

EVER FELT LIKE A
FISH OUT OF WATER?

TEACHERS' NOTES



INDIGO BLUE

From BESTSELLING AUTHOR and RECORD-BREAKING SAILOR

Jessica Watson

INDIGO BLUE

BY JESSICA WATSON

TEACHERS' NOTES BY ROBYN SHEAHAN-BRIGHT

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INTRODUCTION

'Thank you for the many years of joy and adventures we shared. I will always remember you by the water after the sun has set.' (p 227)

Alex has been sent from Sydney to stay with her aunt Robin at Boreen Point, a small coastal town in Queensland, to finish her final year at school at Cootharaba High.

Her father, a pathologist, has gone overseas to do some further research into cancer detection and treatment – work which is driven by his grief over the loss of his wife (and Alex's mother) to breast cancer when Alex was only two years old.

School begins with Alex feeling isolated but she is befriended by Sophie and Sophie's friends, Henry and Anna. Together they resist the taunts of Naomi, the school bully, and her followers Bonny, Alice and Jonty.

Alex's great love is sailing, so she decides to spend the money she's saved for a car, on an old yacht, Indigo Blue, and to repair it so that she can spend her spare time sailing. When Alex visits Barney, a local sailmaker, she meets Sam, a mysterious boy with pointed ears, who lives alone on the shores of the lake, and feels an immediate attraction to him.

One night while taking photos, Alex spots a mysterious figure on the shores of the lake. Meanwhile, on another night she returns home to find her aunt painting a mermaid; Robin tells her a strange story which Old Geoffrey at the shop often tells about his settler ancestors and a 'merperson' named Jack.

Alex and Sophie visit the old sawmill at Mill Point in order to research a history project and find a brown leather-wrapped package which contains the diary of a young school mistress, Eliza Wright, who arrived in the settlement in 1874. The diary (which also contains some ribbons) is missing some crucial pages, but tells a story of her meeting with a mysterious young man. (Later we learn that Aunt Robin had had a similar experience, hence her mermaid paintings and her strange reaction when she meets Sam.)

Sam shows Alex the site of the wreck of the SS Culgoa, which delivered supplies to the early settlement, and together they re-visit the newly discovered ruins, and he takes her to a nearby site where a tree has letters carved into it which indicate that they might have been carved by Eliza

Wright and Jack. Sam and Alex discover an attraction for each other, but the code by which merpeople live forbids relationships with human beings.

Later, Alex discovers an entry in Captain Emanuel William Vance's ship's log dated 15 August 1889 in which he describes meeting a lighthouse keeper and his wife: 'The captain moved on to describe the reefs and islands of northern Australia, but Alex read and re-read his short account of visiting the lighthouse. Of the cheerful woman with ribbons in her hair and the man with a deep connection to the sea.' (p 216)

This novel contains elements of a realistic rite of passage narrative, romance, historical fiction and fantasy. The open ending leaves the outcome of Alex and Sam's romance unknown but with a strong sense that their mutual love for the sea and for each other is a bond that will be difficult to break ...

BEFORE & AFTER READING THE NOVEL

- Examine the cover of the novel. What does it suggest about the novel's themes?
- After you have read the novel, examine the cover again: what does it suggest to you now?
- After you have read the novel, read about it in reviews and articles and use the notes below to examine the text more closely.

THEMES & CURRICULUM TOPICS

Several themes relevant to curriculum topics (Studies of Society and Environment, Science and English Language and Literacy) might be identified in this novel:

STUDIES OF SOCIETY AND ENVIRONMENT (SOSE)

- **OCEAN, SWIMMING AND SAILING**

DISCUSSION POINT: This novel is at its heart about the enticement of the ocean and the joy of sailing. What does it suggest is the appeal of both?

DISCUSSION POINT: Alex is an excellent sailor. What qualities does a sailor need to be successful? (Readers might wish to read Jessica Watson's memoir *True Spirit: The Aussie Girl who Took on the World* (Hachette, 2010) about her solo journey sailing around the world, and other such sailing memoirs.)

DISCUSSION POINT: The ocean can be both thrilling and dangerous. Read Mark Svendsen's *To Die For* (Vintage Classic, 2012, Woolshed Press, 2011) which tells the story of a boy pitted against the sea and a shark. Relate this to Alex's frightening adventure when she sets out alone and nearly wrecks her small craft.

DISCUSSION POINT: Sam's love of the water and of the creatures within it is potent in this novel. Find a passage which is particularly vivid and discuss the feelings it evokes.

