



## OMNIBUS BOOKS

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# Teachers' Notes Crossing

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Teachers' Notes by Rae Carlyle

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## Introduction

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Cara lives with her parents and her younger sister in a ground-floor apartment. In many ways her life is typical of that of any eleven-year-old growing up in her country. She plays on the playground after school, she queues with her sister at the co-op when food deliveries arrive, hoping that this time it will be something tasty and good, and she works hard to be a good citizen and stay alert to anyone who might be having subversive thoughts.

But in other ways Cara is not quite typical, and neither is her family. Both her parents work for the Government, and have shiny new laptops. They have also managed to acquire an elderly desktop computer for Cara's nine-year-old sister Lilith to use, which is almost unheard of. Lilith is a genius, has already attended a special government run camp for gifted children, and hopes to one day be accepted into the Government boarding school.

When Cara's parents have to leave for a month on Government business, they leave a fridge full of eggs, and Cara in charge of the household. It is challenging and lonely for Cara; they have never left the children alone for this long before, and she is also struggling to cope with her emotions and beliefs surrounding an incident with a neighbour and friend that happened last year.

In short, Cara is suffering a crisis of faith – faith in the system and the Government that she has been taught her whole life is the best and only proper system, and which she is expected to serve with full devotion. But the grey view from her window of the Wall which separates her homeland from the country of which it was once a part is echoed by the greyness in her thoughts. The only source of light and warmth she can see is the family upstairs, with whom she used to be friends – but ever since her report of Ava's words led to the mother of the family, Gretchen, being taken to a re-education camp, Cara has been unable to look at or talk to them, and cannot imagine how they could ever forgive her.

Forgiveness, however, comes whether it is asked for or not, and Marco and his son Leon show Cara that the human heart can be as giving and filled with light as their top floor apartment with its window garden and view over the Wall. They leave a pot of savoury stew on her doorstep, and gradually she reacquaints herself with the family who had made such an impact on her the year before. The summer she spent with Leon and his older sister Ava, catching rabbits down by the canal with Ava's homemade crossbow, was the happiest in her life. Now, she and Leon return to the canal, searching for the arrow she lost when Ava was teaching her to shoot. Until she met Ava and Leon, Cara had always been too scared to venture down to the canal, a weed choked wilderness bordering sluggish and forbidding water. Water which Cara now knows she was right to fear, because not long after Ava and Leon's mother was taken away, Ava was reported to have fallen in the canal and drowned. Cara does not know how Leon can stand it, for she feels Ava's loss deeply, and knows that Leon's grief can only be harder to bear.

Slowly, as the story progresses, the reader is introduced both to Cara and Leon as they are now, and to the events of last summer when Cara grew and learned so much. As the tale unfolds, Cara's anguish and confusion are an echo, and the product, of her increasing understanding of the system in which they all must live, and the importance and influence of the Wall on them all. For as she comes to see that the Wall is not just a physical barrier, so too does she come to see that she, and she alone, is the only person who can decide how much of a mental barrier she allows it to be.

## About the Author

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Catherine Norton's short fiction for adults has appeared in many literary journals, and she also contributes to the *Adelaide Review*. In 2011–12 she was Charles Pick Fellow at the University of East Anglia's creative writing school, and she is currently completing a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide. She has taught short story writing to university students and worked as a publishing assistant and a manuscript assessor. *Crossing* is her first novel.

In 2014 she was the recipient of the Max Fatchen Scholarship in the Adelaide Festival Awards, which will support her writing of her next novel, working title 'Falling'.

## Study Notes for Teachers

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### Before Reading the Text

*Crossing* is a novel of a dystopian society, set in an unspecified country at an unspecified time. While it might technically be considered as speculative fiction, in many ways it is reminiscent of 'realistic' fiction. The cover art is powerful, and every element has a direct symbolic relationship with key features within the story. A class discussion of what defines a novel as speculative fiction, and of the symbolic relevance of the cover art, would be a valuable exercise in introducing this gripping and challenging story.

Points for Discussion:

- What makes a novel speculative fiction rather than 'realistic' fiction?
- Does there need to be magic?
- Does it need to be set in the future?
- How can the reader decide?
- Are there different types or subsets of speculative fiction? What are they?
- What does the cover depict? (Identify the various elements – barbed wire, foliage, blurred figure in the background.)

- Looking at the cover, what sort of story do you think the novel might be?
- What is it about the artwork that makes you think this?
- How does looking at the cover make you feel – what emotions does it evoke in the viewer?
- From the title and the cover art, predict what you think the story might be about.

