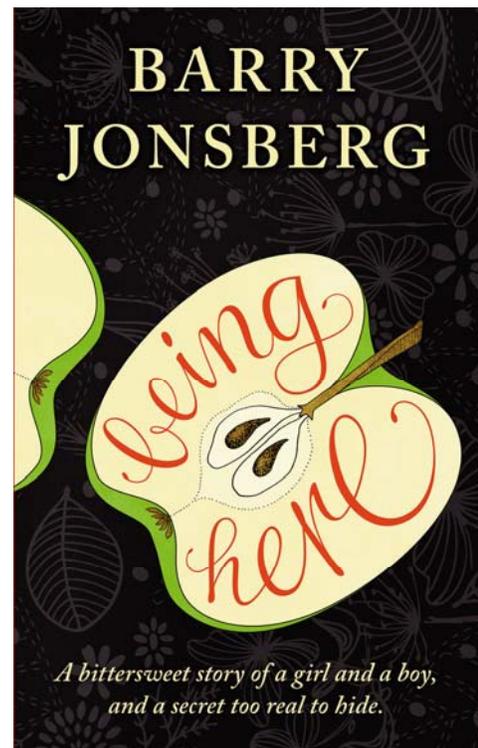


# Teachers Notes by Nita Jonsberg

## Being Here by Barry Jonsberg ISBN 978 1 74237 385 0 Recommended for ages 15+ yrs

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## INTRODUCTION

### PLOT SYNOPSIS

Carly is a high-school student who visits an old woman, Leah, in a nursing home. Carly hopes to preserve local history for a social education project and she seeks information about how ordinary lives were lived in the past.

Leah is in her nineties and has both 'good' and 'bad' days. On a good day, she begins to share her early life with Carly, who is uncomfortably aware that the tales Leah relates are a far cry from what she expects. Leah talks about her young self in third person and Carly learns of an isolated young girl who grew up alone on a farm with a deeply religious mother and a devoted border collie called Pagan. Leah's father killed himself when Leah was five as a result of recurring nightmares and flashbacks concerning his time served in Fromelles. In order to survive after his death, Leah's mother sold 'slices' of their farm, until only a small plot was left.

Leah also relates how her secret friend Adam first appeared at her father's funeral and how thereafter, he comforted her each time her mother perceived Leah had betrayed the fundamental religious codes by which they lived. Despite his early invisibility to others, Adam was there when Leah was locked for three days in the barn where her father killed himself, because she had opened a box in which her mother kept her writing secret. Later, Adam witnessed the grim shooting of Pagan, Leah's only other friend. As an old woman, Leah realises that the death of the dog only served to further narrow her world – that it was always her mother's intention to share Leah only with God. On her discovery of Leah's unsanctioned friendship with Adam, she ordered Leah to choose between them. But it is Adam who made the choice.

During Carly's interviews, Leah realizes that she is not the only one with a story. She suspects the shy girl with rainbow-coloured braces has a story of her own. With Leah's encouragement, Carly is able to see herself clearly and to make decisions about her life. Carly learns a great deal that she will not submit as part of her social education project.

### USE IN THE CURRICULUM

This book is suitable for students of English and SOSE in Years 9 to 12. It demands a high level of understanding and the ability to explore abstract concepts and complex relationships. It lends itself to study in the following areas:

#### English

- Study of structure and use of flashbacks
- Study of characterisation
- Study of writer's craft

Thematic studies include:

- Relationships between parents and children
- Relationships between young and old
- Identity and selfhood
- The power of faith
- The power of imagination
- The enduring nature of love
- Truth and fiction
- The ability of the past to affect the future

#### Studies of Society and Environment

- Study of Australian rural life in the early twentieth century.
- The preservation of local histories and individual history collection as project work.
- Study of Australia's role in WWI and local/national evidence of this.
- Study of religious beliefs and practices in early Australia.

## BEFORE READING

**NB: please check *all* websites and pages for suitability on the day of proposed use.**

Find out what happened at the battle of Fromelles. These websites may be helpful:

<http://www.awm.gov.au/wartime/36/article.asp> (A clear account of what happened in Fromelles, with some first-hand commentary)

<http://www.fromelles.net/> (A database of missing and identified soldiers and photographs)

Look at farming in the 1900s. The following website is useful:

<http://www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/farms/> (A detailed history from settlement onwards)

Leah's mother believes in the 'Old Testament'. If you are not religious, or your school does not teach religion, you can find out the difference between the Old and New Testaments here:

<http://www.insearchoftruth.org/articles/testaments.html> (summarised version)

## SETTING

Discussion of setting in *Being Here* must involve both the physical and the temporal. Most of Leah and Carly's present takes place inside the nursing home in modern times, whereas the story of Leah's young life takes place on a farm in the 1920s and 1930s. In all cases, setting acts as another character, enhancing the action and helping to convey tone.

Using **Worksheet 1**, answer the following:

1. The first setting the reader encounters is the nursing home where Leah lives. What impression is given of it on the first page? What specific words and phrases does the author use to communicate this?
2. Readers meet the young Leah in a barn. What specific objects are referred to in order to position the reader inside the barn with her? What has changed about the setting for Leah?
3. The main setting of Leah's young life is the farm where she lives. The descriptions of it are sparse but evocative. Look at Leah's recollections of her childhood home. What elements does she clearly remember? What do those recollections suggest about her early life?
4. Leah notes that she has 'never set foot outside the state'. What does this metaphorically suggest about her life? How important is it to consider her assertion in the context of the time, before making assumptions about her?
5. Consider how the two main settings (the farm and the nursing home) become familiar to the reader over the course of the book and how this helps the reader to focus on other elements of the story.

## CHARACTERISATION

Authors create a sense of character using these main techniques:

- Direct description
- The character's speech
- The character's actions and reactions
- How others interact with the character
- What others say about the character
- The narrator's attitude towards the character

1. Consider what you know of Leah's physical appearance, both in the present and the past. Can you find any direct description? Does it help the reader to visualise Leah or does the reader largely 'fill in the blanks' from images seen elsewhere?
2. How else does the author form an impression of Leah? What techniques are used? Carefully consider the first part of the novel and the reader's introduction to her.
3. In your own words, describe Carly. What are her defining characteristics? Collate the group's ideas on the whiteboard.
4. What helps the reader empathise with Carly early in the novel?
5. Using an electronic version of **Worksheet 2**, choose one character from the novel and produce a detailed character profile.

## STRUCTURE

The structure of a novel affects the engagement of the reader. It can deliberately create dramatic irony, for instance and can withhold vital information from the reader until the end of the novel which may provide a whole new perspective on what has been read. Often, flashbacks and back-story can help to explain the 'present' of a novel. At senior level, we move away from the primary-school idea that structure involves orientation, complication and resolution in that order and begin to see how authors play with these to craft sophisticated narratives.

Elements of structure can be viewed here:

<http://www.teachit.co.uk/attachments/5023.pdf> (a 'teachit' worksheet on types of narrative structure)

<http://johnwatsonsite.com/MyClassNotes/Topics/Narrative/NarrStruct.html> (includes a useful link to Freytag's triangle)

[http://www.narrati.com/Narratology/Narrative\\_Structure-Plot.htm](http://www.narrati.com/Narratology/Narrative_Structure-Plot.htm) (a comprehensive glossary of narrative structure techniques and terms)

<http://www.fortunecity.com/lavendar/ducksoup/555/storyshape.html> (a demonstration of how structure works in Snow White and other well-known texts)

*Being Here* begins with the epigraph:

The End  
*At death you break up: the bits that were you  
 Start speeding away from each other for ever  
 With no one to see*

The assertion that this is 'The End', along with an extract from Phillip Larkin's 'The Old Fools' accurately represents the stage of the novel, in that Leah is at the end of her life. However, the reader is momentarily de-centred, having been taught that stories begin at the beginning. This continues throughout; the last section of the novel is 'The Beginning', which marks the end of Leah's life and hints at a new existence. The image of raining apple pips, which links with the cover, is also mystifying to the new reader, who does not know why they are there. This first section is not marked as a chapter – the reader is plunged into Leah's musings without warning. There is a sense that the real narrative is the story of Leah's childhood and this is fittingly entitled 'Chapter 1'.

