

'Every now and then an Australian crime novel comes along to stop your breath and haunt your dreams.'

SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

THE

'One of the most stunning debuts I've ever read.'

DAVID BALDACCI

DRY



A DESPERATE ACT IN A SMALL TOWN WITH BIG SECRETS

NOW A
MAJOR MOTION
PICTURE

JANE

HARPPER



TEACHERS' NOTES

THE DRY

BY JANE HARPER

Notes prepared by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Before Reading	3
Themes	4
Plot, Genre & Structure	7
Characters	9
Narrative Voice	12
Style and Use of Language	13
Setting	14
Q & A with the Author	15
Writing Exercises	16
Quotes for Discussion After Reading the Novel	17
Further Reading Ideas for Class Discussion	18
Further Ideas Using Technology	18
Conclusion	18
Author Bio	18
Further Reading	19

INTRODUCTION

Severe drought has plagued the small town of Kiewarra in remote country Victoria for two years, and the township is dying. When Luke Hadler, a local farmer, purportedly shoots his wife Karen and six-year-old son Billy in cold blood and then commits suicide, the town is horrified but not especially surprised. There is no one in Kiewarra who has not been affected by the relentless drought. But Luke's parents, and local police sergeant Greg Raco, have doubts. Why would Luke kill his son but allow his thirteen-month-old daughter Charlotte to live?

Aaron Falk, Luke's childhood friend and a police officer himself, has not been back to Kiewarra since he left nearly twenty years ago following the death of sixteen-year-old Ellie Deacon. Falsely accused of being involved and subjected to continual harassment by Ellie's father, Mal Deacon, and cousin, Grant Dow, Falk and his father Erik moved to Melbourne, cutting all ties with their home town. But returning to Kiewarra for Luke's funeral re-opens old wounds, both for Falk and for Ellie's relatives.

Persuaded by Gerry and Barb Hadler to stay in town to look into the Hadlers' finances, which may have contributed to their deaths, Falk once again becomes the target of abuse for his long-ago association with Ellie Deacon. Meeting Sergeant Raco, who has his own theories about the deaths, adds another thread to the narrative, as does Aaron's reunion with Gretchen Schoner, who had been the further member of his teenage 'gang' of four.

Zeroing in on Ellie's father Mal and cousin Grant, Falk begins to suspect a link between Ellie's death and the Hadlers'. Or is he simply blinded by the need to see Mal and Grant punished? As he re-lives the painful events of the past, Falk begins to come to different conclusions about both cases – and realises that all along he has been backing the wrong horse.

This is the first of a series of four riveting novels to feature police officer Aaron Falk, who has become a beloved figure amongst crime fiction enthusiasts.

BEFORE READING

- What does the title *The Dry* suggest to you? It seems to reference the drought, but what other connotations might this title have? Consider this question after reading the novel as well.
- Does the cover suggest anything to you? Teachers may wish to assemble a variety of covers including the film tie-in cover for consideration.
- This is a work of rural Australian crime or noir. What other works in this genre have you read? What are the tropes of such fiction?

THEMES

Curriculum 9.0 English: Engaging with and Responding to Literature: AC9E10LE03

Curriculum 9.0 English: Texts in Context: AC9E10LY01

Drought

Key Quote: “Everyone’s so angry. But they’re not just angry at Luke exactly. The people paying him out the most don’t seem to hate him for what he’s done. It’s weird. It’s almost like they’re jealous.” “Of what?” “Of the fact that he did what they can’t bring themselves to do, I think. Because now he’s out of it, isn’t he? While the rest of us are stuck here to rot, he’s got no more worrying about crops or missed payments or the next rainfall.” (p 19)

Discussion Point: Does this comment help to obscure the real crime situation and contribute to the mystery?

Discussion Point: The drought overshadows everything that happens in *The Dry*. In some ways it could almost be said to be a character in its own right. What is it about the drought and its effects on the town that makes people less likely to question what happened to the Hadlers?

Discussion Point: How does the drought colour our impressions of Kiewarra, its residents, and the Australian bush throughout the novel?

