our Hands* Ill. by Katie Rewse. Little Tiger Press, 2021.

Thunberg, Greta (*I Know This To Be True*): *On truth, courage & saving our planet* Murdoch Books, 2020.

Thunberg, Greta *No One is Too Small To Make a Difference* Penguin, 2019.

Weckmann, Anna *Greta Thunberg* (Little People, Big Dreams 40) Ill. by Maria Isabel Sanchez Vegara. Frances Lincoln Children's, 2020.

Wilkinson, Carole *Atmospheric: The Burning Story of Climate Change* Black Dog Books, 2015.



Relevant Website Resources

Climate Council: <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/about/>

'Climate Crisis. Climate Justice' *Oxfam Australia*: https://www.oxfam.org.au/what-we-do/climate-justice/?gclid=EAlaIQobChMI4PjrpNXI8QIVmLaWCh2aQQPxEAAYASAAEgLUd_D_BwE

Extinction Rebellion Australia: <https://ausrebellion.earth/>'Extinction Rebellion Youth' *Wikipedia*: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Extinction_Rebellion_Youth

'Greta Thunberg' *Wikipedia*: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greta_Thunberg

'IPCC Climate Change Education Resources' *coolaustralia.org*: https://www.coolaustralia.org/ipcc-climate-change-education-resources/?gclid=EAlaIQobChMIhJbXrPDa9gIVX5NmAh1zkQwIEAAYAiAAEgKhcfD_BwE

Planet Ark: <https://planetark.org/>

'Poetry and the Environment' *Poetry Foundation*: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/146462/poetry-and-the-environment>

School Strike 4 Climate Australia: <https://www.schoolstrike4climate.com/>

'Sustainable Development Goals Book Club' *IBBY*: <https://www.ibby.org/awards-activities/activities/sustainable-development-goals-book-club>

'The Facts about Bushfires and Climate Change' *Climate Council*: https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/not-normal-climate-change-bushfire-web/?atb=dsa01b&gclid=eaiaiqobchmi7btm3amj8qivwj1lbr0ukglieaayaiaaegizz_d_bwe

Timms, Penny 'Australian teenagers' climate change class action case opens 'big crack in the wall', expert says' *ABC News* 27/05/2021: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-27/climate-class-action-teenagers-vickery-coal-mine-legal-precedent/100169398>

'Transforming Our World; the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' *United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs*: <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

'What is Climate Change?' *Australian Museum* https://australian.museum/learn/climate-change/about-climate-change/?gclid=EAlaIQobChMI4PjrpNXI8QIVmLaWCh2aQQPxEAAYAiAAEgiWE_D_BwE

'What is the Kyoto Protocol?' *United Nations Climate Change*: https://unfccc.int/kyoto_protocol