## Reading the Text

*Crossing* is a novel that is ideally suited to study as a whole-class exercise. Depending on the age and competence of the students, it can be either read aloud to a class, or assigned as independent reading with frequent interludes involving whole-class discussions. The language used is clear and uncomplicated, and the action is gripping, meaning most students will be readily engaged with the story when reading independently. The subtleties of theme and the intricate interleaving of past and present viewpoints, as well as the protagonist's introspective tendencies, means that teacher-led group discussions at regular points throughout the course of reading the text should enhance the students' understanding of both the action in the novel and of the literary devices used.

## Themes, Symbolism and Literary Devices

The most easily identifiable literary theme in *Crossing* is that of enclosure and confinement as symbolised by the Wall. From the first chapter, it is clear that the Wall has a profound psychological impact on the characters, and Cara's gradual realisation of other, metaphorical walls that influence her life and actions is a key element of the novel. Other themes and devices present that are worth discussion are those of personal growth and forgiveness, and how the physical environment can be a reflection of a mental landscape.

Topics for discussion:

- Every window in Cara's home looks directly at the Wall.
  - o How does she describe the view from her windows?
  - o What do you think the psychological impact of such a view might be?
  - o How does the author let us know how this view affects Cara?
  - o The view from Leon's apartment is completely different. Discuss the symbolism of the two different views, and how it relates to the viewpoints held by the two different families.
- When Cara's parents are away, she sleeps on their bed at an angle, because then she can sometimes see a tiny patch of blue sky.
  - o Why is this view of sky important to Cara?
  - o What is the symbolic importance of such a view – what might that patch of sky represent?
- When Cara spends time with Ava, she dares to go places and do things that she hasn't dared to before.

- How does Ava describe the canal? How does this compare to Cara's original description of it?
- When Ava says to Cara *don't ever let them wall up your mind*, what does she mean?
- Ava teaches Cara how to shoot a crossbow. She also teaches her new ways of looking at the world they live in. What are some of the realisations that Cara reaches because of the time she spends with Ava and Leon?
- Can you think of any metaphorical walls in your life?
- What is meant by the phrase (often used in sports) of 'he/she hit the wall'?
- Why does the sight of Ava in the Youth League uniform startle Cara so much?
  - Why do you think Ava reacts so badly to Cara's obvious shock?
  - What might Ava be feeling about having to join the Youth League?
- Cara tries (and fails) to make a birthday cake for Lilith. Before she visited on Ava's birthday, Cara had never seen a birthday celebration at all. The birthday celebration symbolises the difference between the two families, and their outlook on life, and the other side of it is seen in Lilith's reaction to Cara's attempts to bake a cake for her.
  - What do you think the cake symbolises to Cara?
  - Why does she try to bake one?
  - What is the result of her attempt and how does she describe the taste?
- The divide between the two families and their differing ways of life is an echo of the divide within the city as exemplified by the wall.
  - How does Cara describe the view over the wall?
  - What does the city look like on the other side?
  - When Cara looks back at her side, how does she describe the building she has grown up in?
  - What point do you think the author is making by having Cara see things this way? Can you think of a cliché/phrase/saying that would embody Cara's final realisation?
  - How does Lilith see the wall?
- In Cara's country there are constant shortages and rationing of food and manufactured goods.
  - Why do you think there are constant shortages?
  - What other problems might the country have, that aren't mentioned in the book?
  - What do the houses where the leaders live look like?
  - When Ava tells a joke, her mother is arrested. When Lilith hacks into National Security files, she is rewarded and praised for her ability. Why might the Government of Cara's country treat them so differently?
  - What other metaphorical walls exist in their lives?

## Historic Parallels

In the Author's Note, Norton states that *the Wall in this story closely resembles the one that divided the German capital into two halves, East and West, from 1961 to 1989. The Berlin*

*Wall began as a simple barbed-wire fence, but over the decades it grew into a complex defence system and a monument to the paranoia of the East German government, which would not allow its citizens to leave the country.* The parallels between the Berlin Wall and the Wall in *Crossing* are readily apparent to anyone who remembers Germany before the wall came down, but for children today, it is an historic artefact. The degree of knowledge and understanding of the Berlin Wall and its significance that individual students have will vary greatly. Some study of the Berlin Wall and its past and current impact on the German population would greatly enhance students' interpretation of the events and viewpoints presented within the novel. Conversely, studying *Crossing* as an adjunct to a modern history unit dealing with post WWII Europe would facilitate students' comprehension of the long and short term ramifications of the Berlin Wall, and the probable motivations and responses of those involved in its construction.

