

TEACHERS' NOTES

by

David Williams & Leonie Jordan

From Kinglake to Kabul

Edited by

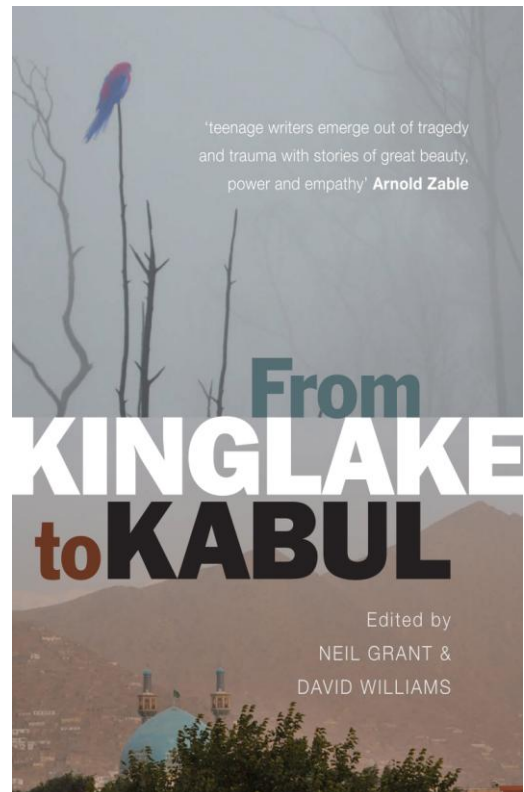
Neil Grant & David Williams

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Recommended for ages 13+ yrs

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INTRODUCTION

In an extraordinary journey across cultural boundaries, these teenage writers emerge out of tragedy and trauma with stories of great beauty, power and empathy. Their work provides a model for writing projects that reach out for mutual understanding in a divided world.

-Arnold Zable

SYNOPSIS

Kinglake had one day of disaster with far-reaching effects; Kabul has endured thirty years of war. *From Kinglake to Kabul* is a collaborative anthology created by students from two schools connected by tragedy.

In this collection of young people's writing, students from two vastly different countries share their stories of resilience, courage and hope. In doing so they illustrate the remarkable healing quality of words and illuminate what connects us as humans. This is not a book of remembrance or a book that desires to shock; it is a book about what is best about human nature.

The students' writing is contained within an account of Neil Grant's journey to Afghanistan, providing vital contextual information about the history and culture of the country. Each piece is also prefaced by a paragraph explaining the circumstances in which it was written and drawing out resonances with other stories.

STYLE

From Kinglake to Kabul is characterized by its rich, collage-like structure. As well as featuring young people's writing, it also includes short pieces by teachers, aid workers and relatives, providing a multiplicity of perspectives on the Victorian bushfires and life in Afghanistan. A variety of text-types are evident in the book: as well as recounts of personal experiences, the book includes poems, fictional narratives, a speech and letters. The text is illustrated with photographs overlaid with haikus—this fusion of visual and literary elements providing a broader, more nuanced exploration of key themes.

Most of the pieces in the books are personal and deeply subjective in tone. They tend to emphasise feelings, with many serving a cathartic purpose: 'We must not throw salt on them [our wounds]. Instead we must care enough to help them heal.' They also tend to be marked by an emotional honesty and a willingness to reflect and draw meaning from experience: 'I need to make this country a better and happier place to live. I just need to work out how.'

Despite these similarities, however, each piece has its own distinctive style, reflecting the unique perspective of the author: for instance, in 'Magical Kabul' Sabrina Omar uses lush,

metaphorical language to vividly evoke the beauty of Kabul viewed from afar: 'a rainbow that had been snipped into billions of pieces and scattered all over.' In contrast, in 'At Night I Dream' Francis Jager relies on plain, unadorned language and an accumulation of short, stark sentences to convey the reality of a young beggar who yearns to become a doctor.