- **'FISH OUT OF WATER' OR NEWCOMER**

DISCUSSION POINT: The cover includes the words: 'Ever felt like a fish out of water?' How does this statement relate to this novel?

DISCUSSION POINT: Alex faces what any newcomer to any community confronts. She is lonely and unsure of the conventions of this new school and town, and an easy target for bullies like Naomi, and older people like John who is dismissive of her youth. But her new friends help her to settle in and she begins to feel connected to the area. How difficult is it to be a new student at a school or a newcomer in a small, close-knit community? Read *One Would Think the Deep* (UQP, 2016) by Claire Zorn, *Stony Heart Country* (Penguin, 1999) by David Metzenthen or *Saltwater Vampires* (Penguin, 2010) by Kirsty Eagar – three novels that deal with such experiences in very different ways.

DISCUSSION POINT: Sam, too, is a 'fish out of water' both literally and metaphorically in every place he visits. He doesn't allow himself to make friends because of the 'codex' and also because human beings are naturally suspicious of merpeople. Discuss his experiences in relation to anyone who is a member of a minority and therefore the subject of suspicion and prejudice. (See Merpeople Legends below.)

- **COMING OF AGE & RITE OF PASSAGE**

DISCUSSION POINT: ' "Dedicated. It sounds like you've always looked after yourself, then?" "I suppose. Dad's always treated me like an adult. He never fussed over me. Sometimes I would have liked company in the evenings, but I was never lonely on the weekends because I was always at the yacht club." ' (p 64) Alex is unusually mature for a teenage girl; not many people would spend their hard-earned savings on a boat and then spend their spare time restoring it. How has she gained such maturity?

DISCUSSION POINT: Alex discovers (p 171) that Sophie's fear of disappointing her parents' expectations is making her a nervous wreck. How easy is it to maintain some balance when studying for final exams?

DISCUSSION POINT: Alex has a new rite of passage to explore: that of dealing with her first love. Even though falling in love with a merperson is unusual, there are aspects of their relationship that every teenager faces. What aspects are they?

- **MERPEOPLE LEGENDS**

DISCUSSION POINT: Old Geoffrey at the store has retold a story, apparently passed down to him by his ancestors, some of the first settlers in the area, about their finding a baby abandoned on the lake shore, 'a baby that grew a tail when dipped in bath water' (p 23). They raised the baby as Jack, but when fully grown, he disappeared. This story relates to Sam, and also to the merpeople Aunt Robin met as a girl, amongst whom was a boy named Daniel, and also to Jack the young man Eliza Wright met on the shore and later married. Old Geoffrey's story sounds outlandish but sometimes family history can contain elements of truth.

DISCUSSION POINT: Research legends about mermaids and merpersons or merrows. Read Narelle Oliver's *Mermaids Most Amazing* (Omnibus Books, 2001) and Professor Ari Berk's *The Secret History of Mermaids and Creatures of the Deep* Illustrated by Various (Candlewick Press, 2009). Read novels such as Ruth Park's *My Sister Sif* (UQP 2009; Penguin 1986) or Helen Dunmore's *Ingo* (HarperCollins, 2005).

DISCUSSION POINT: The following quote puts merpeople in a contemporary perspective: ' "Lately there's talk of a small group of merfolk who want to come out to humans, they're sick of hiding, and they think it would be fun to make a spectacle, cash in on magazine deals, TV rights, that sort of thing. They think it would give us comfortable lives, and a status that they believe we're entitled to. I couldn't think of anything worse than all that attention, but . . ." Sam was speaking very quietly now. "My mum would still be here if she'd had access to human medical facilities." ' (p 124)

Might merpeople be recognised as a minority forced to remain hidden because of prejudice against them?

DISCUSSION POINT: Sam explains to Alex: ' "Relationships with humans . . . we have the codex, and part of it – one of the rules, an important one – dictates that we can't fall in love with a human. If we become too close, we must leave and return to the sea immediately." "Why?" Alex asked in a whisper. He sighed. "To give a part of yourself, your heart, to a human is to curse them. The human that holds the heart of a merperson feels every step on the earth like the cuts of a hundred oyster shells." ' (pp 156–7) He also refers to Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Little Mermaid', later made into a Disney movie, and its links with this philosophy. Discuss the tale and its relationship to this novel.

