

MEL AND SHELL

JULIA LAWRINSON

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YEAR LEVEL: Y4–7

CROSS-CURRICULUM PRIORITY: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures

ABOUT THE BOOK

The year is 1979 and best friends Mel and Shell are one half of Friends Squared, a foursome busy navigating school bullies, dance class, Brownies, horse riding and BMX, all while desperately waiting for the next ABBA song to be released. But this isn't an ordinary school year, and theirs isn't an ordinary friendship. To celebrate the 150th anniversary of European settlers arriving in Australia, Year 5 are tasked with writing letters to imaginary pen pals living in 1829. When Shell is abruptly moved to a new class, however, her letters become consumed with worry as the unthinkable happens: her friendship with Mel slowly unravels. With new hobbies and family struggles pulling them apart, will not being able to imagine life without ABBA be enough to keep them together?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julia Lawrinson is an award-winning writer of books for children and young adults. She hails from Perth and, despite leaving school at fifteen, has a PhD in writing and a Bachelor of Laws with distinction. Julia has worked in a range of organisations, from the arts to parliament to health. She has presented at schools, workshops and conferences across Australia, and in Singapore, Indonesia and the USA, and loves meeting her audience and encouraging reading, learning and curiosity. Her books are about friendship, family and the occasional Jack Russell. She loves the ocean, reading, dog parks and the word serendipity.

THEMES

- Friendship
- Family
- Bullying
- Australian history

AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

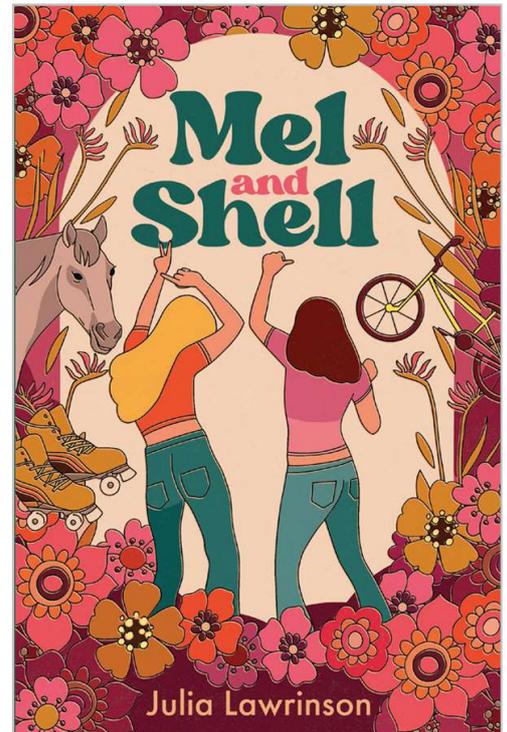
Y4–7 English

Y4–7 History

Y4–7 Health and Physical Education (Mental Health and Well Being)

USEFUL WEBSITES

- Author website: julia-lawrinson.com.au



CLASSROOM IDEAS

Discussion questions

1. Compare and contrast the characters Mel and Shell using the following subheadings: likes, dislikes, strengths, weaknesses. What adjectives would you use to describe the personality of each? What interests do they have in common? Find examples in the story where they have *different ideas about what is fun* (p. 89). How would you describe their friendship?
 - a. Do you have a best friend? What activities do you enjoy doing together? Do you sometimes have different ideas about what is fun?
 - b. What do you think makes a good friend? Find examples in the story where you think Mel is a good friend to Shell (and vice versa). Find examples where you think they let each other down. Can you recall a time when you were a good friend to someone? Can you think of a time when you were not? How did you resolve the situation?
2. What is an epistolary novel? What did you enjoy most about this unusual structure? Look closely at the structure of Shell's letters – what components make up this genre (e.g. date, 'Dear', 'Yours' etc.)? How is a letter organised differently to a short story or a poem? Can you write your own letter to a friend adhering to the correct format?
 - a. The entire novel is narrated through letters from Shell's point of view. Can you write a letter from the point of view of Mel, Jody or Sharon? How/why might they give a very different description of events to Shell?
3. Shell is instructed by her teacher to write in as much detail as possible so Mary can (theoretically) easily imagine life in 1979. How can you add detail to your own writing (e.g. use adjectives, similes, metaphors, personification etc. to enhance the imagery for your reader)? What devices does Shell use in the following excerpt to paint a vivid picture for Mary? *Underneath the rattle of my teeth in my head, I could hear the wind against the windows, whistling like a ghost.* (p. 191).
4. Why do you think Sharon bullies others, particularly Mel? Why do you think she behaves so differently at horse riding in comparison to school? Have you or someone you know ever been bullied? How did this make you feel? What are some actions you can take if you (or someone you know) are being bullied? Why do you think Shell's mum tells her to be nice to Sharon even though she is a bully?
5. Why do you think Mel pretends everything is normal after the fight between her parents? How would you feel if you were Mel? Why do you think she doesn't tell Shell about her parents splitting up and going to live with her dad?
6. What does it mean to 'infer' meaning or 'read between the lines'? For example, consider the clues below we are given about the character Jody's cultural heritage prior to the revelation that she is Indigenous:
 - a. She is adopted (many Indigenous children were adopted in 1979 due to the government policies that resulted in the Stolen Generations)
 - b. She doesn't think it would be fun to dress up in old-fashioned clothes and pretend to arrive in Australia in 1829 like Shell does (p. 153):
'It's all right for you,' Jody said. 'All you would have been in 1829 is cold!'
'And scared,' I said. 'It would have been scary coming to a strange place.'
'You wouldn't have been the only ones who were scared,' Jody said.
 - c. She is visibly upset after the class discussion about how Indigenous peoples might have felt when the colonists stole their homelands (p. 107):
*Jody got really quiet when we were writing in our journals. She finished quickly and stared out the window. 'Hey, can I borrow your textas?' I whispered ... 'Take what you want,' she snapped. I looked at her. Jody never gets angry. But she looked angry. Then Jody put up her hand and asked to go to the toilet. Miss R nodded. Jody was gone a long time.*Nothing in these excerpts tells us *directly* that Jody is Indigenous. However, if we consider all the clues together, we might *infer* that she is. Were you surprised like Shell to discover that this is indeed the case? Or had you already predicted this?
7. What is racism and what are some of the different forms it can take? How do you know if someone or something is racist? Why is it sometimes hard to recognise racism (i.e. because it is often considered normal or harmless by people who aren't affected by it)? What different kinds of racism does Jody encounter throughout the story (e.g. Shell sneaking a glance at her to see if she 'looks Aboriginal', Sharon teasing her about practising for a corroboree; Lisa's uncle making a comment about why

