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## *How to Grow a Family Tree*

By Eliza Henry Jones

### Summary

**From the author of *P is for Pearl* comes a heart-warming book about family, friendship and what home can mean.**

Stella may only be seventeen, but having read every self-help book she can find means she knows a thing or two about helping people. She sure wasn't expecting to be the one in need of help, though.

Thanks to her father's gambling addiction, Stella and her family now find themselves living at Fairyland Caravan Park. And hiding this truth from her friends is hard enough without dealing with another secret: Stella's birth mother has sent her a letter.

As Stella deals with the chaos of her family, she must also confront the secrets and past of her 'other' family. But Stella is stronger than she realises.

### Key Learning Outcomes

ACELA1551, ACELA1565, ACELT1771, ACELT1640, ACELT1812, ACELT1643, ACELT1644, ACELY1746

### Key Concepts

Family, Identity, Addiction, Trauma, Friendship, Mental health, Love, Growing up

Recommended Ages: 14+

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

## After Reading

Stella believes that her somewhat-complicated family situation is worse than what her friends are experiencing, and that they don't really understand what she's going through. At several points throughout the novel, people point out to her that everyone has problems, and that her problems are just different to theirs.

- Which of Stella's problems are not as unusual as she thinks they are?
- Some of the things Stella is going through are unusual. Do you think she communicates this well to her friends?
- What responsibilities does Stella have that her friends don't?
- Why doesn't she want to tell her friends about moving to the caravan park?
  - How does she think they'll respond?
  - Do they respond as she expects them to?
  - Do any of them change their perception of Fairyland across the course of the novel?
- What are Stella's perceptions of the caravan park before and after the family move there, and how do they change?

Imagine that you're either Stella, Taylor, their mum or their dad.

- Write a series of three diary entries. One that takes place before the move is discussed, one the week before the move, and one a month after the move.
  - What are you nervous about or afraid of?
  - What surprises you?
  - How do you feel about the other members of your family?
  - What might you share with your diary that you wouldn't share with them?

'Before the letter arrived, I'd seen myself in my father's nose and my mother's eyes and Taylor's wide mouth and crooked teeth ... But for some reason, now I look at them and see them only reflected in each other. I've never known who I look like and it's unnerving how much it suddenly bothers me.' (p. 8)

Stella has always known that she was adopted. It's not, however, something she's really spent a lot of time thinking about until she receives a letter from her birth mother, Kelly.

- Why do you think Stella is so anxious about opening the letter from Kelly?
- What might she be afraid of finding?
- Before you read the contents of the letter, what did you imagine it might say?
- Write your own version of Kelly's letter to Stella.
- How does your letter differ from Stella's version in the book?

## Themes

Stella is forced to grow up due to circumstances that are outside of her control (her dad's gambling, her birth mother appearing in her life).

- How much of growing up is about the choices you make and how much is about the things that happen to you?
- Think back to what you thought being a grownup would be like when you were five, seven and ten years old. Write a short paragraph (or draw a short comic) that shows your expectations of adulthood at each of these ages.
  - How has your perception of growing up changed over time?
- Kelly was also forced to grow up very quickly due to events she has little influence over. How have her experiences as a teenager influenced the person she has become? Use evidence from the text to support your ideas.

Throughout *How to Grow a Family Tree* we are exposed to socioeconomic or class differences in Australia. Stella is forced to confront these, and her assumptions about them, when her family moves to Fairyland. Even though her family has never been very well off, the shock of living in a caravan park enables her to see that people who have the least in society are often those who have had bad luck, have tried to make a better life for themselves, or who have made just one poor decision that has resulted in them losing almost everything.

- Find two quotes that demonstrate how Fairyland is viewed. Is this a fair representation of the park and the people who live there?
- List all the reasons that the residents give for living at Fairyland. Find a quote for each one.
- For most of the residents, Fairyland provides them with a supportive community. How do we know this?
- The residents are upset when they can no longer live at Fairyland. How do they attempt to keep their community together?

There are many ways in which a family can be created. While there are some unusual elements to Stella's circumstances, they prove that sharing DNA isn't what makes a family.