Discussion Point: “Jesus, some of these are depressing,” Raco murmured. Falk could see what he meant. There were stick figure families in which every face had a crayon mouth turned downwards. A painting of a cow with angel wings. *Toffee My Cow in Heaven*, the shaky caption read. In every attempt at landscape, the paddocks were coloured brown.’ (p 87) The drought’s effect on children is described in the artworks they’ve created at school. Discuss this topic bearing in mind that some students may be suffering the impacts of drought. Locate resources which address this issue. [See **Further Reading**]

Secrets and Lies

Key Quote: “Sometimes it feels like you were the only person Luke was loyal to,” Gretchen said. “The way he stood by you around Ellie’s death. He copped a load of grief for that after you left. All kinds of people were leaning on him to change his story, give you up.” She drained her wineglass and peered at Falk over the rim. “He never would.” Falk took a breath. Now was the time to tell her. *Luke lied. You lied.* “Listen, Gretch, about that –” “You were lucky really,” she cut him off. Her voice had lowered a notch. “Lucky you were with him, for starters.” (pp 130–1)

Discussion Point: At the core of this novel is the idea of secrets and lies, and the reasons why people keep them. Luke and Gretchen both keep the secret about their whereabouts on the day Ellie died, even from Falk, but for different reasons. The quote above is even more contrived as we realise later that Gretchen always knew that Aaron *wasn’t* with Luke, because he was with her. How does the keeping of this secret affect their relationship with each other and with Falk? How does it impact the way the truth comes out about Ellie’s death?

Discussion Point: Why do you think Gretchen is so reluctant to tell Falk who Lachie’s real father is? (Read pp 278–82 for further information.)

Discussion Point: Gerry Hadler has always known that the alibi the boys had concocted was a lie. Why has he kept it a secret for so long?

Discussion Point: Jamie Sullivan’s secret needlessly hinders the investigation into the Hadlers’ deaths, and yet his fears about what people in a small town might do if they found out about his – and Dr Leigh’s – homosexuality are

understandable. Similarly, Ellie Deacon keeps the secret of her father's abuse, with tragic consequences. What does this tell us about the nature of secrets, and the need for truth?

Discussion Point: Is it better for some secrets to be kept in any circumstances? Why or why not?

Friendship

Key Quote: 'As they shook hands for what would prove to be the last time, Falk found himself struggling to remember, once again, why they were still friends.' (p 193)

Discussion Point: In spite of their shared childhood, Luke and Falk had very different personalities. What is it that gradually spells the end of their friendship? Do you think they would have remained friends if they hadn't lied about where they were at the time of Ellie's death and/or if Luke had told Aaron where he really was in the first place?

Discussion Point: 'Falk thought about that photo. Luke, Gretchen, himself. And Ellie Deacon, with her long black hair. They'd all been so tight. Teenage tight, where you believe your friends are soul mates and the bonds will last forever.' (p 14) Aaron and Luke are tied together but Aaron realises at their last meeting in Melbourne that there is little to connect them. Gretchen and Aaron attempt to re-unite, but again have little to connect. What makes a childhood friendship solid or fragile?

Australian Identity, the 'Ugly Australian' and Small-Town Mob Mentality

Key Quote: "How long have you been in town?" "Coming up to ten years. A lot of them still see me as fresh off the boat, though. Born and bred here, or forever an outsider, seems to be the Kiewarra way." "Born and bred isn't a free pass either," Falk said with a grim smile. "How'd you end up all the way out here anyway?" McMurdo paused. Rolled his tongue over his teeth. "What reason do you give for leaving Kiewarra?" "Career opportunities," Falk said drily. "Well. Think I'll say the same and leave it at that." (p 141)

Discussion Point: Although born there, Falk is cast as an 'outsider' in this novel; the butt of suspicion and innuendo. McMurdo's comment suggests that he also is still to be accepted despite owning the local pub. How typical is this sort of ostracism, in your opinion? Are Australian country towns unwelcoming?

Discussion Point: Kenneth Cook's *Wake in Fright* (1961) has some similarities to *The Dry* in the terrible violence of local prejudice and treatment of outsiders. Grant Dow is an exponent of that. (The films of both novels demonstrate the same concerns.) Compare and contrast the two novels.