Thereafter, the novel alternates between past and present, first-person and third-person narrative points of view. Past and present are mixed in many chapters – this perhaps indicates how past and present merge in Leah's head. The present acts as a frame for the past and often surprises the reader, who is absorbed in Leah's narrative of the past. In this way, an element of metafiction emerges – the reader is constantly reminded of the process of reading. This element is further developed with Leah's thoughts about how she presents her story and her awareness that she has

not 'signposted' the start of her story well enough or indeed, added enough drama to keep Carly's interest (p39). Leah remains aware of this throughout, noting on p. 88 that 'love' and 'murder' await Carly and the reader. What is clear is that many elements, less dramatic and thrilling, have probably been omitted from the story, while dreams past and present are included. Leah highlights this explicitly on p. 153 when she says 'I am using the tools of narrative'.

In Chapter 2, a story-within-a-story is introduced when Leah's mother begins her own narrative – the reader does not discover that this narrative is disjointed and unintelligible until much later.

The middle of the story is highlighted with a dark page, suggestive of the oblivion referred to in Larkin's poem, and another extract from 'The Old Fools' features (p 81). Chapters 7, 8 and 9 disrupt the rhythm of the narrative; 7 features only Leah's past, 8 Carly's present and 9, Leah's present. When Carly is invited to tell her own story, the reader becomes aware of the changing balance in the relationship between the two. Interestingly, the reader might note that although Carly discloses some elements of story she also, like Leah, withholds some aspects. In her case, it is the story of her brother and the fact that, like Leah's Adam, he exists only in her mind.

The novel ends with Leah divulging details about her life not given to Carly and hinting at a rich and more fulfilled life in her middle age than Leah enjoyed in her girlhood. The reader is aware that many stories could be told and that they have heard but one of Leah's.

There are several narrative strands in the novel: Leah's story, Leah's mother and father's stories, Carly's story and Jane's story.

#### **NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE**

The narrative begins in first person from Leah's point of view. It is important to note the narrator's status as an aged woman who sometimes gets things wrong – Carly's name, for instance. All events, including interactions with Carly, are reported by Leah and therefore mediated by her.

When Leah tells Carly of her early life on the farm, she talks about herself in the third person. This separates the current narrator from the girl she once was.

- Discuss the function and effect of these changes of narrative perspective.

#### **THEMES**

- Relationships between parents and children
  - Relationships between young and old
  - Identity and selfhood
  - The power of faith
  - The power of imagination
  - The enduring nature of love
  - Truth and fiction
  - The ability of the past to affect the present and future
- In small groups, choose three main themes. Identify where and how each of the themes is articulated in the text. Present your findings to the class, using a PowerPoint presentation.

#### **THE SUPERNATURAL**

The existence of Adam can be said to be supernatural.

Adam is more than an imaginary friend, since his footprints are noticed by Leah's mother (p 189) and he is possibly seen by Pastor Bauer (p 191). Leah is discovered with him by her mother in the orchard (p 217).

There is a phenomenon cited by many which may explain Adam's existence. He is an example of a Tulpa. The word 'Tulpa' is Tibetan and means 'thought-form'. You can find out about Tulpas here:

<http://www.tulpa.com/explain/alexandra.html> (An account of how a tulpa was brought into being by Alexandra David-Neel, a French explorer)

<http://www.succubus.net/wiki/Tulpa> (comprehensive notes on the Tulpa phenomenon)

The link to this phenomenon is evident in Jonsberg's inclusion of Pablo Picasso's assertion: 'everything you can imagine is real' which appears in Adam's speech on p. 241.