- What do you think the title of the book means?
- How important is the title of a book?
  - What does it tell us about what the author sees as important?
- How does the book challenge typical notions of family? What kinds of alternative families can you find in the book?
- Do Stella and Taylor trust their dad? Make a list of examples where they are suspicious of him, or where he betrays their trust.
  - Are they right to be suspicious?
  - What could he do to earn back their trust?
  - What do you think he wishes he could say to his daughters but can't?

- At the end of *How to Grow a Family Tree*, Stella says, 'I feel a pang for my dad, who loved us enough to disappear.' (p. 329) How can her father's leaving be seen as an act of love to his family?
  - Do you think all the members of Stella's family see his leaving this way?

One of the hardest lessons we learn as we grow up is that love isn't always easy, nor does it solve every problem. We also learn about all the different kinds of love that we can both feel and experience from others.

- What has Stella learnt about love and imperfection by the end of the book?
  - Map out the relationships between the people Stella loves and the people who love her (some might be one way, and some might be closer than others).
- Who would you say is in Stella's inner circle by the end of the book and how do you know?
  - What examples can you find to support this?
- Does Kelly love Stella?
  - Why is Kelly unable to tolerate any imperfections in her life?
  - What does this tell you about her response to the trauma of her adolescence?
  - Imagine (and write) the conversation that Stella and Kelly might have a year after the end of the book.

## Techniques

Letters are a symbol of missed communication in *How to Grow a Family Tree*. Not only are there the letters that Kelly has sent to Stella, but there are also the letters that Matthew has sent to his mother. In both cases these letters go unanswered, though for very different reasons.

- Do you agree with Stella's mum's reasons for not giving Stella Kelly's letters?
  - At what age do you think it would have been appropriate for Stella to receive the letters her birth mother had written to her?
- Stella finds Kelly's last letter in the letterbox. Do you think this was the best way for her to begin the process of connecting with her birth mother?
  - Do you think that Stella would have begun this journey even if she had never discovered the letter?
- What do you think Matthew hopes for when he writes to his mother?
  - Compose a letter from Matthew to his mother in which he tells her that Fairyland is being closed.
- More positively, the notes that Stella writes to Clem help her begin to understand how he feels about her, although she finds it confronting when she sees that he has kept them all.
  - Imagine that it's the end of Year 12. Write five notes that Stella might write to Clem about everything that's happened over the previous 12 months.



'And what a shame it is to have a space that beautiful if you're never going to share it with anybody' (p. 321). Gardens are a motif throughout the novel. They come to represent many concepts:

- Belonging and community
- Identity
- Socioeconomic differences
- Growth

For each of these ideas, find two quotes from the book and explain what Henry Jones is attempting to convey through her use of the different kinds of gardens that exist in the novel.

Names both identify us and help to create our identity. The names that people have and use in *How to Grow a Family Tree* sometimes have great significance.

- Richard's name is actually Rahim, and over time his use of Richard has meant that he has taken on a new identity. When Stella tells Richard he should use his 'real' name, he responds with, 'There are parts of me that are Richard now, you know?' (p. 71) What do you think Richard means by this?
- Clem constantly calls Stella 'Price', which is her surname. And yet under different circumstances her last name could have been Russo. Why do you think the author has Stella's best friend refer to her in this way?
  - What does it say about where Stella belongs?
  - What does it tell us about the nature of their relationship?
- One thing that names can do is to define our relationships. The question of who is Stella's 'mum' becomes a difficult one. Ultimately Stella realises who that really is.
  - Do you agree with her decision?
  - What does this tell us about where Stella feels she belongs?
  - Why do you think Stella makes that decision?
  - How do you think Kelly might feel about who Stella's 'mum' is?

The book is set against the backdrop of an impending flood.

- How is the flood introduced into the narrative?
- How does the writer use the threat of the flood to explore the class differences between the characters?
- How will the flood impact some more than others? Is that fair?

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eliza Henry Jones is a freelance writer and novelist based on a little farm in the Yarra Valley. She is the author of the novels *In the Quiet* (2015) and *Ache* (2017) and the young adult novels *P is for Pearl* (2018) and *How to Grow a Family Tree* (2020). Her novels have been listed for multiple awards. She is currently a PhD candidate in creative writing at Deakin University.