Country/City Divide

Key Quote: 'That's partly what took city natives like the Whitlams by surprise, Falk thought. The quiet. He could understand them seeking out the idyllic country lifestyle; a lot of people did. The idea had an enticing wholesome glow when it was weighed up from the back of a traffic jam or while crammed into a garden-less apartment. They all had the same visions of breathing fresh clean air and knowing their neighbours. The kids would eat home-grown vegies and learn the value of an honest day's work. On arrival, as the empty moving truck disappeared from sight, they gazed around and were always taken aback by the crushing vastness of the open land. The space was the thing that hit them first. There was so much of it. There was enough to drown in. To look out and see not another soul between you and the horizon could be a strange and disturbing sight . . . *I didn't know it was like this.*' (p 190)

Discussion Point: The theme of the country/city divide is fundamental to this novel. It is also one of the major themes in Australian literature. For a country with so much land, we are also a nation which has concentrated population in a handful of capital cities near the coastline leaving the regional and remote centres with a need for better infrastructure and arbitrary notions of which lifestyle is preferable. It has also led to a false divide; to city prejudices against country people and vice versa. Discuss.

Parents and Relationships with Children

Key Quote: “Oh, I’m very sorry to hear that.” Rita looked at him, her eyes sympathetic. “But surely that doesn’t make it any less true? Death rarely changes how we feel about someone. Heightens it, more often than not.” (p 219)

Discussion Point: Aaron and his father Erik never reconciled their differences. Erik resented his son’s lie and suspected him of possible murder; Aaron resented his father’s suspicion of him. And both lost their home, their friends and their community when forced to leave Kiewarra. Gerry Hadler is still troubled by the thought that his son Luke may have been involved in Ellie Deacon’s death. Ellie Deacon obviously had a traumatic upbringing with her mother leaving, and her father abusing her. How important is the theme of parent/child relationships in this novel?

Gambling

Key Quote: “There’s nothing illegal about pissing your cash away. Thank God. Otherwise I’d be out of business.” “So would a lot of people.” Falk managed a smile. “These gambling types are fair old suckers, though. Always looking for strategies and loopholes. End of the day, it only works if you back the right horse.” (p 286)

Discussion Point: Whitlam’s addiction has destroyed any values he may once have had. He has committed violent acts before. He clearly makes choices without consideration of his wife or child. His evenings are spent at the pub on the pokies, and his attitude to the town and his school are negative – both offer him only a temporary escape from what is pursuing him. His cold-blooded and very hasty decision to fake the deaths of the Hadlers shows the extreme lengths to which he will travel. The fact that Billy was his daughter Danielle’s friend at school makes it all the more heinous. What does this novel reveal about addiction?

PLOT, GENRE & STRUCTURE

1. The novel is structured chronologically beginning with a Prologue, and also contains flashbacks. [See **Narrative Voice** below.] These two pages of text set the scene and provide an entrée to the themes of the novel.

Discussion Point: How important is this prologue, which describes flies being drawn to the scene of the murders? Why is this approach such a powerful way to introduce the events and themes of the novel?

2. This is a crime novel; the tropes of this genre demand that various clues and red herrings (false clues) are laid before revealing the criminal. Those most obviously under suspicion are Matt Deacon and Grant Dow. Gretchen's controlled anger is another red flag.

Discussion Point: There have been several cases of deaths like the Hadlers' often caused by domestic violence and disputes, in Australia in recent years. How does knowledge about these cloud the true nature of this case, both for the characters and for the reader?

Discussion Point: Pacing, tension and suspense are integral to such a narrative, and the author inserts details to entice the reader into suspense and speculation, for example:

- Gerry Hadler's note to Falk has been sent prior to the funeral. 'Luke lied. You lied. Be at the funeral.' (p 8)
- Gerry asks Falk: "I have to know." "Know what?" Gerry's eyes looked almost black against the bright sunlight. "If Luke had killed before." (p 18)
- Barb says to Falk: "He might well have borrowed money from someone. Or had bad debts he couldn't pay. Maybe someone he owed came looking for him." (p 28)
- 'Gerry nodded, looking down at his feet. "Aaron, if I'd thought for a second that you had, I wouldn't have kept quiet. Why do you think I didn't say anything? It would have ruined your life. The suspicion would have followed you for *years*. Would they have let you join the police? Luke would have had the book thrown at him for lying. All that for what? The girl was still dead. Killed herself, realistically, and I know a fair few others thought so too. You boys had nothing to do with it." (pp 29–30)
- The dead rabbit story. (p 31)
- Raco searching in Luke's barn asks Falk where Luke might hide something small. (p 37)
- "It's the cartridges," Raco said finally. "From the shotgun that killed the Hadlers. They don't match." (p 38) "Yeah," he said. "There's more." (p 40)
- "This –" he stepped aside so Falk could see right down the long hallway, "– is where it starts to get strange." (p 44)
- "Maybe whoever was here that day didn't kill the baby because they just didn't need to kill the baby," Falk said finally. "Nothing personal about it. Doesn't matter who you are, thirteen-month-olds don't make good witnesses." (p 48)
- 'Always something happening.' (p 77)
- 'We've got bugger all to do with any of that stuff that happened back then. Understand? Never have. His mum neither.' (p 121)

