



'A gorgeous, strange,  
unforgettable story . . .  
I more than loved it.'  
LAINI TAYLOR

the  
changeover  
*Margaret Mahy*

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
ELIZABETH KNOX

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# Teacher's Notes

Written by Sarina Dickson

# Writing Style

As Elizabeth Knox notes in her comprehensive introduction, *The Changeover* is a coming-of-age story, but a wise Mahy sort, where the young person doesn't leave childhood and become an adult, but gains adult power and responsibility by carrying her family and her childhood self across the rift of a crisis, a crisis which looks to most of the world like a mysterious illness, but to those who know is something much worse.'

The story touches on several themes and teachers will need to use discretion in regards to the emotional maturity of their students to be able to offer support to the students during some parts of the story. For students reading *The Changeover* independently there are several references to sex and it's important to note the main character, Laura Chant, is 14. On page 58 the story mentions the brutal beating and rape of an older child at the school, on page 117 the beating of Sorry by his foster father is described in detail and on page 177 the expletive 'bitch' is used.

*The Changeover* is a gripping, fast-paced read. Students will easily relate to the main character, Laura, as she struggles with the earlier divorce of her parents, her mother's sudden new relationship, her responsibilities as a daughter and her confusing interest in Sorry.

'A clammy hand pressed Laura down to her knees beside Jacko's bed. It was the hand of terror, nothing less.' It was a warning. Laura felt it when she looked in the mirror that morning. There had been others: the day her father left home, the day she met Sorensen – the boy with the strange silver eyes.

But nothing had prepared Laura for the horror of today. And now her little brother, Jacko, was fighting for his life after being sucked dry of his youth by the sinister Carmody Braque. Laura knows there is only one way to save Jacko; she must join Sorensen and use his supernatural powers to change over if there is to be any hope for her little brother.



**Margaret Mahy (1936–2012) is one of New Zealand's most celebrated children's writers. She is the author of more than 150 titles, which have been translated into many different languages and sold around the world. Appointed to the Order of New Zealand in 1993, Mahy also won many global prizes for children's writers, including the Carnegie Medal and the prestigious Hans Christian Andersen Award.**

# Suggested Discussion Questions

- † Why does Laura deserve a different voice from Jacko? (p.7)
- † What is 'playing truant'? What does it feel like for Laura when she gets a warning? When has she had them before? (p.8)
- † Laura's mother tells her that her warnings are meaningless, but then she tells her to be careful...just in case. Do you think her mother does believe the warnings might be true? Do you ever experience emotions or sensations that feel like a warning? Can you describe them? (p.12)
- † Describe Laura's mother. How does Laura feel about her? Give an example from the text to support your answer. Do you think there will be a consequence for Laura for ignoring the warning? Do you think what she is feeling is real or imagined? (p.13)
- † Is Nicky really thinking about Laura's happiness when she tries to set her up with Barry? Who is she really thinking about and why? (p.14)
- † Why might Laura have so much trouble accepting the way Jacko loves her? Can you explain what the following paragraph means 'Sometimes it seemed to her that Jacko was not her brother but in some way her own baby, a baby she would have one day, both born and unborn at the same time.' (p.16)
- † The author, Margaret Mahy gives us an amazing description of 'rotting time'. Can you suggest something else that might describe rotting time? (p.21)
- † What does 'Don't let's push our luck' mean? (p.29)
- † Why is Laura unhappy that her mother brought a guest home for dinner? (p.33)
- † Why is Chris and Kate agreeing on books an 'ominous sign'? What could it be a sign of? (p.34)
- † Why might Kate have asked Laura if she thought Chris was nice 'half pleadingly'? (p.36)
- † How does Laura know that Kate can't believe her story? What does it mean to be superstitious? Do you think Laura is being superstitious? (p.38)
- † Can you predict what could be changing Mr Braque? (p.41)
- † Do you think Kate should stay home? Why or why not? What does 'ebullient' mean? Can you suggest a simile? (p.46)
- † What do you think about Laura going out in the dark by herself and lying to her mother about where she is going? Do you think she will be safe? What will Sorry think when she gets there? (p.55)
- † What does the author mean by 'the terrain became spectral'? (p.56)