- **AGEISM AND SEXISM**

DISCUSSION POINT: John who sells Alex the boat is dismissive of such a young girl buying a boat, and is also critical of her abilities. But eventually they develop a grudging respect for each other. Was Alex's initial response to John's snide comments effective? How else might she have responded to him?

DISCUSSION POINT: Society has a tendency to think of mentors as people who are older and more 'experienced'. But sometimes young people – like Jessica Watson, the author of this book – have reserves of knowledge which are underestimated. When she set off on her epic world solo yachting challenge there were many people who were skeptical, but her success proved them wrong. Can older people learn from those younger than themselves? In what areas are young people likely to be more skilled than

older people?

- **PRACTICAL VERSUS ARTISTIC**

DISCUSSION POINT: Robin makes several remarks indicating that her parents favoured her brother because of his academic success and frowned on her artistic interests. Is this a common prejudice?

DISCUSSION POINT: How easy is it for a person to pursue an artistic life? Robin survives via running an art gallery as well as selling her paintings. Would most artists supplement their income in this or other ways?

- **BREAST CANCER**

DISCUSSION POINT: Alex's mother has died of breast cancer which has left a huge gap in their family life. Her father has immersed himself in scientific research to discover a cure. Alex has suffered her grief largely in private. Discuss the effect of such loss. (Note to Teachers: Some students may have suffered this sort of loss, and will require sensitive engagement with this topic.)

DISCUSSION POINT: Read of the struggles of high-profile sufferers and campaigners for breast cancer research such as Connie Johnson (1977–2017) and her organisation Love Your Sister; Jane McGrath (1966–2008) and the McGrath Foundation; Olivia Newton-John (1948–). See also: 'Awareness Campaigns' Cancer Australia <<https://canceraustralia.gov.au/affected-cancer/cancer-types/breast-cancer/awareness/awareness-campaigns>>

- **QUEENSLAND HISTORY**

DISCUSSION POINT: Research the settlement of the Tewantin area where this novel is set.

DISCUSSION POINT: Eliza refers to Eliza Fraser (p 54) and her being shipwrecked in 1836 and taken in by Aboriginal people. Research her story more fully.

SCIENCE

ACTIVITY: Research cancer and how medical scientists like Alex's father are dealing with the crisis.

ACTIVITY: Research the possible scientific origins of mermaid legends.

ACTIVITY: Research climate change and the effect of it on small coastal communities like the one described in this novel.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE & LITERACY

Study the writing style employed in this narrative, and examine the following sub-topics:

- **NARRATIVE PERSON, NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE & TENSE**

DISCUSSION POINT: The novel is written in third person immediate past tense from the subjective viewpoint of Alex. Eliza Wright's diary entries are written in first person present and immediate past tense.

ACTIVITY: How might the narrative have changed had Alex's story been written in first person?

- **SYMBOLISM**

DISCUSSION POINT: The central symbolic motif is that of a merperson. What other symbolism did you notice in this novel?

- **LITERARY DEVICES**

ACTIVITY: Find examples of the use of literary devices in this novel, using the table below to identify examples. For example, some nautical metaphors are used in chapter titles such as 'Fish out of Water' and 'The Sailmaker's Apprentice', and themes relate strongly to the subject of the ocean and sailing.

SIMILIE	'like the cuts of hundreds of oysters.' (p 222)
METAPHORS	
PERSONIFICATION	
OTHER	

- HUMOUR**

ACTIVITY: Identify techniques by which humour is provoked in this novel. Add quotes to the following table:

SARCASM	
IRONY	
EXAGGERATION	
BLACK HUMOUR	
OTHER	

- **STRUCTURE**

The structure of the story can be analysed in terms of key narrative features used to engage the reader's attention and to shape the work:

a) *Strong beginnings and endings to chapters* are one way of structuring a narrative, for example:

Beginning: 'The trip had been such a disaster that she decided not to tell Sophie about any of it.' (p 169)

Ending: 'Everyone deserved to be treated on their birthday – and who doesn't like surprises?' (p 83)

Which other opening or closing sentence was particularly gripping, in your opinion?

b) *Suspense* is the key to any narrative's structure.

Clues are often left for a reader, which later make sense, eg. 'Sam walked back into the other room without a word and Alex suddenly noticed an intense salty smell. Must be Indigo's old sails, she thought.' (p 21) Later we learn that Sam is a merman, which explains his 'salty smell'.

c) *Using a 'framing story or idea'* makes a narrative more cohesive. The legend of merpeople and a meeting between a human and a merperson is the framing story in this novel.

d) *Mirroring in parallel plots/characters* also cements the structure, themes and plot of a narrative. For example, as the plot develops, we see the parallels between Eliza Wright, Aunt Robin and Alex's experiences with Jack, Daniel and Sam in different times, which adds to the suspense.

- **SETTING**

DISCUSSION POINT: Description in setting can be evoked via a complex range of literary devices. Choose a passage in the novel and analyse the devices and techniques used to convey the scene.

DISCUSSION POINT: Setting is often described using other senses apart from sight, such as hearing, tasting, feeling, smelling. As you read, observe the use of the senses in this author's description of setting.

- **CHARACTERS**

Major Characters: Alex, Sam, Aunt Robin, Alex's new friends – Sophie, Henry and Anna.

Minor Characters: John (the boat broker); Barney (the sailmaker), Naomi (a student who 'has it in for Alex') and her group of friends – Bonny, Alice and Jonty; Old Geoffrey at the store; David (Sam's uncle); Adam (Sam's cousin, and David's son).

ACTIVITY: Draw up a character chart and find key quotes that give a clear picture of any of these characters, and isolate events that demonstrate their natures. Then write a brief character study of the person using the quotes and events to illustrate the points made in your summary.

QUESTION: Which character was most intriguing and why? Which character would you like to have heard more about?

DISCUSSION POINT: This contrasting description of Aunt Robin and Alex's dad reveals their personalities: 'It seemed to Alex that if her aunt liked a piece of jewellery or clothing, nothing stopped her from wearing it along with every other item she had, all at once if necessary. She certainly didn't seem worried that almost every outfit she owned clashed with her bright red curly hair. And Robin's house mimicked the way she liked to dress: the living room was loud, messy and a riot of mismatched colours and patterns. Alex's dad had always strived for order and minimalism in their house, so the chaos of his sister's place left Alex feeling slightly on edge.' (p 9) Write a description of two people you know using contrasting description in this way.

- **GENRE**

ACTIVITY: This novel contains elements of the realistic rite of passage, romance, historical fiction and fantasy. Choose one of these genres and analyse the novel in terms of the conventions of that genre.

- **WRITING TASKS**

ACTIVITY: Write a diary entry as if written by Alex about meeting Sam.

ACTIVITY: Write a letter as if written by Aunt Robin to Alex's father about Alex's first weeks in Boreen Point.

ACTIVITY: One of the most famous mermaid stories is Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Little Mermaid.' (1836) <http://hca.gilead.org/il/li_merma.html> Write a contemporary version of this story as a 'refracted fairy tale'.

ACTIVITY: Read Alex's letter to Sam (pp 237–8). Imagine what he might have written in return.

- **VISUAL LITERACY**

ACTIVITY: Create a graphic novel interpretation of an incident in the novel. [See **Bibliography**.] [See also Black Mermaid Productions <<http://blackmermaid.com/>> which is an Australian comics creative team that publishes 'epic, exciting and entertaining mermaid stories'; this site may give you some inspiration.]

ACTIVITY: Design a new cover for this book.

ACTIVITY: Create a book trailer for this novel. [See **Bibliography**.]

ACTIVITY: Do a Google search and study images of merpeople drawn by some of the great illustrators. Then draw and paint an image of your own. Create a gallery of the various images in your classroom.

FURTHER QUOTES FOR DISCUSSION

1. 'Why did he live in the hut across the lake? Had he always lived there? Did he live alone? And her thoughts kept returning to his intriguing features.' (p 42)
2. *'You are not a bad-looking young lady; there are even those who would consider you pretty. There is no need for you to undertake a vocation and risk forfeiting the prospect of a good marriage.'* (p 51)
3. *'My ideas of women's rights fall on deaf ears here. And, of course, I teach these women's children, so I feel that I must always present my most sensible self.'* (p 57)
4. ' "You don't think I'm a freak, do you?" he whispered.' (p 98)
5. ' "How are you so sure that you're the normal one?" he asked, matching her teasing tone.' (p 115)
6. 'Don't you think it's kind of ironic that you're studying science? I mean, you're straight out of a fantasy story.' (p 123)
7. ' "I'm worried, Sam." Alex froze. "We're friends, honestly," she heard Sam's whispered voice. "I swear it on Neptune." "Don't try that rubbish on me, Sam. I've seen you together, you're like magnets." ' (p 149)
8. 'I'm so sorry. I've been such a bad friend. I've been so caught up in myself that I didn't realise you were struggling.' (p 171)
9. 'Oh, I'm sure it will be okay. You're too much like your father, stressing over little things, stuck in your ways, never being spontaneous. After all, you know I believe that everything happens for a reason. You'll see, something good will come of this little bingle.' (p 190)
10. 'Fate has a funny way of revealing stories to those who search for them.' (p 223)