- Throughout the narrative, Falk's role is ostensibly to investigate the Luke Hadler accounts, which is a furphy since he seems not to find any issues. This is in stark contrast to Whitlam's story that Karen had come to his office to ask for some consideration, given her family's financial woes. This lie ties in later when we discover the real nature of the meeting between Karen and Whitlam.

Encourage students to identify the further suspenseful clues or 'signposts' in this novel. Consider the ways in which the pacing is determined by these structural exclamation points.

3. 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.

4. Narrative structure can consist of a range of internal devices such as the opening and closing sentences of chapters.

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

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

Discussion Point: What were the key events which revealed the nature of each major character?

CHARACTERS

1. Action in this novel revolves around several key characters.

- **AARON FALK, police officer who specialises in financial crimes, and childhood friend of Luke Hadler:**

Key Quote: 'Falk felt a sharp pang of longing for what might have been. He could see his father standing at the screen door in the evenings, a tall figure framed with the glow of light from the house. Calling him to leave his games and come in. Time for dinner, Aaron.' (p 119)

Discussion Point: How has growing up without a mother affected Falk's life? In what ways does this become especially apparent when he and his father move to Melbourne, cutting all ties with his childhood home?

Discussion Point: 'Why couldn't he let her in? Why *wouldn't* he let her in? Did he not trust her? Or did he not love her enough?' (pp 147-8) Falk's adult relationships have not been what he hoped. How have the events surrounding Ellie's death, and his relationship with Ellie in life, affected Falk and his ability to engage with people?

Discussion Point: Do you think that leaving town was the right way for Erik Falk to deal with the situation he and Aaron were facing? How did his father's doubts about him affect Aaron?

- **LUKE HADLER, deceased farmer and childhood friend of Aaron:**

Key Quote: "Luke could be so selfish sometimes," Gretchen said. She ran a finger through a condensation ring on the table, ruining it. "He would put himself first, second and third and not even realise it. Didn't he? It wasn't just me?" She looked gratified when Falk nodded.' (p 126)

Discussion Point: Luke is revealed to us as someone who had both good and not-so-good qualities. In spite of their long friendship, Falk cannot quite rule out that Luke might have committed the murders of his wife and son. In what ways did Luke differ from Grant Dow? What was it about Luke that made people think him capable of murder?

Key Quote: 'I know Luke was your mate and Dow's a dickhead, but in a lot of ways they were quite similar. Both bolshy, larger than life, got tempers on them. Two sides of the same coin, you know?' (p 144)

Discussion Point: This comparison is perhaps a further indication that Luke's popularity had a seamier side to it. Was he 'one of the good guys' (p 126) as Aaron likes to think he was?

- **GRETCHEN SCHONER, farmer and childhood friend of Luke and Aaron:**

Key Quote: 'Ellie had been wrong about her, Falk knew. Gretchen was never an airhead. She was made of much sterner stuff than that. She had stayed and faced the music. She'd built a life in a community that had got the better of others, not least himself and possibly now Luke Hadler. Gretchen was tough. She was a fighter.' (p 135)

Discussion Point: What other qualities do we learn Gretchen has as the novel progresses?

- **SERGEANT GREG RACO, new policeman in town:**

Key Quote: 'He had a lift to his eyes that made him look like he was smiling even when he wasn't.' (p 35)

Discussion Point: Raco's diligence and belief in justice are qualities to be admired as is his devotion to his wife, Rita. What makes Raco such a good policeman?

- **PRINCIPAL SCOTT WHITLAM, a relatively new teacher in town:**

Key Quote: “But something like that,” he said. “Knowing how close he came to not being there. God, it leaves you with a lot of what ifs.” (p 92)

Discussion Point: Whitlam appears to be a minor character in this narrative, until he assumes a major role in the latter part of the novel, and in retrospect. This statement above reveals the nature of his duplicity. How would you describe his character?