Another supernatural element that strangely adds verisimilitude to Leah's story is Adam's ability to 'show her' the worlds she has imagined and yet his inability to 'see' the world of a Shakespearian play.

## LANGUAGE AND STYLE

The style of *Being Here* is literary. Jonsberg uses figurative language, particularly in Leah's thoughts and speech. There is a strong contrast between her language and that of the young protagonist Carly and this is highlighted when Leah corrects Carly's modern expressions and contractions. Leah's friend Lucy remarks several times on Leah's facility with language. What is telling is Leah's reluctant and ironic usage of modern terms such as Lucy's 'hardwired', which underscores her love of language and her ability to play with it.

Leah's mother employs a largely religious register, as she parrots the teachings of the bible. When she is angry, her speech patterns are reminiscent of fundamentalist preachers, with references to damnation, hell and suchlike. This language helps to fix her character and possibly creates empathy for her, as her religion is all she has left after the untimely death of Leah's father.

### SYMBOLISM

**'sɪmbəlɪzəm** / (say 'sɪmbuhlɪzʊhm)

*noun* **1.** the practice of representing things by symbols, or of investing things with a symbolic meaning or character.

**2.** a set or system of symbols.

**3.** symbolic meaning or character.

[Macquarie Dictionary]

*Being Here* has a number of symbolic elements within the narrative, most of them linked to the religious. Perhaps the main components could be identified thus:

1. Leah's farm as a 'transfigured' Garden of Eden
2. The continuing reference to apples in Leah's recollections of the past
3. Adam as a Christ figure

The Garden of Eden is central to traditional Christian ideology as the place of bliss where Adam [an important name within the novel] and Eve, the first humans, lived. The only rule imposed by God was that neither should eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge. The Bible does not specify the type of tree but it is traditionally represented as an apple tree. It is Eve who disobeyed God's rule and ate the fruit at the urging of the serpent who was Satan. When Adam followed Eve's lead, humanity was banished from the garden of paradise forever. More details of the story can be found at

<http://www.allaboutgod.com/truth/genesis-2.htm#4>

Within the novel, Leah refers constantly to the farm as her mother's version of Eden, a place where they can live in purity. There are also references to Leah's mother as a God-like figure who attempts to create her own Garden, apples as a symbol of purity and inevitable decay and Adam as a Christ figure who dies to 'save' Leah (it might be worth noting that he is also 'resurrected' at the end of the

novel to bring Leah to her own version of heaven). Students may wish to look at the following extracts from the novel and discuss their symbolic significance:

*Yes, the worm was in the apple even then. I knew it. But I had hidden the knowledge from myself.* [p34]

*A thin, pale scar snaked along his left side.* [p49] [a description of Adam]

*'God and your mother. Are you sure you aren't confusing the two, Leah?'* [p51]

*My dreams are thin. I see Adam step down from the cross above mother's bed. His forehead is dotted with crimson.* [p.63]

*Something snakes from my arm. There is a container above me. Snakes. The garden. Apples. Green and polished, reflecting the sky. I have to look closely to spot the worm.* [p64]

*'Mother wanted a world that was always shrinking. The farm. Us. Her image of paradise, I imagine, was a small plot of land, a transfigured Eden, containing only her, me and God.'* [p114]

*'Mother got her wish. It was really her wish all along. Just the three of us – God, her and me – in our dusty garden of Eden. All evil banished.'*

*'You even had the apple trees,' says Carly.*

*'Yes,' I say. 'And the serpent, of course.'*

*'The serpent?'*

*'Adam. Adam was the serpent lurking under the tree all along. I just hadn't recognised him. But Mamma did. And when she discovered him, then whatever state of bliss we'd enjoyed was gone forever. I was cast out. To this day I am cast out.'* [p197-8]

*'Because after his love, I knew there was no point in settling for anything less. I couldn't settle for anything less.'*

*'He'd do anything for you, huh?'*

*'He sacrificed himself for me,' I say.* [p212]

