

THE SPECTACULAR SPENCER GRAY

DEB FITZPATRICK

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YEAR LEVEL: Y5–9

CROSS-CURRICULUM PRIORITY: Sustainability

ABOUT THE BOOK

Spencer Gray is just an ordinary kid, but he manages to get into some pretty extraordinary situations. When Spencer stumbles on a sinister operation in the bush, his life goes into overdrive – midnight rescue missions, super-endangered animals, hair-raising adventures. To survive, Spencer will need to pull off something spectacular.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Deb Fitzpatrick loves bushwalking with her family. When she can, she sneaks away to a shack in the karri forest of the south-west of Western Australia. She's the author of 11 books for readers of all ages, some of which have received awards in Australia, been published in the US and optioned for film. Her latest is *Tawny Trouble* (2025). Deb regularly teaches creative writing to both children and adults, and has a Master of Arts in creative writing from UWA. She loves weaving stories from real life into her writing. Deb lived for several years in the cloud forest of Costa Rica, where she did a lot of hiking while toucans, three-toed sloths and spider monkeys crossed through the forest canopy above her. Deb shares her life with her lovely family and their kelpie, who is absolutely not a failed sheepdog.

THEMES

- Critically endangered Australian animals
- Conservation
- Crime
- Bravery
- Resilience
- Family
- Friendship

AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

Y5–9 English

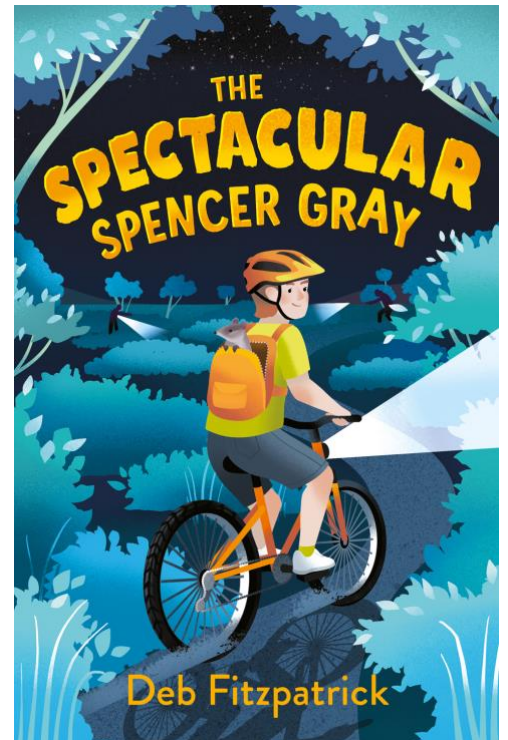
Y5–9 Biological sciences

Y5–9 Geography

Y5–9 Mental health

USEFUL WEBSITES

- Author's website: debfitzpatrick.com.au
- *Australian Geographic* – Australian endangered species list: australiangeographic.com.au/topics/science-environment/2014/06/australian-endangered-species-list
- *Australian Geographic* – Gilbert's Potoroo: australiangeographic.com.au/topics/wildlife/2012/09/back-from-the-dead-gilberts-potoroo



CLASSROOM IDEAS

Discussion questions

1. What do you think the man might have been doing in the bush surrounding Spencer's school? Brainstorm in pairs. Why would he race away when Spencer saw him? What do you think could be under the 'flapping thing' that Spencer glimpsed?
2. Spencer has a mystery to solve – and so does the reader. What are some of the key characteristics of books within the mystery genre?
3. Create a table listing the literary conventions of mystery novels in one column, and in the adjacent column provide examples of the way author Deb Fitzpatrick has used each in her novel.
4. **""How hard must it be for people learning English from scratch? All those words that sound the same but mean completely different things —" / "Like bear, the animal, and bare, in the nude," Pips interrupted excitedly.'** (p. 15) In groups of three, see how many homophones you can think of in just fifteen minutes – the group with the most wins.
5. How does the author create tension and suspense in the chapters where Spencer is kidnapped?
6. What strategies does Spencer use to remain calm? How does he problem-solve to get out of this terrible situation?
7. Have you ever been in a situation where you had to think fast to solve a problem? Write a recount of this event.
8. If you were Spencer, would you have gone back to investigate the bush behind the oval and Arrow Beach alone? What alternative choices could he have made? What does this decision reveal about Spencer's personality?
9. How does the character Spencer grow or change through his experiences over the course of the novel? What do you think he learns through surviving this ordeal?
10. How are the themes of curiosity, bravery and resilience represented in this novel? What other themes stood out to you in the story? What did you enjoy most about the book?

Creative writing

1. Write a short story in which the protagonist has a mystery to solve – and the reader must discover the clues right alongside them. Experiment with the conventions of the mystery genre, e.g. leaving 'red herrings' (misleading clues) in the story. Use figurative language and descriptions of setting to evoke tension and suspense.
2. **'He had got himself involved in something bad. Something dark. All thanks to the soccer ball going a bit further than normal that day at lunchtime.'** (p. 129) How are the themes of chance, fate and coincidence important in this novel? Write a short story in which the protagonists find themselves in an improbable situation based on an everyday event.
3. **""Why does crazy stuff always happen to me?" Spencer said to no one in particular.'** (p. 52) What crazy things have happened to you? Write a diary entry reflecting on one of these events.
4. Rewrite the end of the novel based on one of the following plot alterations. How might the ending be different?
 - a. Spencer's mother finds Fluffnut under the bed and demands an answer.
 - b. Pips catches Spencer sneaking home from Arrow Beach after midnight and demands to help with the mission to return Fluffnut.
 - c. Leon and Charlie decide to return with Spencer to Arrow Beach on the night of the kidnapping.
5. **'He saw, in that instant, just how dangerous the life of a police officer was. You never knew what was literally around the corner.'** (p. 144) Would you like to be a police officer? Write a short detective fiction piece in which the protagonist is a member of the police force.
6. In your opinion, what were the strengths and weaknesses of the novel? To whom would you recommend this book and why? Write a short review for your school newspaper or blog.

Biological sciences

1. Why is it illegal to keep native animals as pets in Western Australia? Is this law the same in every state? In groups of four, research and debate for/against the validity of the claim: 'Native animals should be available as pets in Australia.'
2. Create a definition for the term 'critically endangered'.

3. Select either the Gilbert's Potoroo or another critically endangered Australian animal from the Australian Geographic website. Research and create a fact sheet presenting the following information about your species: name; habitat; diet; life cycle; interesting facts; labelled diagram; reasons for critically endangered status. Include a reference list.
4. Write a persuasive article for your school newspaper aiming to convince others of what you believe should be done to protect the Gilbert's Potoroo.
5. Spencer unwittingly stumbles upon a rare marsupial-smuggling ring. Create a definition for the terms 'marsupial' and 'smuggling'. What is the punishment for this crime in Australia?
6. How can you and your school spread awareness and raise money for the protection of the Gilbert's Potoroo or other endangered Australian species? Consider hosting a *Pennies for Potoroos* drive, asking students to collect spare change. Will you host a school talent show or raffle? Will you organise an animal awareness day?

Mental health

1. Spencer uses two key strategies to help him remain calm during a time of crisis. Create a definition for each and explain how it can be used to help fight anxiety.
 - a. Rhythmic breathing
 - b. Positive self-talk
2. What strategies do you personally use to remain calm when you feel stressed? Create a list.



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