



Teacher Notes

The Danger of Small Things

Written by Caryl Lewis

Teacher notes prepared by Karys McEwen

Publication details

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Reader ages:	14 years and up

Themes

- Environmental collapse
- Climate change
- Gender and power
- Friendship
- Resistance and rebellion
- Stories and imagination
- Survival
- Hope
- Control and propaganda
- The importance of art and literature
- Bodily autonomy and reproductive control

About the Book

Imagine a world where honeybees have died out. It's a patriarchal world where famines are rife. It's a world without art, without books, without plays. Girls are sent away from home, forced to pollinate crops by hand with brushes and to marry as soon as they can. Inhabiting this world is Jess and her friends Cass, Deva, and Ruth. But even if one fourteen-year-old knows that the system is dangerous, can she really stoke a revolution?

About the Author

Caryl Lewis is an award-winning Welsh novelist, children's writer, playwright, and screenwriter. Her breakthrough novel, *Martha, Jac a Sianco*, is widely regarded as a modern classic of Welsh literature and sits on the Welsh curriculum. The film adaptation (with a screenplay by Caryl) won six Welsh BAFTAs and the Spirit of the Festival Award at the Celtic Media Festival. Caryl's other screenwriting work includes BBC/S4C thrillers *Hinterland* and *Hidden*, and she's also the author of *The Danger of Small Things*. She is a visiting lecturer in creative writing at Cardiff University and lives with her family on a farm near Aberystwyth.

Learning areas:

- English
 - Language
 - Literature
 - Literacy
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Core capabilities:

- Critical and Creative Thinking
- Ethical Understanding
- Personal and Social Capability
- Intercultural Understanding

Cross curriculum priorities:

- Sustainability

Before Reading

- Read the title of the novel. What do you think “small things” might refer to? Why might small things be dangerous?
- Study the cover design. What mood or atmosphere do the bees create? What predictions can you make about the story?
- The novel opens with the line: “The world ended years before anyone realized it had, in complete silence.” What effect does this opening sentence have on the reader?
- Before reading, discuss what students already know about bees and pollination. Why are bees important to ecosystems and food production?
- Research the dystopian fiction genre. What are some common features of dystopian novels?
- Create a class list of other dystopian texts students may already know. What themes or warnings do these stories often explore?
- Discuss the role that stories, books, art and imagination play in our lives. Why might authoritarian governments attempt to control or remove them?
- Why does Jess struggle to stay silent about the injustice around her?
- Discuss the role of fear in controlling the population. Which characters are motivated by fear, and which resist it?
- Why are imagination and storytelling powerful acts in the novel?
- How does the novel explore the relationship between environmental destruction and political control?
- What examples of hope can be found throughout the story, even in difficult moments?
- Why do you think the novel is titled *The Danger of Small Things*?
- Jess reflects that people “couldn’t see the danger in small things” (p. 5). What warning might the author be giving readers about our own world?
- How do the memories of books such as *The Secret Garden* and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* shape Jess and Cass’s understanding of possibility and freedom? (pp. 22-23)
- Which character did you find most sympathetic or interesting, and why?
- How does Jess change over the course of the novel?

Comprehension questions

- Why does Jess spend so much time thinking about bees and the collapse of the world?
- How does Jess describe the world before the collapse? Which details feel most shocking or upsetting to her?
- What role did Jess’s mother and Ruth play in preserving stories and knowledge?
- Why are books considered dangerous in this society?
- How does the camp maintain control over the girls?
- Describe Jess and Cass’s friendship. Why is it so important to both of them?
- Why is Cass frightened of the Assembly ceremonies?
- What is the significance of the girls’ hair being cut before marriage?
- How does Father Renatus attempt to justify the system running the camp? (pp. 17-18)

Literacy:

Genre / Dystopian fiction

The Danger of Small Things is a dystopian novel. Dystopian fiction often imagines societies shaped by oppression, environmental disaster, inequality or authoritarian control. These stories frequently act as warnings, encouraging readers to think critically about the world around them.

- Identify some common conventions of dystopian fiction present in the novel. Consider:
 - setting
 - government control
 - propaganda
 - surveillance
 - restricted freedoms

- environmental collapse
- rebellion
- Compare this novel to another dystopian setting you have read or viewed. How are the societies similar or different?
- Why do you think dystopian fiction is so popular with teenage readers?
- Discuss how the author uses first person narration to shape the reader's understanding of Jess's world.
- The novel frequently contrasts beauty and brutality. Find examples where the author uses vivid imagery to describe nature, flowers or memories of the past alongside violence, fear or control.
- Explore the symbolism of bees throughout the novel. What might they represent beyond pollination?
- Jess remembers stories about robins, coral reefs, forests and oceans. Why are these descriptions so emotionally powerful?
- Discuss the role of language and propaganda in the camp. How do slogans such as "We're in this together" attempt to manipulate the girls?
- How can stories, imagination and art become forms of resistance in oppressive societies?

Theme / Environmental collapse

The disappearance of bees triggers the collapse of ecosystems, food systems and eventually society itself.

- Research the real-world importance of bees and pollinators. What risks do scientists warn about if bee populations continue to decline?
- Discuss the relationship between environmental destruction and inequality in the novel. Who suffers most from the collapse?
- The novel suggests that environmental disasters are often ignored until it is too late. Can you think of examples in the real world where warnings have been dismissed or ignored?
- Why do you think the author connects environmental collapse with the loss of art, literature and culture?

Final reflections:

- What aspects of the world in *The Danger of Small Things* felt most believable or realistic?
- Did the novel leave you feeling hopeful, pessimistic, or something in between? Explain your response.
- Which relationships in the novel felt most important to the story?
- What role do kindness and friendship play in helping characters survive?
- How might the story have been different if it were told from Cass's perspective instead of Jess's?
- What message do you think the author wants readers to take away from the novel?
- Would you recommend this novel to other readers? Why or why not?
- Compare Jess at the beginning of the novel to Jess at the end. What has she learned about herself and the world?

Creative activities:

- Design a new cover for *The Danger of Small Things*. Explain the symbols, colours and imagery you chose.
- Create a propaganda poster that might appear inside the camp. Use slogans and visual techniques to persuade the girls to obey the system.
- Write a diary entry from Cass's perspective after the Assembly ceremony.
- Imagine that bees suddenly disappeared in the modern world. Write a short news article describing the first signs of collapse.
- Jess and Cass imagine other worlds through stories. Create your own hidden place of hope and describe it using rich sensory detail.
- Research a real environmental issue affecting the world today. Create an informative poster or presentation connecting it to the warnings in the novel.

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- Write an additional scene set before the events of the novel, showing Jess's life with her mother and brother before she is taken to the camp.
- Create a playlist of songs that reflect the mood, themes or relationships in the novel. Explain your choices.
- Imagine a sequel to the novel. Write a blurb describing what might happen next.
- The novel argues that small things matter. Write a personal reflection about a "small thing" that has had a significant impact on your own life or community.