2. There are also several minor characters:

Gerry Hadler, Luke’s father, Barb Hadler, Luke’s mother, Charlotte, the thirteen- month-old baby of Luke and Karen; Karen Hadler (deceased) and her son Billy (deceased);

Gretchen’s five-year-old son, Lachie;

Rita Raco, pregnant wife of Greg Raco;

Ellie Deacon (deceased), Mal Deacon, father to Ellie, Grant Dow, cousin to Ellie;

Dr Patrick Leigh;

David McMurdo, barman;

Jamie Sullivan, farmer and friend of Luke, and Mrs Sullivan, Jamie's Gran;

Scott Whitlam’s wife Sandra, and daughter Danielle;

Deborah, receptionist at police station, Constable Evan Barnes;

Erik Falk, Aaron’s father (deceased);

Mandy Vaser (nee Mantel), local mother and former schoolmate of Luke, Aaron and Gretchen;

Ian Willis, owner of the Milk Bar and a former school mate who refuses Aaron service;

Cecilia Targus, Mal Deacon’s solicitor.

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

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?

Discussion Point: Some characters invoke sympathy in the reader, others don’t, and some can be ambiguous. Consider, for example, Gretchen who seems to be a cheerful woman, a competent farmer, and a caring single mother and yet has some deep-seated issues as well. Which characters did you suspect of being different to how they presented themselves? What clues in the narrative led you to that conclusion?

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

Activity: Write a description of Barb Hadler, using metaphorical language.

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

Key Quote: "The living room felt claustrophobic after the brightness of the kitchen, and everywhere half-empty cups jostled with blank-eyed china figurines for precious space." (p 74)

Discussion Point: What does this description suggest about the members of the Sullivan household?

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

"I'm not sure you've got a choice. Something like this. It's not a one-man job." "We've got Barnes."

"Who?"

"My constable at the station. So that's three of us."

"That's only two of you, mate," Falk said. "I can't stay."

"I thought you told the Hadlers you would."

Falk rubbed the bridge of his nose. The pokies behind him clanged more loudly. He felt like the noise was inside his head.

"For a couple of days. That means one or two. Not for the duration of an investigation. An unofficial one at that. I've got a job to get back to."

"Fine." Raco spoke like it was obvious. "Stay for the couple of days then. It doesn't have to be anything on the books. Do what you said you'd do on the money side. As soon as we get something solid, I'll go to Clyde." (p 50)

Discussion Point: Discuss this dialogue between Aaron Falk and Greg Raco. What does it reveal about each of them?

NARRATIVE VOICE

Curriculum 9.0 English: Examining Literature: AC9E10LE06/AC9E10LE07

Discussion Point: Jane Harper has chosen to tell this story in the narrative voice of third person, past tense, from Aaron Falk's point of view, with flashbacks from various characters' point of view threaded throughout. What is the effect of this? How does it shape the reader's understanding of Falk himself, as well as of the other characters in the novel?

Discussion Point: Some of the recollections by narrators in this novel are unreliable. (e.g. Whitlam of Karen's visit to his office: "She said the farm was going under," Whitlam said. "Karen thought they had six months, maybe less." [p 90].) And some of the statements made by characters in the framing narrative are duplicitous. (e.g. Gretchen telling Falk how Luke protected him. [pp 130–1]) Re-read this novel to realise that it is an amalgam of true and false testimonies. Discuss those in detail.

Discussion Point: Some of the flashback scenes are shown to the reader a second time in a more expanded form as the novel progresses. What does this device show us about the reliability of the assumptions we make about the events and the characters?

Discussion Point: Choose a section in the narrative and re-write it in first person. How does this change the narrative?

STYLE AND USE OF LANGUAGE

Curriculum 9.0 English: Examining Literature: AC9E10LE05

Discussion Point: **Voice** is created by a range of devices including syntax, choice of words, literary devices such as metaphor and simile and personification. For example:

‘The late afternoon heat draped itself around him like a blanket.’ (p 4)

‘The question ached like a bruise.’ (p 10)

‘Windows shrouded by closed curtains gazed out like a pair of blinded eyes.’ (p 33)

‘The rumours were fed well by Ellie’s father Mal Deacon, and grew fat and solid. They sprouted legs and heads and they never died.’ (p 99)

“‘Think you might be right. Unfortunately. Christ, it’s like *Deliverance* round here sometimes,” Whitlam said.’ (p 179)

‘The point is that some alibis are a bit like that plasterboard you work with. They hold up initially, but put them under pressure and they crumble pretty damn swiftly.’ (p 202)

‘The past coated him like a layer of grime.’ (p 224)

Choose and discuss some further quotes from the novel that employ such devices.

