

A WRECK OF SEABIRDS

KARLEAH OLSON

ISBN (PB): 9781760993924

YEAR LEVEL: Y10–12

ABOUT THE BOOK

When Briony first meets Ren, he is standing in the freezing sea at the edge of their tiny town. Ren hasn't been home for a decade but has returned to be with his dying father. Briony won't leave, hoping that Sarah, her missing sister, will one day reappear.

But Sarah and her friend Aria have been stranded on a desolate island far off the coast. The longer they're trapped there, the less alone they seem.

How many secrets in this town have been swallowed by the brooding sea?

This tightly written, atmospheric novel captures the natural environment and explores the depths of human emotion. Delving into themes of loss, isolation and entrapment, *A Wreck of Seabirds* moves back and forth in time, intertwining the stories of Briony, Ren and Sarah against the moody backdrop of the Western Australian coastal landscape.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karleah Olson is a Perth-based writer and an avid reader. She has spent the last few years as a PhD candidate at Edith Cowan University, where she is studying Australian Coastal Gothic Literature. Her debut novel, *A Wreck of Seabirds*, was shortlisted for the 2023 Fogarty Literary Award.

THEMES

- Grief
- Mental illness (e.g. depression, anxiety, dementia)
- Family conflict/breakdown
- Unsolved mysteries
- Survival

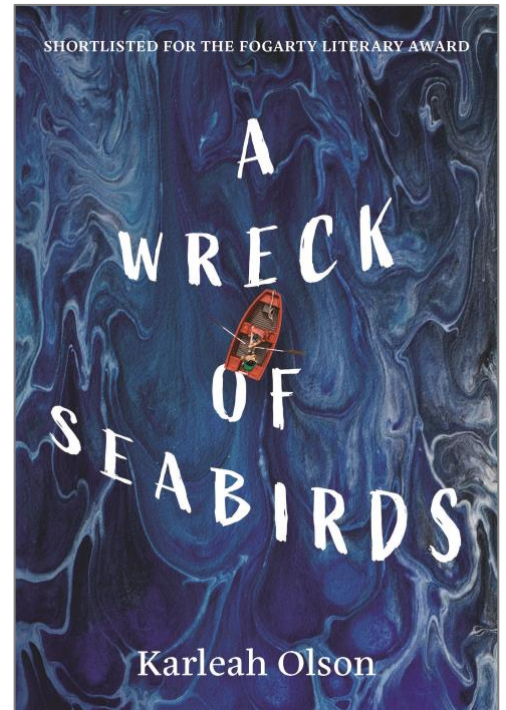
Trigger warnings: self-harm

AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

- F–10 English
- F–10 Humanities and social sciences
- F–10 The arts
- F–10 Health and physical education

USEFUL WEBSITES

- Bushcraft Survival Australia: bushcraftsurvivalaustralia.com.au



CLASSROOM IDEAS

BEFORE READING

1. What do you think the title, *A Wreck of Seabirds*, means? Consider how it plays on the idea of a collective noun, and brainstorm possibilities to create a word cloud as a class.
2. What themes does the cover artwork suggest might be in the book? E.g. a small boat on a wide expanse of sea could suggest a sense of being lost.

AFTER READING

Discussion questions

1. Have students make notes in a journal on the following:
 - a. Characterisation – of the main characters and any minor characters they feel are significant
 - b. Setting
 - c. Narration – the narrators' point of view; the narrators' reliability; issues of bias
 - d. Plot structure
 - e. Literary devices
 - f. Symbolism
 - g. Dialogue – compile a list of important quotes for each character, noting how they may change/grow over the course of the novel
2. There have been many 'survival' stories written, including some that the students may know, e.g. *Hatchet* and *Lord of the Flies*. In groups, discuss how you might react if you found yourself in a survival situation like Aria and Sarah. What skills and strengths do you have that would aid you? How would you cope without electricity, devices and conveniences?
3. Create a list of 10 items that you think are key to survival for activities such as camping.
4. How are the themes of entrapment and confinement portrayed throughout the novel?
5. The genre of *A Wreck of Seabirds* falls into Australian coastal gothic literature. What elements of the narrative indicate this, and how would you define this genre based on your reading experience of this book?
6. The author wrote this book as part of her PhD thesis. Why do you think she chose to explore this topic through creative writing in the format of a novel?

Setting and characters

1. Using passages from the narrative as inspiration, create a piece of artwork that represents one of the settings in the book (e.g. a bird's-eye view like the cover).
2. Create a character web to show the connections between primary and secondary characters in the book. List the conflicts between characters and explore the reasons behind these conflicts.

Text structure and literary devices

1. The book is written from three points of view and across different time periods. Discuss the pros and cons of this narrative structure, and why you think the author has chosen to write the story this way. How does this impact mood, tone and purpose?
2. Create a class definition of the term 'foreshadowing'. Find examples of foreshadowing in the early chapters.
3. List some descriptions from the book that help convey the atmosphere of the scene without using dialogue. Compare how these literary devices of 'showing' and 'telling' can improve or hinder a reader's connection with the narrative.

Vocabulary and figurative language

1. The author has used many examples of figurative language (e.g. metaphor, simile, personification) throughout the narrative. Choose two examples from below and for each one, list the type of figurative language it is and suggest a reason the author may have chosen to use it:
 - a. **'battle the open sea' (p. 14)**
 - b. **'her brows knitted together' (p. 40)**
 - c. **'the angry swirl of the world at sea' (p. 43)**
 - d. **'beach littered with people' (p. 80)**
 - e. **'plastering a smile on his face' (p. 81)**

Creative Writing

1. Write a different ending to the final island scene.
2. Imagine and write about what happens to the characters after the novel ends.