she's good at ballet)? How is each of these an example of racism? Which of these examples is deliberate and which is unintentional? How might you feel if you were Jody?

8. How can you help to overcome racism in your community? Visit the [Racism No Way website](#) for a selection of anti-racism lessons for Australian schools and read the handout entitled 'Examples of Racist Behaviour in a School Context'.
9. Why do you think Mel stops being Shell's friend at one point in the story? Do you think this is fair? What finally brings them back together? What lessons about friendship do both girls learn over the course of the novel? What messages did you personally take away from the story?

History

1. How does Shell's everyday life in 1979 sound similar/different to the present (e.g. consider her descriptions of schooling, music, television shows, technologies, hobbies, games etc.)? Research everyday life in 1979 using the following subheadings: transport, fashion, technology, entertainment, medicine, major world events. What do you think you would have liked most about living in 1979? What do you think would be the main thing that would surprise someone from 1979 if they suddenly arrived in the present (e.g. the internet)?
2. Research everyday life in 1829 as Shell's pen pal Mary would have experienced it. Use the following subheadings: food, shelter, transport, fashion, technology, entertainment, medicine, education, hobbies, games, major world events. How does it sound similar/different to the present? What do you think you would have liked most about living in 1829?
3. Shell's teacher informs them that only boys from wealthy families typically attended school in 1829. Why was this the case? Do you think this was fair? How/when did this change?
4. *Miss R said that corporal punishment is old-fashioned, and she preferred that we take responsibility for our actions.* (p. 48). What is corporal punishment? When/why was this abolished in Australia?
5. The boys in Shell's class complain about having to help sew a tapestry for the WAY '79 Commemoration. They say sewing is for girls but Miss R declares, *In these modern times everyone should be able to do everything* (p. 159). Do you agree?
6. *I wish I could go back in time, just for a day, to see what it was really like* (p. 98). Write an imaginative short story where you find yourself living in 1829 for a day.
7. Interview a parent and/or grandparent and record their answers to the following questions (note: feel free to add more questions of your own):
 - a. What year were you born?
 - b. What was the toy you played with most as a child?
 - c. What was your favourite thing about going to school?
 - d. What transport did your family use?
 - e. What technology did you have at home?
 - f. What hobbies and games did you enjoy?

In what ways was your family member's childhood similar/different to yours in the present?

8. Make a time capsule for someone to open 150 years in the future to learn about everyday life in the 2020s. Include the following information: your name; the date; your favourite thing about living in the present; your least favourite thing about living in the present; your favourite subject at school; your favourite food, movie, book, television show, band, outfit, celebration, celebrity and hobby; a prediction for the future 150 years from now. How might everyday life be different 150 years in the future? In pairs, create a prediction chart.
9. Mel and Shell are dedicated fans of the band ABBA. What genre/s of music did they play? What were some of their biggest hits? Choreograph a dance routine to an ABBA song of your choice. Research fashion trends in 1979 to design an accompanying costume then hold a class concert.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures

1. Shell says *I liked thinking about what Perth would have been like without the buildings and cars and roads and trains ... But I'd never thought about what Aboriginal people might have felt.* (p. 106). Have you ever considered this before? Reflect upon the question Shell's teacher poses to her students: *How would you feel if a group of people came to your house, and told you to get out?* (p. 107).
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have lived in Australia for tens of thousands of years. Construct a timeline of Australian history that begins 50,000 years ago and create class definitions for the terms 'settlement' and 'invasion'. Why do particular groups in Australia use the term 'invasion' as opposed to the term 'settlement' to describe European arrival?

3. Shell's mum informs her that many Aboriginal children in 1979 were adopted. Why was this the case? (Hint: research the forcible removal policies implemented by successive federal, state and territory governments from the late 1800s up to the 1970s that resulted in the Stolen Generations, such as those listed on the [Australian Human Rights Commission's Track the History Timeline: The Stolen Generations](#).)
4. Jody says *People can say they're sorry ... But it doesn't make anything better* (p. 154). What do you think she means? As a class, view former prime minister [Kevin Rudd's apology to Australia's Indigenous peoples](#) from 13 February 2008 (approx. 4 mins) and discuss its place in Australian history.
5. What was the [Bringing Them Home report](#) (1997)? Why was this an important step towards reconciliation? How else do you think Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians can continue to work towards reconciliation today?

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