- † What do you guess ‘Janua Caeli’ translates to? (p.57)
- † Why might Sorry be frightened of Laura? (p.62)
- † What is the difference between being oblique and being obscure? (p.64)
- † What does old Mrs Carlisle think that eating ‘our bread and salt’ is a sign of? (p.72)
- † The tone of Chapter 5 changes quite suddenly when Sorry’s mother opens the door and Laura enters. The first part is sinister and dark, and the second part is more like the first 4 chapters. Can you explain how the author showed the change? Does the pace of the story change? Did she use different types of words? Did you notice it change? (pp.56–74)
- † What is an ‘incubus’? What does Sorry mean by ‘He’s sealing up’? (p.83)
- † What is a smile that is ‘both deprecating and conciliatory’? What might it look like? (p.85)
- † The rosebuds are the second outside proof Laura had of Sorry’s double nature, what is the first? (p.86)
- † What does Winter mean when she tells Laura that they can’t promise Sorry is safe company? (p.95)
- † Do you think Winter’s plan will work? Is it too risky for Laura to agree? Do you think Laura can trust the Carlisles? (p.104)
- † Why is Laura so upset to find Chris at her house? Do you think she is angry, or hurt, or both? (p.III)
- † What does Sorry mean when he says to Laura that she can choose not to suffer? Do you agree? Why? (p.II4)
- † What is ‘repenting’? What does ‘stigmata’ mean? (p.II6)
- † Why is Laura jealous of Chris Holly? (p.I21)
- † Do you think there is a reason that the doctor can smell the peppermint smell but none of the other staff can? Why? (p.I29)
- † What does Laura mean by ‘the worst shadows are in my head’? (p.I35)
- † Can you explain what Miryam means by ‘Sorensen has so many missing pieces’? (p.I36)
- † What do you think Winter stands to gain from Laura’s changeover? (p.I49)
- † Who is the Alice that Laura compares herself to? (p.I51)
- † How do Sorry and Laura plan to trick Carmody? What are the strengths and weaknesses of their plan? What is ‘vehemence’? (p.I60)
- † Why would Laura not be prepared to just let Carmody choose another victim? (p.I68)

- † Do you think Laura's troubles are over? Is it possible Sorry and his family have an ulterior motive for changing Laura over? Will there be an unknown price for her to pay? **(p.169)**
- † Have you heard the expression 'nature hates a vacuum' before? What does it mean? Can you give an example? **(p.171)**
- † Why did Sorry start to stutter when he was trying to be kind to Laura on the hospital steps? **(p.172)**
- † Can you rewrite the sentence 'She met her enemy in the strengthening citadel of her brother...' in a way younger children could understand it? **(p.177)**
- † Can you explain or describe the 'secret illness' Laura mentions when she is describing her father leaving? **(p.181)**
- † Do you think Laura will regret being cruel to Carmody? Is Sorry right that Laura faces a choice similar to one Carmody once faced, a choice that turned him into the horrible man Laura now sees him as? **(p.189)**
- † What does 'sidling and querulous' mean? Does it refer to Carmody's appearance or the way he moves? **(p.193)**
- † Throughout the story Sorry describes himself as unfeeling. Do you think his assessment of himself is accurate? What evidence have you found in the story to illustrate your point of view? **(p.209)**
- † How has Laura loving Sorry changed him? Has the change in Sorry also improved his relationships with his mother and grandmother? **(p.217)**

# Suggested Activities

## Art

Using the description of Carmody Braque on page 20 make an image of him as you imagine him to be. The final product will reflect the themes of your current art program and therefore may be charcoal, print, painting etc depending on your focus for the term.

## Venn Diagram

List things the author mentioned about Laura's life that have changed or no longer exist in your life now e.g. telephone on the wall. Did you notice the absence of other things like mobile phones, or the internet? What parts of Laura's life are the same as yours e.g. fish and chips for tea sometimes. Show your list in a Venn diagram with Laura's life on the left, yours on the right and the things that are the same in the overlap in the middle.

## Recalling Main Events

List the ten main events as you recall them in the story. Using your list, retell the story in a series of simple line drawings of the events on your list in the order they happened in the story.

## Story Inspiration

Write the next chapter of the book. Tell the audience how Laura's life has changed since her changeover. What kind of relationship does Laura develop with Winter and Miryam now that she is also a witch? Do Kate and Chris get married? Does Laura meet other witches?

## Design/Digitech

Choose a scene that you think is particularly significant from the story and use it to illustrate a cover for *The Changeover*. Consider the colours and fonts you use to reflect the overall feeling of the story.