SETTING

1. The fictional rural Australian town of Kiewarra is the central setting of the novel.

Discussion Point: How does the town itself inform our ideas about the people who live there and the events that take place there? What are the positives and negatives of a small town's tight-knit community? For example, the persecution (p 99) suffered by Aaron and his father or Mandy Vaser's vitriolic gossip about Aaron are products of small-town fear and innuendo.

Discussion Point: The bush, the rock tree (pp 108–13) and the Kiewarra River are the scenes of several major events in the novel. Why do you think Falk is drawn to these places? What does the contrast between the wild places in the novel and those tamed by human habitation show us?

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

Discussion Point: Read and analyse a description of two places in this novel which are in sharp contrast to each other, for example:

'They sat outdoors around a small pine table covered with a colourful cloth as the sky turned a deep indigo. The Racos lived in a converted former shop at the far end of the main street. Walking distance to the police station. The back garden housed a lavender bush and a lemon tree, and fairy lights strung along the fence gave the scene a festive glow.' (p 215)

And:

'The burial itself had been a private one so he hadn't been to the Hadlers' graves, but they were easy to find. Brand new, the polished headstones looked like indoor furniture accidentally left outside among their weather-beaten neighbours. The graves were ankle deep in a sea of cellophane, stuffed toys and withered flowers. Even from several feet away, the pungent smell of floral decay was overpowering.' (p 238)

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

Activity: Write a piece describing Luke and Karen Hadler's house, using all these senses.

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

For example: 'The kitchen was clean but disorganised, and above the stove a large scorch mark stained the wall. The paint had blistered and was peeling away like an ugly grey wound.' (p 74)

Discussion Point: Choose and 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 rock tree as it is described in this novel. Compare your various images.

Q & A WITH THE AUTHOR

Q. Where did you get the idea for the town of Kiewarra and its inhabitants?

A. Kiewarra is an amalgam of a lot of different communities, and not just small towns or even ones necessarily based in Australia. I wanted to capture that sense of claustrophobia that comes when people feel their neighbours all know just a little bit too much, but at the same time face shared problems. I think that happens in a lot of places, not just in rural towns. Kiewarra's inhabitants are a pure product of their environment. Many of them are dissatisfied and yet they all have their own reasons to stay, trapped by their livelihoods or their connections with family or the past, or just by their own inertia.

Q: Sadly, domestic homicides/suicides appear in the news far too often. Were you influenced by these stories in developing your plot?

A. I always felt this was a book more about a whole community than any one act. I was obviously aware of such incidents, but deliberately didn't probe too closely into the details. I wanted the novel to feel authentic, but I didn't want to blur the line between the piece of fiction I was writing and the real life tragedies those families and communities were suffering through. If a novel can help spark conversations about domestic homicides, or any other social issue, I hope that's a good thing, but *The Dry* is intended as fiction rather than a commentary.

Q. Aaron Falk appeared in this, in *Force of Nature*, and in your latest book *Exiles*, said to be his last appearance. How difficult is it to let this character go?

A. It's very bittersweet. Falk has given me so much and I started writing the third book, *Exiles*, knowing that it would be his final story. In some ways the novel was my 350-page goodbye letter to him, so it was a really special book to write. But I feel that in fiction, a strong ending is as important as a strong start – arguably even more so. Not every character is built for a twenty-book series and as an author you have to be clear-eyed about that and know when to say when. Aaron Falk has been with me since page one of book one and done so much for me, so I wanted to put aside any pressure to continue past the point that I felt was right for his character, and instead give him the ending he deserved.

WRITING EXERCISES

1. **Write a letter** as if written by Ellie to Aaron explaining her decision to run away.
2. **Write a descriptive passage** about drought and its impact on people.
3. Examine the **blurb** and **cover** of this book. After reading the novel, design your own cover and then write your own blurb.
4. **Write an essay** exploring the following statement: 'The secrets kept by the characters in this novel could have led to another miscarriage of justice.'
5. **Write a poem** as if written by Aaron about his feelings for Ellie Deacon.