*'Do you not see?' she screamed. 'Do you not see what you have done? You have brought evil here, Leah. Into our world. You have been corrupted by the Devil and that ... that creature is his spawn. Here to tempt you into wickedness.'* [p221]

*One world has returned and another has gone forever. She knows it has gone forever. An apple lies on the ground. Something has burrowed beneath its flesh. Its perfection is blemished by a dark bruise that she knows will spread and spread until all that was green and good is consumed by darkness and time.* [p243]

#### **ALLUSIONS TO OTHER TEXTS**

Throughout *Being Here*, allusions are made to many texts. The most obvious is the extract from Larkin's *The Old Fools*, which is the source of the epigraphs and also gives the novel its title. In addition, Leah alludes to texts that she has read alone or shared with Adam. They are:

- *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens
- *Othello* by William Shakespeare
- *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare
- Various fairy tales
- *Robin Hood* Mythological character – one of the earliest authors of a narrative version was Howard Pyle in 1883
- The Bible

- Look at two of these texts (or summaries of them) and in pairs, make notes about the relevance or function within *Being Here* of the allusions to these texts.

## MAJOR ASSIGNMENTS

(Choose and complete **one** question.)

### CREATIVE

1. Re-write Leah's mother's outburst at the church from Pastor Bauer's perspective (pp190-196).
2. Produce an extract of the book you think Leah's mother might have written.
3. Choose a chapter and re-write it, including some of the details you think Leah may have left out in an attempt to keep Carly engaged.
4. Write a blog from Carly's point of view which is written after her first three interviews with Leah. Try to imagine how Carly might talk about Leah to her friends online.
5. From Leah's perspective, write about what happened in the middle part of her life.

### ANALYTICAL (ESSAY FORMAT)

1. 'Everything you can imagine is real.' (Pablo Picasso). Discuss with reference to Leah's story about her young self.
2. How important is Carly to the development of the story?
3. 'There would be no story without Adam.' To what extent can this be said to be true?
4. Discuss the importance of the symbolism of apples in *Being Here*.
5. How far can it be said that *Being Here* is a book that celebrates the power of stories and story-telling?
6. To what extent do Leah and Carly enrich each other's lives?
7. Why has Jonsberg used Larkin's poem 'The Old Fools' to frame his narrative?

**Worksheet 1**

**SETTINGS**

**The Nursing Home**

- 1 *What impression is given of the nursing home on the first page? What specific words and phrases does the author use to communicate this?*

**The Barn**

- 2 *What specific objects are referred to in order to position the reader inside the barn with Leah? What has changed about the setting for her?*

**The Farm**

- 3 *What memories does Leah have of the farm? What elements does she remember and what does this tell the reader about her early life?*

*Being Here* by Barry Jonsberg  
**Worksheet 2 — Character Profile**

<b>Name of character:</b>	
<b>TRAIT</b>	<b>EVIDENCE (including page numbers)</b>
Age	
Appearance	
Speech (vocabulary level, favourite sayings, pronunciation etc.)	
Beliefs and/or values	
Socio-economic level	
Mannerisms	
Intelligence	
Strengths	
Weaknesses	

\*Use the electronic version of this worksheet so that cells can expand according to the information gathered.

## **ABOUT THE WRITERS**

### **BARRY JONSBURG**

Barry Jonsberg's young adult novels, *The Whole Business with Kiffo and the Pitbull* and *It's Not All About YOU, Calma!* were short-listed for the Children's Book Council Book of the Year, Older Readers, award. *It's Not All About YOU, Calma!* also won the Adelaide Festival Award for Children's Literature. *Dreamrider* was short-listed in the NSW Premier's Awards for the Ethel Turner prize and *Cassie* (Girlfriend Fiction) was short-listed for the Children's Peace Literature Award.

Barry lives in Darwin with his wife, children and two dogs. His books have been published in the US, the UK, France, Poland, Germany and China.

Visit [www.barryjonsberg.com](http://www.barryjonsberg.com)

### **NITA JONSBURG**

Anita Jonsberg lives in Darwin and teaches English at Years 10, 11 and 12.