The book is best read from start to finish. An editorial narrative connects the stories and provides important context. However, these teachers notes also include five collections of the stories grouped by theme or topic.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

'Afghanistan is a country at war ... We in Australia have seen the product of this war. People have arrived as asylum seekers and stayed as refugees. They have given up their country because their hope had worn so thin. But I knew there was more to the story of Afghanistan than what we saw on the evening news. There had to be. I arrived in Kabul at the end of July 2009, three and a half weeks out from the controversial elections. I arrived to bombed-out streets and erratic electricity. I sat in a taxi from the airport and felt landmines erupt inside me.

'...But there is something about the human spirit that allows it to continue even after the most devastating tragedy. In Kinglake and in Kabul, I saw people move beyond their circumstances. I bought books and gum from kids in Chicken Street trying to fund their English tuition. I watched friends from Kinglake tell their stories of survival to the nation and the world. And I saw the power in all these stories because they show us something that remains after everything has been taken. Hope.' – Neil Grant

'Black Saturday came and destroyed so much, including my home and the lives of so many of our townsfolk ... This book reveals the best in all of us and especially our young people. Our students here and in Afghanistan remind us that even after such loss, our capacity for compassion and hope remains.' – David Williams.

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

- Students write their own impression of what Kabul, Afghanistan, is like. This activity will be most useful later when comparing their own preconceptions to how others describe living in or visiting Kabul.
- Discuss what the class knows about Afghanistan. What would they expect the typical day of an Afghan teenager to be like? What challenges might they face?
- In groups, have students complete a webquest on Afghanistan, focusing on such topics as geographical features, social organization, religion, and history.

- Look at the cover of the book. What ideas does it convey? What visual techniques have been used to promote these ideas? Consider such aspects as framing, symbolism, proxemics/positioning, lines/vectors, colour, font/typography.
- Students can conduct research on Black Saturday and Afghanistan to gain some general background knowledge.

N.B.: The book's concept is best described in the preface ix and on pp.28-29.

THEMES

Key themes in the book include: war and conflict, natural disasters, survival/resilience/endurance, hope, community and the regenerative power of writing.

THEMATIC STORY GROUPS

RECOUNTS OF BLACK SATURDAY

From Kinglake to Kabul contains a number of harrowing accounts of the writers' experience during the firestorm on Black Saturday:

- 'When it rained flame' by Tess Pollock p.36
- 'An afternoon walk' by Maddie Arrowsmith p.64
- 'The Black Saturday' by Thuy and My Nguyen p.78
- 'We leave everything and run' by Tamika Dean p.114
- 'We just hugged' by Stephanie Wilkinson p.158
- 'Short messaging service' by Emily Dannel p.199.

STRUGGLE DURING THE WARS IN AFGHANISTAN

In these stories, students from the International School of Kabul detail the hardships of life in war-torn Afghanistan.

- 'Victims of war' by Hameed Abawi p.5
- 'A lap full of tears' by Neelo Hashim p.42
- 'Journey to freedom' by Lina Muradi p.68
- 'A game of Risk' by Stephanie Antonucci p.100
- 'Lockdown' by Laila Gharzai p.122
- 'Fugitives to Pakistan' by Nargis p.162

STORIES OF HOPE FOR KABUL AND AFGHANISTAN

Despite the years of destruction and near loss of any hope for a brighter, better future, these stories display resilience, optimism and a deep love of country and desire to rebuild it. They

also work to highlight the good things about Afghanistan—an impression that may contrast with our own preconceptions.

'The journey begins' by Neil Grant p.1

'Miracle-Gro' by Ayaz Rahyab p.153

'Magical Kabul' by Sabrina Omar p.135

'Skate not war' by Maddy Wahlberg p.177

'Even a glimmer is enough' (poem) p.131

'Repairing dreams' by Farishta Rahami p.186

Further discussion:

In 'Magical Kabul', Sabrina Omar comes to find beauty in her new country. Sabrina spent her childhood in America. She represents many of the brilliant young people who have returned to Kabul determined to rebuild Afghanistan. She is a member of the new generation of future leaders of Afghanistan.