QUOTES FOR DISCUSSION AFTER READING THE NOVEL

1. “That right? You lot should be investigating the bloody government for letting things get this bad.” The man nodded to where Luke’s body lay alongside those of his wife and six-year-old son. “We’re out here trying to feed this country, worst weather in a hundred years, and they’re crapping on about scrapping the subsidies. In some ways you can hardly blame the poor bastard.” (p 6)
2. ‘He had never known his own mother. She had died in a haemorrhaging pool of her own blood less than an hour after he was born. His dad had tried – tried hard, even – to fill the gap, But any sense Falk had growing up of maternal tenderness, every warm cake from the oven, every over-perfumed cuddle, had come from Barb Hadler. She may have been Luke’s mother, but she had always made time for him.’ (pp 70–1)
3. “Christ, it’s dead around here,” Falk said. “That’s the thing about money problems. They’re contagious. Farmers have no cash to spend in shops, the shop goes under and then you’ve got yourself more people with no money to spend in shops. Apparently they’ve been falling like dominoes.” (p 96)
4. This quote gives a visceral insight into the physical aspects of drought: ‘The huge river was nothing more than a dusty scar in the land. The empty bed stretched long and barren in either direction, its serpentine curves tracing the path where the water had flowed. The hollow that had been carved over centuries was now a cracked patchwork of rocks and crabgrass. Along the banks, gnarled grey tree roots were exposed like cobwebs. It was appalling.’ (p 105)
5. Read this lengthy passage about Falk considering a possible alternative life for himself had he stayed in Kiewarra: ‘Is this what his own life could have been like? . . . That light forever.’ (pp 150–2)
6. “Thanks,” Gretchen said. “He’s obsessed with grown men at the moment. I think he’s starting to see the other kids with dads and . . . well, you know.” She shrugged. Didn’t meet Falk’s eye. “Still, that’s what motherhood’s about, isn’t it? Eighteen years of crushing guilt?” (p 163)
7. ‘Her face clouded. “But yeah. It can be an issue. It’s not really the lack of company, it’s feeling cut off that gets me a bit. I can’t get reliable internet, and even the phone coverage is patchy. Not that I’ve got loads of people trying to call me anyway.” She paused, her mouth pressed into a tight line. “You know I didn’t even find out what had happened to Luke until the next morning?” (p 164)
8. “All right. Fine. I – *we* – don’t feel comfortable with Aar – with *your friend* – being so close to our children.” She looked straight at Falk. “We’d like you to leave.” (p 167)
9. “So you grew up here in Kiewarra? That must have felt like a long few years.” (p 182)
10. “I loved her.” “Since when,” Falk said, “has that ever stopped anybody from hurting someone?” (p 270)
11. “You need to open your eyes, and fast. You’re staring so hard at the past that it’s blinding you.” (p 272)
12. “Weren’t you a tiny bit tempted to let Kiewarra burn to the ground after everything it’s done to you?” (p 324)

FURTHER READING IDEAS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

1. Read crime fiction set in regional or rural Australia. [See **Further Reading**.]
2. Re-read the novel and see if there were things you had not noticed in the first reading that become more significant having re-read it.
3. Choose picture books that explore drought and have students make artistic responses to them by creating their own picture book text and designing a storyboard for it. Discuss the conventions of a storyboard before you begin this activity. [See **Further Reading**.]
4. Read non-fiction accounts or memoirs about growing up in regional or rural Australia. [See **Further Reading**.]
5. Read other books by Jane Harper.

FURTHER IDEAS USING TECHNOLOGY

1. Research the author and her writing of this work.
2. Watch the movie and compare to the novel.
3. Research any of the topics or themes explored in this novel, online.
4. Create a book trailer for this novel.
5. Design a poster advertising this novel.

CONCLUSION

The Dry is a work of rural noir – a crime novel that keeps the reader guessing while it traverses social themes such as drought, small-town prejudices and the impact of secrets and lies.

