

Teachers Notes

by Dr Susan La Marca

SOLO

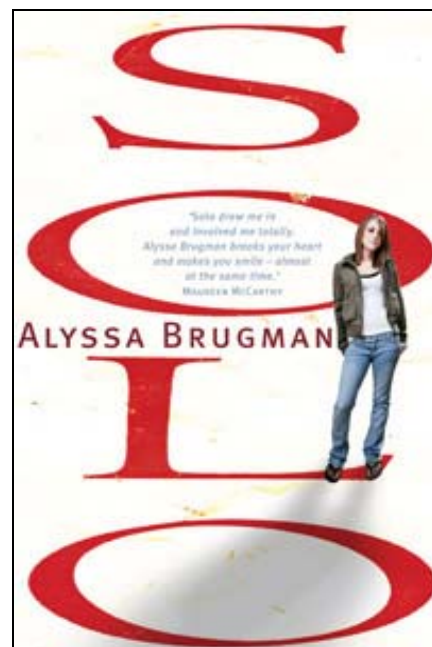
by
Alyssa Brugman

ISBN

Recommended for ages 14 yrs or older

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INTRODUCTION

Solo explores the life of Mackenzie, a troubled young girl with a mysterious past. The book is written as a retrospective, first person narrative. As the story opens she has just been sent to a camp for adolescents, many of whom appear to be having difficulty coping with everyday life. At the camp, Mackenzie is preparing to undertake a 'