

TALKING POINTS

CILIP Carnegie Medal Shortlist 2013



The CILIP Carnegie
& Kate Greenaway
Children's Book
Awards

The Weight of Water by Sarah Crossan

Structure of the book

This is an unusual book, in that it is written entirely in verse, with poems instead of chapters.

- How do you feel about the structure of the book before you started? Were you put off or encouraged to read it?
- When you started the book, did you find it easier or more difficult to read than books with chapters?
- Talk about how each poem paints a small picture of a feeling or a moment, and how these all link up to make one bigger picture.

Themes of the book

Poverty

- Read 'Deceiver'. Why do you think Kasienska makes the decision not to spend her money?
- Read 'Thursday'. Why does Kasienska not look normal?

Racism

- In 'First Day' a teacher calls Kasienska 'Cassie' and in 'Dalilah' a teacher calls her 'Lily'. Do you think that this is racist?
- Read 'Pale'. In this poem, Kasienska feels that she is the only one unwelcome because she is 'too white'. Do you think that she is right? What is your experience of racial prejudice?
- In the poem 'Noise', what effect does the word 'infested' have on the feeling that you get about the residents of the building?
- What does the 'Radio News Flash' poem tell us about racism against Polish people? Why does Kanoro give Mama a meaningful look?

Immigration

- Re-read the first poem in the book, 'Leaving Gdańsk Główny'. What can we tell about Mama and Kasienska just from this poem?
- Kasienska is put into a class with younger children. Read 'Year Seven'. How do you think she feels about being in this class? Do you think the school made the right decision?
- In 'Mistaken', how does Kasienska's experience of being an immigrant differ to how she imagined it?
- Kasienska says that being an English girl in Gdańsk is a different thing to being a Polish girl in Coventry. Why do you think this is? Do you agree with her?
- What is the poem 'July 7' about? What is the connection to Dalilah here?



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School

- In 'First Day', what are your impressions of Mrs Warran? What kind of feeling do you get about how the school receives immigrants?
- Does the poem 'Group Work' reflect your experience of school?
- In 'Change', Kasienska describes the teachers as 'bored' and in 'Teachers' she hints that they may be too busy and disinterested to stop the bullies. Do you think this is a fair description of the teachers in the book? How about the teachers you know in real life?
- Why does Kasienska feel 'Prize Night Envy'?

Bullying

- Do you think that what Clair does to Kasienska counts as bullying?
- In the poem 'The Hunt', how is Kasienska feeling?
- What is the name for the type of bullying that Clair does when she circulates a text message rumour?
- In the poem 'Karma', what are Kasienska's reflections about the situation she is in, and the way she has acted in the past?
- In 'The Pity Club', Kasienska states that she doesn't know what is worse, pity or persecution. Why do you think she feels that they are both negative things? Do you agree? Why do you think that the pupils in the 'pity club' do not make friends with her?
- When Kasienska tries to tell her mother about the bullying, her mother says 'Girls are like this'. Do you agree?
- What does Kasienska's refusal to do the dares in the poem 'Dare Devil' say about her?
- The poems 'Assembly' and 'No Offence, But...' deal with the topic of joking. Where do you think the line is between joking and bullying?
- In 'Ms Morrow', why does Kasienska not tell her teacher what has been going on?
- How does Kasienska finally overcome the bullying?

Characters of the book

Tata

- What does the poem, 'Before England' tell us about why Kasienska's father left?
- When Kasienska and her mother first come to England, how does Kasienska feel about the idea of finding him? (Read 'Road Atlas'.)
- Read 'I Wish Tata Were Dead'. Why does Kasienska wish her father was dead?
- In 'Late Nights' there is a Polish saying, 'Running away makes you guilty'. Do you think this applies to Tata?
- What does the poem 'Ending the Odyssey', about Kasienska going to meet her father tell us about how she is feeling?
- How does Kasienska feel about Tata after she has found him? Read 'Blame' and 'The Gospel According to Tata'.
- Why does finding out about William's mother change the way that Kasienska feels about her father?



- What impression do we get about Mama at the start of the book?
- What impression are we given about Mama from her relentless search for Tata?
- How does Kasienska's relationship with Mama change during the book? (Read 'Questions' and 'Misread'. Do you think this is typical of a mother/daughter relationship, or specific to their circumstances?)
- Why is Mama angry with Kasienska when she finds out about Tata? Read 'Motherless'.
- What are the clues throughout the book that Mama is developing a relationship with Kanoro? How does his return change Mama?

Kanoro

- Read 'Kanoro', where the character is introduced. What kind of person is he?
- Why does Kanoro say 'There is honour in all things' in the poem 'Kanoro'?
- In 'Novice', Kanoro says 'I'm a lucky man'. What do you think he is referring to?
- When Kanoro tells Kasienska, 'Happiness should be your revenge' in the poem 'Talking', what does he mean? Do you agree with him?

William

- What is it about William that Kasienska likes? Do you like William?
- What do you think about the contrast between the title of 'Not Alone' and the very ordinary scene described? What does it tell us about Kasienska and William?
- Read the poem 'Kenilworth Castle'. Why do you think Kasienska and William prefer crumbling Kenilworth castle to 'shiny' Warwick castle?
- What is significant about William telling Kasienska to stand up for herself in the poem 'Confidence'?

Clair

- What impression do we get of Clair from the first poem where she is mentioned – 'Happy Slapping'?
- How does Kasienska react and do you think this differs from how she feels? How can we tell this?
- Why do you think that Clair's attitude towards Kasienska changes?
- Why does Clair react differently than usual to Kasienska in 'Maybe', when she is on her own?

Melanie

- What impression do we get of Melanie in the book, and why? Read 'I Didn't Mean to Go Back' and 'Melanie'.
- In 'Cold Hot Chocolate' when Kasienska sees her father again, Melanie looks at him and says 'I know'. What does Melanie know?

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Dalilah
 How does meeting Dalilah change Kasienska?
 How does the 'Sleepover' help Kasienska?

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- What is the significance of the last poem in the book?

The symbolism of water

- Water appears in various forms in the book. Find examples of water and talk about how they contribute to the feel of the book and to the plot. (Think about rain, the dripping tap, snowing and, of course, swimming.)
- What is it about swimming that attracts Kasienska? What is the link between swimming and finding her father?
- What does the dream 'Life Saver' symbolise?
- What is the importance of Kasienska saving Briony's life? Why does she pause for a moment first?
- Think about the title of the book and the poem 'Home' that the quote appears in. What is the significance of the weight of water to Kasienska?
- What is the significance of the new 'Butterfly' swimming stroke in the Epilogue?

Further reading

- *Odd Girl Out* by Rachel Simmons
- *Dani's Diary* by Narinder Dhani
- *The Unforgotten Coat* by Frank Cottrell Boyce