AUTHOR BIO

Jane Harper is the internationally bestselling author of the *The Dry*, *Force of Nature*, *The Lost Man*, *The Survivors* and *Exiles*. Her books are published in forty territories worldwide, and *The Dry* and *Force of Nature* have been adapted into major motion pictures starring Eric Bana. Jane has won numerous top awards including the Australian Book Industry Awards Book of the Year, the Australian Indie Awards Book of the Year, the CWA Gold Dagger Award for Best Crime Novel, and the British Book Awards Crime and Thriller Book of the Year. Jane worked as a print journalist for thirteen years both in Australia and the UK, and now lives in Melbourne with her husband and two children.

FURTHER READING

Picture Books

- Brooke, Cori *All I Want for Christmas is Rain* Ill. by Megan Forward. New Frontier Publishing, 2016.
- French, Jackie *Drought* Ill. by Bruce Whatley. Scholastic Press, 2018.
- Germein, Katrina *Big Rain Coming* Ill. by Bronwyn Bancroft. Penguin, 2002; Roland Harvey Books, 1999.
- Heffernan, John *Two Summers* Ill. by Freya Blackwood. Scholastic Press, 2003.
- Oktober, Tricia *Drought* Hodder Headline, 1997.

Fiction

- Brandi, Mark *Wimmera* Hachette, 2017.
- Cook, Kenneth *Wake in Fright* Text Publishing, 1961.
- Disher, Garry <https://www.textpublishing.com.au/authors/garrydisher>
- Hammer, Chris *Scrublands* Allen & Unwin, 2018.
- McGinnis, Kerry <https://www.penguin.com.au/authors/kerry-mcginnis>
- Temple, Peter *The Broken Shore* Text Publishing, 2005.
- Walter, Lachlan *The Rain Never Came* Odyssey Books, 2017.

YA Fiction

- Davis, Tony *The Big Dry* HarperCollins, 2013.
- Silvey, Craig *Jasper Jones* Allen & Unwin, 2016.

Non-Fiction

- Blaine, Lech *Car Crash: a Memoir* Black Inc, 2021.
- McGinnis, Kerry *Pieces of Blue* Penguin, 1999.
- Morton, Rick, ed. *Growing Up in Country Australia* Black Inc, 2022.
- Morton, Rick *One Hundred Years of Dirt* MUP, 2018.

Films

- 'The Dry' Film (2020) Director: Robert Connolly. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5144174/>
- 'Force of Nature' Film (2024) Director: Robert Connolly. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt20256448/>

Relevant Website Resources

Coutts, Donna 'What is drought, how long does it last and what is a drought declaration' *KidsNews* April 30, 2019
<https://www.kidsnews.com.au/explainers/what-is-drought-how-long-does-it-last-and-what-is-a-drought-declaration/news-story/ae5059c8c9478eb10281a3820cbda54d>

Delaney, Brigid 'The Dry Completely Changed my Life: Jane Harper, Australia's Queen of Crime' *The Guardian* 17 September 2022
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/sep/17/the-dry-completely-changed-my-life-jane-harper-australias-queen-of>

'Drought in Numbers 2022: Restoration for Readiness and Resilience' *United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification* 13 May 2022

<https://www.preventionweb.net/publication/drought-numbers-2022-restoration-readiness-and-resilience>

'Factsheet: Climate Change and Drought' *Climate Council* 21 June 2018

https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/resources/climate-change-and-drought-factsheet/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIo-zcxJTp_AIVz0NgCh1i5w29EAAYASAAEgKKQ_D_BwE

Keck, Madeleine 'Drought Puts Children in Australia at Risk for Mental Health Issues, UN Study Shows' *Global Citizen* 25 February 2019

<https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/drought-and-mental-health-australia/>

'Podcast: Margaret Hickey on the Rise of Australian Rural Crime Fiction' *Better Reading* 22 August 2022

<https://www.betterreading.com.au/podcast/podcast-margaret-hickey-on-the-rise-of-australian-rural-crime-fiction/>

'The Impact of Drought on Children' *Emerging Minds* 2019

<https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/the-impact-of-drought-on-children/>

'They come from a Land Downunder: 13 Australian Crime Writers to Try'

Crime Fiction Lover 27 April 2020

<https://crimefictionlover.com/2020/04/they-come-from-a-land-downunder-13-australian-crime-writers-to-try/>

Viskic, Emma 'Rural Australia: The Perfect Setting for Mystery: 5 Crime Novels Set in Small-Town Australia' *CrimeReads* 25 October 2018

<https://crimereads.com/rural-australia-the-perfect-setting-for-mystery/>