



# WHISPER

By Fran Dobbie

## **TEACHERS NOTES**

by Phillip G. Nean & Vic O'Callaghan



# WHISPER

*To bring together people who have a sincere heart and a passion for all humanity is the vision I have for this book. Differences in this world make our planet a very interesting—and sometimes not-so-interesting—place to live in. Accepting each person's uniqueness only heightens our awareness and appreciation of the individual's many gifts and will lead to true reconciliation. Sharing and learning will provide what our country needs: ownership for all, 'together' walking the same road. This is my gift to you.*

Fran Dobbie, May 2000

PHILLIP G. NEAN is a Gamilaroi (pronounced *Gum-il-roy*) man from north-west New South Wales. He is an Aboriginal educator/researcher who has worked in the field of Aboriginal education for 21 years. During that period, he has held positions in schools and state office. He has worked throughout New South Wales and other states to ensure that the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal people are reflected in government policies and practices.

VIC O'CALLAGHAN is a former primary school teacher who lives in the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney, with his wife Liz and their two sons. As an Australian, he was humbled at being given the opportunity to walk high above the waters of Sydney Harbour with hundreds of thousands of his kin in the first national Walk for Reconciliation in May 2000. Vic now works as a freelance writer and editor.

## THEMES

*Whisper* is about the strength of friendship and all that it means. The adventures of Maggie and Edie help explain things that sometimes are not clear to friends. From their experiences at school and during holiday time, the reader becomes involved in the life of a small community, and is provided with an insight into what these girls, through their families and teachers, learn about the strength of friendship.

**ACTIVITY:** Discuss some of the things that the girls in the stories learn about friendship. Make a list of words and phrases that you would use to describe friendship.

Later in the book, the reader is introduced to another element of friendship—between adult and child. The girls and their classmates confide some of their feelings about their adult friends, relatives and teachers.

**ACTIVITY:** Explore some of the interactions that help define the concept of friendship. Talk about the different ways that the adults have of passing on information and lessons about friendship.

Throughout the novel the ‘shiny black car’ is mentioned, but it is not until late in the book that the purpose of the car is made clear. Having heard about how and why Aboriginal children are removed from their families, the strength of friendship in this small community is again obvious when the car comes to take Auntie Junie’s kids. It is also made clear that similar things happened to non-Aboriginal families—for example, when some of the children are in danger of being removed by the Social Services Department for not being provided with ‘nourishing’ lunches.

**ACTIVITY:** Investigate some of the reasons why children, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, were taken from their families. During your research try to find out who made the decision about which children to take and what helped those decisions to be made. Discuss any correlation between the actions and reasons.

The issue of discrimination is raised in the novel by referring to the sporting ability of Aboriginal children, as well as Old Dora, who is described as a witch. Edie says, ‘What’s the big deal about colour anyway? Your skin’s lighter than mine, but it doesn’t mean we can’t be friends.’ (p. 72). The girls then learn a valuable lesson about the differences between people.

**ACTIVITY:** Identify examples of discrimination in the book. Research and collect examples of discrimination from other areas, involving people from other cultures. Discuss the examples that you collect with the explanations that Mr Jones, Pop, Aunty and Dora give in the book.

## **PLOT**

*Whisper* describes the special friendship that exists between Maggie and Edie. Although the author does not put labels on the girls, the reader learns early on that they are from different cultural backgrounds, and that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families co-exist happily in this small community. Throughout the novel, we are provided with an insight into the extended nature of Edie's family and the different relationships of the people who come to visit or stay with her and her grandparents. We also learn how Aunty and Pop work with the girls to help them strengthen their friendship and their relationships with other people in the community.

**ACTIVITY:** Discuss some of the reasons that the attitudes of Aunty and Pop appear to be so enlightened compared to the attitudes of some of the adults that you know or read about.

Early in the book the reader is introduced to some of Edie's aunts who tell her stories about their life experiences. Later, we are introduced to Old Pete who also teaches Edie some valuable lessons. These stories help Edie to 'grow up', and they become more than fond memories of visiting relatives and friends.

**ACTIVITY:** Identify the 'messages' that Edie speaks of and discuss what they mean for her. Select one of the 'messages' that Edie mentions and discuss it in relation to your own life.

Throughout *Whisper* the reader experiences various aspects of Aboriginal culture. These include the sharing of knowledge, the use of different ways to communicate and some healing remedies.

**ACTIVITY:** Choose an aspect of Aboriginal culture that is mentioned in the book. Research how that part of Aboriginal culture was practised in other parts of Australia. Discuss ways that information relating to Aboriginal culture is passed from one person to the next or from one community to another.

Mr Jones speaks about some of his teaching experiences in other communities. It is quite evident that he has worked with children in rural communities and with adults who had very different feelings for the children with whom they worked. Mr Jones contributes to the ‘growing up’ process of all the students at the school, but his experiences particularly affect Edie.

**ACTIVITY:** Identify the ‘messages’ that Mr Jones gives the children in Edie’s class and discuss how they help Edie and her friends strengthen their friendship. Choose one of Mr Jones’s ‘messages’ and discuss how that would help you and your friends.

One other aspect that is reinforced throughout the book is the strength of believing. Edie’s family and friends recount how believing has helped them throughout their lives.

**ACTIVITY:** Identify the sections in *Whisper* that tell of the beliefs that different characters have and how those beliefs have affected their lives. Choose one belief and discuss how it could apply to your own life experiences.