FURTHER ACTIVITIES

1. **Compare this novel to other young adult novels** that deal with the ocean as a theme, or with legends of merpeople. [See Bibliography.]
2. **Design a poster to advertise this book.**
3. The **title of this book** refers to Alex's boat. What other title might the book have had?
4. **Debate any of the topics** covered in these notes, or suggested by the novel.
5. Locate and study **poetry** that engages with the ocean, eg 'Sea Poems – Poems for Sea' PoemHunter.com <<https://www.poemhunter.com/poems/sea/>> Write an acrostic poem using the letters in 'Indigo Blue'.

CONCLUSION

Jessica Watson has written a combination of reality and fantasy drawing on her deep knowledge of sailing and the ocean, together with her obvious curiosity about the fantastical legends of the deep. She has also created a touching romance and an historical novel which will encourage readers to explore the history of this community and their own local history.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jessica Watson

Defying criticism from those who said her task was destined to fail, after 210 days at sea navigating some of the world's most challenging oceans and surviving seven knockdowns, Jessica sailed back into Sydney Harbour on 15 May 2010. She became the youngest person to sail solo non-stop and unassisted around the world, aged 16.

As she docked at the Sydney Opera House she met the Prime Minister on stage and then delivered a simple, but inspirational speech where she replied to the Prime Minister who declared her to be an Australian hero:

'I would like to disagree with our Prime Minister. I do not consider myself a hero. I am just an ordinary person, who had a dream and worked hard at it. By sailing solo, non-stop and unassisted around the world, I have proved that anything really is possible.'

Jessica had captured the hearts of not only Australians but millions of supporters around the globe as they cheered on the 16-year-old Aussie, who had overcome the adversity and odds to achieve what many thought impossible.

Sharing her experiences on her blog, she became a storyteller, and her fan base grew to the extent of having 5 million hits on her website when she sailed into Sydney.

Jessica's book about the voyage, *True Spirit*, quickly became an Australian bestseller and has been published in 12 countries – another extraordinary achievement for a girl who suffers from dyslexia.

Jessica filmed a documentary, *210 Days*, which was narrated by Sir Richard Branson. And Sunstar Entertainment, the producers of Oscar-nominated movie *Lion*, are currently working on a film adaptation of Jessica's story, scheduled for release in 2018.

She was named Young Australian of the Year in 2011. In December that year, Jessica skippered the youngest crew ever to compete in the iconic Sydney to Hobart yacht race. Her crew finished second in their division, and Jessica was awarded the Jane Tate trophy for the first female skipper.

In January 2012, Jessica was announced in the Australia Day Honours list, receiving an OAM (Order of Australia Medal) for services to sailing and being a role model for the youth of Australia.

Now aged 23, Jessica is the co-founder of a start-up company and a Youth Ambassador for The United Nations World Food Programme. She is currently undertaking an MBA. Indigo Blue is her second book.

Information from Jessica's website: <http://www.jessicawatson.com.au/about-jessica>

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<<https://www.livescience.com/39882-mermaid.html>>

Witschi, Vanessa 'Mermaids in Folklore & Australian Indigenous Culture'

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<<http://www.troublemag.com/mermaids-in-folklore-australian-indigenous-culture/>>

Other Non-Fiction and Website Teaching Resources:

'Book Trailers' Insideadog

<<http://www.insideadog.com.au/teachers/book-trailers>>

'Book Trailers for Readers' by Michelle Harclerode

<<http://www.booktrailersforreaders.com>>

'Book Trailers – Resources: Ipswich District Teacher Librarian Network'

<<http://idtl.net.au/book-trailers.php>>

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE NOTES

Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright operates justified text writing and publishing consultancy services, and is widely published on children's literature, publishing history and Australian fiction. Her publications include Paper Empires: A History of the Book in Australia 1946–2005 (co-edited with Craig Munro) (UQP, 2006). In 2011 she was recipient of the CBCA (Qld) Dame Annabelle Rankin Award, in 2012, of the CBCA Nan Chauncy Award for Outstanding Services to Children's Literature, and in 2014, the QWC's Johnno Award.