Topics for discussion:

- When was the Berlin Wall built, by whom, and why?
- What would it have been like for people in Berlin when the wall was first built? What about when it came down?
- Do you think the fact that it once existed still affects people in Berlin and Germany today? What might be some of the ways it does this?
- In *Crossing* the Youth League is a group that all children have to join when they turn fifteen. Do you know of any parallel organisations in world history? What do you think the purpose of these organisations and making them compulsory is/was?

## Plot Construction, Viewpoint and Perspective

*Crossing* is written in the first person, from the perspective of Cara, and the action takes place over the course of a year. The plot is not, however, constructed in a chronologically linear fashion. Norton makes good use of reminiscence and flashbacks, interleaving Cara's relation of previous events into the present-tense storyline. The structure is complex, because there are not only the two event-sequences that are unfolding simultaneously (last summer with Ava and Leon, and Cara's present), but Norton also uses Cara's recollections and descriptions of her life to set the scene and flesh out the details of the world and society that is constrained by the Wall. The viewpoint and perspective are consistently those of Cara throughout, and other characters' interpretations and opinions of events are presented either through dialogue and Cara's descriptions of their reactions, or when Cara herself has a personal insight into their motives through the course of the action.

Topics for discussion:

- Why might an author choose to use first person and present tense to tell a story?
- How does the past story affect your understanding and interpretation of the present story?
- Why might the author have chosen this structure?

- Draw a timeline of the main events in the story, in chronological order. Draw arrows to show where the past events appear in the book, in relationship to the present events (show order of appearance.)
- How does the order in which you, the reader, find out what has happened, affect your response to the story?
- How is your knowledge of Cara and of the significance of events affected?
- Think about how the order of revealing facts about Cara and her life influences the tension in the novel. How does heightening the tension change a story?
- Throughout the novel, Cara describes occurrences that seem to be of relatively minor significance, but later turn out to be crucial to how events unfold. Leon's fear of the slide and Cara's ability to shoot an arrow over the canal are both important in the final scene. What other apparently minor events are there that turn out to be important?

## Creative Activities

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- Write a brief paragraph describing the inside of Cara's and Leon's apartments, comparing and contrasting them. Focus on using emotive adjectives to convey the different feelings symbolised by the two homes.
- Cara says on page 44 *a story could be a barrier too, invisible only just as real*. Throughout human history stories have been used as a metaphorical wall to try to keep people from going places and doing things. As a class, brainstorm as many instances of this as you can (fairy tales are a good example). Write a short story designed to keep small children away from a dangerous feature near where you live (river/lake/busy road).
- When the Berlin Wall was built, often families and friends were separated by it. Write a short story from the perspective of a child in Berlin at the time the Wall was built, describing what it felt like for them seeing it go up, and realising that they wouldn't be able to see someone important to them again.
- The Wall divides a single city into two. Make a list of as many words as you can that are relevant descriptors of the physical and mental impact on the population (e.g. divide, split, distance, separation).
- Write a short story where a real barrier (wall, gate, fence, river) is reflected by metaphorical barriers within the protagonist's thinking.
- Draw a picture of the Wall based on the description in the book. Compare your picture to photos of the Berlin Wall. How similar are they?
- On a map of your home (or closest) city or town, draw a line directly through the middle. Make a list of all the things on your side of the line that are important, (libraries, schools, shops, sporting arenas, farms, parks, hospitals, dentists, rivers etc.) and a second list of things on the other side. Think about how life would have to change if suddenly people on one side couldn't get to the other side! Write two short paragraphs from the perspective of two people on opposite sides of your imaginary wall talking about all the things they can't do any more.

- Write a poem about a wall.
- Make a collage of the canal. Use as many scraps of found and recycled paper, plastic, and otherwise discarded stuff as possible.
- Research recipes that use eggs as their main ingredient. Can you find any that Cara didn't? Write the menu you would cook if you had to serve eggs at every meal. What other ingredients would you need? Try to write a menu that allows only four other ingredients.
- Research real-life stories of people escaping over the Berlin Wall. Briefly retell their story, and include the retelling on a poster that illustrates the escape. Present your poster to the class.
- Visit a nearby waterway, natural area or park, or go for a walk around the school's neighbourhood. Take notes on any items that you see people have discarded. When you return to class, draw a picture of what Cara, Ava and Leon's museum might look like had they fished your list of objects out of the canal.