## **STRUCTURE**

*Whisper* is a collection of short stories narrated in first person from Edie’s point of view. It is a fictitious account of two young girls growing up in a country town on the south coast of New South Wales.

**ACTIVITY:** Take a different point of view and discuss how some of the other main characters would view events. For example, how would Auntie Gwen and Uncle Tom view the shiny black car and its occupants?

## **STYLE**

Although each story in this collection can stand on its own, the tone and style of Fran Dobbie’s writing changes as time passes. Edie reacts differently during the final stories from the way she reacts earlier on. In ‘A Warm Gentle Breeze’, Edie asks the question, ‘What was I? A child or a young adult?’ (p. 35).

**ACTIVITY:** Find more examples that show how Edie is becoming a teenager who is thinking and behaving differently from the little girl in the first story.

## CHARACTERS

In most books and stories of this nature, the personality of each character is revealed to the reader through actions, attitudes and thoughts.

**ACTIVITY:** Select one of the main characters and write a profile. Compare the similarities and differences of that character to five members of your class.

At the end of the book a different teacher is introduced to the reader. The actions and attitudes of that teacher see Edie referring to him as an ogre and a monster.

**ACTIVITY:** Why does Edie refer to the replacement teacher as an ogre? You might also refer to the personality of some of the other characters in the story.

Friends like Edie and Maggie appear to be inseparable. They share almost everything, but occasionally they disagree.

**ACTIVITY:** Keep a diary for a period of one term. In the diary, record what you and your best friend (real or imaginary) talk about, the things that you do, your impressions of your classmates, what your plans are for the future, etc.

## LANGUAGE

The language of *Whisper* is simple but often poetic, and uses similes, metaphors and personification.

**ACTIVITY:** Find examples of each type of poetic language and describe the ways in which metaphors and personifications are different.

‘Proto-language’ is the name given to vocabulary that is unique to one or two individuals. ‘“Look girls,” Jo said. “A jimmy’s coming.” A jimmy was the name we gave to a storm cloud.’ (p. 13)

**ACTIVITY:** Invent some words of your own which you think could be substituted for some common words you know.

Humour is crucial to relationships in Edie’s family. In ‘The Rainmaker’, Edie describes her house with fondness: ‘Over the years, the rains had grown many tins.’ (p. 68). Do you think this statement is funny? Why/why not?

ACTIVITY: Select other humorous moments from the novel and explain how seeing the funny side of things can help people cope with difficult situations.

## SETTING

The stories are set in a country town on the south coast of New South Wales.

ACTIVITY: Using an atlas, select a town you think most fits the size and location of Edie's home town. Is the setting important to the stories? Why? What clues are we given as to the size of the town?

Edie and Maggie always find a special place to meet, talk and think.

ACTIVITY: Describe some of these special places. Write a description of your own special place.

ACTIVITY: In *Whisper*, the land and the world of nature almost become characters, more important than the people. How does Fran Dobbie use language to convey this?

## COMPREHENSION

### EDIE'S DREAM

1. What do Edie and Maggie have in their hideout to protect them?
2. Why does Edie believe Sam will not harm her?
3. How old was Edie when her mother died?

### BACKYARD MEMORIES

1. How does Edie describe the taste of the sap from the wattle trees?
2. Explain why Auntie Kat no longer visits for Christmas.

### SOUL FOOD

1. Name one thing Aunty Gwen never forgets to do.
2. What does Edie's ankle look like after it is injured?
3. Why do you think Edie thinks her grandmother will never be the same?

### A WARM, GENTLE BREEZE

1. Why is Edie embarrassed on her way to town with Pop?
2. What advice has Lisa's father given her?
3. How has the sun affected Lisa's face?

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- In ‘Backyard Memories’, Edie yells at Maggie to ‘Get out from under the tree!’ (p. 13). Discuss and find evidence as to why Edie is so insistent that Maggie move quickly.
- The last few words of ‘Soul Food’ have Edie asking a very poignant question: ‘How do you take something that is already owned?’ (p. 24). Briefly research the history of Aboriginal land rights in Australia.
- Intuition is a very real experience. Some call it a ‘gut feeling’. In ‘Dancing Dolphins’, Edie pauses to think about where Angie may have gone (p. 47). Write about a time when you or someone you know tried to solve a problem by trusting your ‘gut feeling’.
- Write a letter from Sam to Toby (‘Lost Shoes’, p. 53). Indicate where Sam would place the letter so that Toby would read it.
- In ‘Black Cockatoos’ (p. 59), there is anguish about the colour of skin. Imagine if we really meant it when we said some people are black and some people are white. Hold a piece of white paper and black paper side by side. Have you ever seen people who appear this way? Prepare a talk for your class on this topic. Consider the way words are used in non-literal ways.
- Auntie Gwen speaks to Edie when Matty is taken away in one of the shiny black cars (‘Outside the Dogtag’, p. 96). She tells her that she ‘should appreciate that sorrow: it helps you to grow.’ What do you think Auntie means by this statement?
- Edie and Maggie have their friendship tested when they are competing in the school athletics carnival (‘The Legacy’, p. 78). At the conclusion of the race, both girls have learned an important lesson. Research the records of sporting events or interview your parents to discover where similar gestures of sportsmanship have been shown. Research the goals and aims of various sports/sporting bodies. Is it possible to lose yet still win?

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