- Students can adopt Sabrina's persona and style and write creatively in response to her story 'Magical Kabul'.

EMPATHY – FICTION AND LETTERS

Through fiction, Australian students explore living in Afghanistan. Afghans respond in letters. On p.145, Neil Grant says 'through fiction we can explore places we cannot physically go to.' He argues that through reading and writing fiction, we can develop a sense of empathy which makes us human and helps us to help others.

'The dry and the dust' by Rosie Pavlovic p.141

'The water carrier' by Paige Dwyer p.146

'She cups her hands' by Tahlia Kennedy p.183

'At night I dream' by Francis Jagers p.190

Further discussion:

Have the students read 'At night I dream' without telling them the circumstances in which it was written.

- What was their impression of the story?
- Does their response to it alter when they learn it is a fictional piece work-shopped by an Australian student?
- To what extent does context shape our response to a text?

How did the Afghan students feel about the stories? To what extent do you think the writers demonstrated empathy?

Sarah Morris writes in her letter to Ferozuddin Alizada (p.62), 'So many people have said that going through the bushfires can help us to relate to how it would feel to live in a place called Afghanistan. But I don't think any of us can really relate to what you have gone through.'

- Do you agree with this comment?
- To what extent does literature allow us to empathise with others?

STORIES OF HOPE AFTER BLACK SATURDAY

'The birds' by David Williams p.14

'The mountain road' by Lily Pavlovic p.202

'Black Saturday anniversary speech' by Malcolm Hackett p.206

Epilogue p.211

Further discussion:

In 'The birds' (p.14) David Williams played Bob Marley's *Three Little Birds* and his wife, Carmen, 'immediately burst into tears' (p.18).

- Find the lyrics or play the song.
- Why was Carmen so affected by the chorus of the song?
- Why are David's 'spirits lifted' (p.19)?

Malcolm Hackett's speech (p.206) so eloquently reveals what is best about human nature.

- Discuss what these things are.

AFTER READING

ACTIVITIES

1. Remembering the pre-reading activities where students gave their impression of what Afghan teenagers' lives might be like, ask them to now write a reflection about how their perceptions have changed after reading the book.
2. Listen to some of the students from the book discuss their stories in the ABC 774 radio segment. Which version do you find more powerful - the written accounts of their experiences or the oral ones? Why?
http://www.1000pencils.com.au/1000pencils/Press/Entries/2010/9/4_Great_Radio_Program_from_774.html
3. View a film dealing with Afghanistan such as *The Kite Runner*, *Buddha Collapsed Out of Shame*, or *Generation Islam* (documentary). Alternately, read a novel such as *Parvana*, *Jameela*, *The Kite Runner* or *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. How does this enhance understanding of the text?
4. The students at Diamond Valley College composed haikus in response to photographs. Look at the photographs from the book that don't have accompanying haikus (e.g. pp.27,

55.) Have students compose their own poems inspired by these images, or by other images chosen by the teacher. Create a class anthology of these poems.

5. Present one of the stories in the book in graphic novel format.

DISCUSSION AND ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Discuss one of the following statements in relation to *From Kinglake to Kabul*:
 - i) 'Adversity often brings out the best in people.'
 - ii) 'To truly understand a person, we must first walk in their shoes.'
2. Read the story 'A History in the Taliban Era' by Jhangir Said. Rewrite this story from the perspective of the Talib, focusing particularly on how and why his attitude has changed from one meeting to the next.
3. 'My way of coping with the bushfires was to imagine that it never happened. To try and block it out,' states Sarah Morris (p.64).
 - Think of a challenging or traumatic experience in your own life, and how you coped with it.
 - As well as writing about their experiences, many of the writers in this book were supported in their recovery by general practitioners, psychologists and counsellors. Visit <http://www.cfa.vic.gov.au/firesafety/bushfire/afterabushfire.htm> for information about recovery after bushfire. Report back to class.
4. Read Malcolm Hackett's speech from (pp 206-209)
 - In what ways did people help the survivors of Black Saturday?
 - How did the survivors help each other?
 - Extension: Research volunteering in your local community. Prepare a report or poster that highlights the contribution volunteers make in your community.

RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

The following were all located through The Source, an online resource to which many school libraries subscribe: http://www.magpies.net.au/magpies/public/?Mival=m_member

Pitched at upper primary/middle years, but containing useful references and teaching ideas:

'A Unit of Work: Bushfires' in *The Literature Base* Volume 13, Issue 3, July 2002.
Archived as downloadable PDF at:
http://www.magpies.net.au/magpies/magpies/?Mival=m_pdf

An Afghan refugee begins school in Australia—particularly relevant because of the theme of healing through storytelling:

Hawke, Rosanne *Soraya the Storyteller* 2004 Lothian Books, South Melbourne, Vic
Story of a Muslim girl living in modern Afghanistan:

Khan, Rukhsana *Jameela* Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW

Three linked novels about children's experience of war, internal displacement and refugee camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan:

Ellis, Deborah *Shauzia* Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW

Ellis, Deborah *Parvana* Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW

Ellis, Deborah *Parvana's Journey* Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW

Three novels about the modern refugee experience for young people:

Gleitzman, Morris *Boy Overboard* 2002 Penguin Books Australia, Camberwell, Vic

Gleeson, Libby *Mahtab's Story* Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW

Sunderland, Alan *Refugee: the diary of Ali Ismail, Woomera, 2001-2002* 2006 Scholastic Australia, Gosford, NSW

An Australian classic about kids in a bush fire:

Southall, Ivan *Ash Road* 1965 Angus & Robertson, Sydney, NSW

ABOUT THE WRITERS

NEIL GRANT

Neil Grant was born in Glasgow Scotland in the Year of the Fire Horse. He learnt to speak Australian at the age of thirteen when he migrated to Melbourne with his family. He finished high school at the International School of Kuala Lumpur in 1985 and spent the next fourteen years working on his resumé and travelling to places such as Israel, Yugoslavia, India, Nepal, Thailand, Greece, Italy, the UK and Tasmania. In 2000 he had his first novel (*Rhino Chasers*) accepted by Allen & Unwin. He travelled through Indonesia for two months researching his second novel *Indo Dreaming* which was published by Allen & Unwin in 2005 and shortlisted for the Queensland Premier's Literary Award and the Melbourne Prize for Best Writing.

To research another novel, Neil travelled to Kabul and Bamiyan in Afghanistan in 2009 with the help of an Australia Council grant. After this trip, he worked with teacher David Williams at Diamond Valley College to produce the student anthology *1000 Pencils: from Kinglake to Kabul* (www.1000pencils.com.au), now re-edited and published as *From Kinglake to Kabul*.

At every opportunity he escapes to write and dream to a mudbrick cottage he built himself on the Far South Coast of NSW. Neil has three children and lives in Cottles Bridge, Vic.

DAVID WILLIAMS

David Williams was born in Melbourne and grew up in the semi-rural town of Hurstbridge. At 17, David joined the Australian Army where he gained valuable training and experience in journalism and public relations, video production and soldiering. David became an English teacher and later Head of English. His first student anthology *Lightning in Kuala Lumpur* hinted that students as young as 13 could write for mainstream publication. In 2009, David

teamed up with author Neil Grant to produce *1000 Pencils: from Kinglake to Kabul*. David's belief in the excellence and potential of teen writing was thus proved.

David is developing a number of new projects and is always on the lookout for schools or communities willing to take the plunge into publication. David enjoys riding his motorcycle and lives with his wife Carmen and their Italian greyhound Bonne.