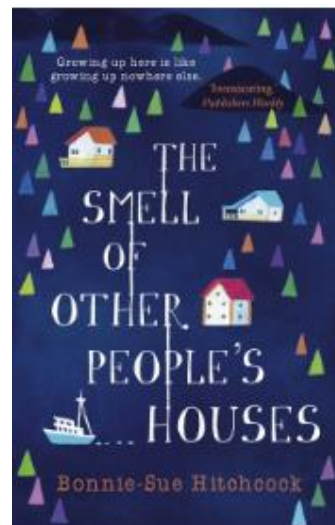


2017 Carnegie Medal shortlist Talking Points

Title: **The Smell of Other People's Houses**

Author: **Bonnie-Sue Hitchcock**

Publisher: **Faber**



ALASKA

Bonnie-Sue Hitchcock has described Alaska as “such a funny, interesting place”. If it’s not a place you knew, how well do you feel she evokes its distinctiveness in this book?

Did you have particular expectations of Alaska, particular things you knew about it before you started reading? And were your prejudices confirmed by this book or did your understanding change?

One of the ways the author uses the place is to contrast what might seem like an epic, big, dramatic backdrop with intimate personal stories – can you think of examples of how this might work?

Bonnie-Sue Hitchcock used to work as a journalist – what do you think talking about this place in a *fiction* allowed her to do with it that’s different?

THE CHARACTERS

What do the four principle characters have in common?

They’re different, too, of course – how much difference is there between their voices?

Ruth’s grandmother is a strong presence throughout – but does your view of her change over the course of the book?

Most of the secondary character in the book are adults – do you think our protagonists are well supported by the adult world around them? Is the adult world generally sympathetic?

FAMILIES

Each of our protagonists has a quite different experience of what it means to be part of a family – and it doesn’t always mean being raised by two parents, and it doesn’t even necessarily mean being close to any blood relatives at all. Why do you think showing these different kinds of family is important in the book?



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Do the characters' own feelings about what "family" means change over the course of their stories?

CONNECTIONS

The interconnectedness of the characters' respective stories isn't all clear from the outset – did you like the way you had to piece it together as you went?

Does the book in general have something to say about our own experiences of the world, our own interconnectedness with others as we live our own individual stories?

Seemingly insignificant objects are sometimes the connection between different characters' strands of the story – can you think of any examples?

There's quite a neat resolution of the stories at the end – did it work for you?

THE SMELL OF OTHER PEOPLE'S HOUSES

The Smell of Other People's Houses – a good title? (What makes a good title, do you think?)

Smell is key to the story – can you think of a few instances where there are significant evocations of smell that have some effect on the characters?

All four main characters have different problems with home – but what does "home" mean to each of them?

COMING OF AGE

This is a "coming of age" story – so how have each of the four protagonists changed by the end?

How much of these changes have been to do with their own choices, their own ability to make decisions for themselves in their lives?

Why do you think the author structured the novel into sections that follow the seasons of the year? Does it work well?

Some people have commented that Alaska itself (almost a character in its own right) is coming of age in this book – how might this be so?

AND FINALLY...

Does this Carnegie-shortlisted book deserve to win? Why, or why not?



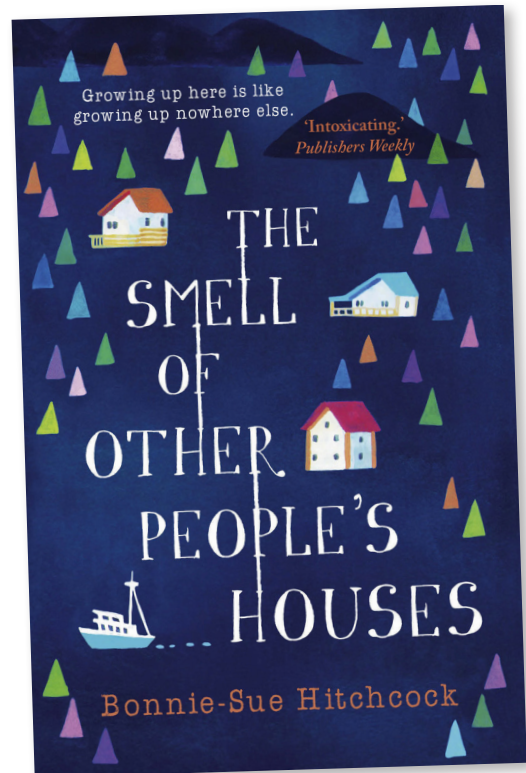
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THE SMELL OF OTHER PEOPLE'S HOUSES

by Bonnie-Sue Hitchcock
Faber and Faber

Shortlisted for the 2017 Carnegie Medal
and the Amnesty CILIP Honour

'Not a word is wasted. The four protagonists are subtly and so convincingly developed it's difficult to imagine they are not real people... There is a total balance between a sense of urgency and great reflection' – Judging panel



These rights belong to everybody; whether we are rich or poor, whatever country we live in, whatever sex or whatever colour we are, whatever language we speak, whatever we think or whatever we believe.

Article 2, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Ruth, Dora, Alyce and Hank are growing up in 1970 Alaska, facing their own difficulties and challenges. The author, born and raised in Alaska, weaves their stories together, dealing with themes of abuse, poverty, abandonment, racism and more. It highlights the importance of friendship, community and love.

**‘We don't have to be blood to be family.’
Ruth**

HUMAN RIGHTS THEMES IN THIS STORY

Rights of indigenous people; racism; poverty; right to a family; sexual and reproductive rights; children's rights; right to be safe; right to be protected; justice; duty to others; domestic violence; sexual abuse; young carers.

YOU CAN TALK ABOUT...

The right to a family and to be safe

- Both Hank and Dora escape their family homes. Why and at what price?
- Why does Hank feel he has to keep his brothers safe?
- What do you think about the behaviour of Dora's mum?
- When Dora is at Dumpling's, she says: 'Everything has a purpose here, even me.' What do you think she is thinking?

Duty to others

- What does the red ribbon mean?
- Dumpling says: 'Where we come from, babies are a gift to the whole village. Everyone loves them.' How does this make you feel?

The right to be heard

- What do you think about Gran's decision to send Ruth to the Abbey?
- What would you have done if you were Gran?
- Why is it important to Alyce that she chooses the adoptive parents?
- How do you feel when Dora stands up to her father?

Discrimination

- What divides people in the book? What connects them?
- Talk about the representation of poverty and race.
- What do you think of Ray's behaviour?
- What would you say to Ray to change his mind?

The ending

- At the end, who saves whom?
- What did you learn about indigenous peoples of Alaska?
- What can we learn from how the adults behave in the book?

ACTIVITY

Draw a tree and put your name on the trunk. On each branch write the name of someone who is close to you (you could include who you live with, your closest friends, members of your family). On each branch draw leaves with the names of people they are closest to. Look at this family tree – it shows how we are connected to people including those we are not related to.

RESEARCH

Research the history of Alaska including its status as a US state and the Alaska Native tribes.

Write for 20 minutes about the smell of other people's houses. (This is how the initial idea of the book was conceived).

We are all born free and equal

The atrocities of World War II sparked a determination to protect the rights of all human beings, everywhere. On 10 December 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The preamble says it must be shared, learned by children and be a part of all our lives.

For a simplified version of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights go to www.amnesty.org.uk/udhr

For more free educational resources from Amnesty International go to www.amnesty.org.uk/education



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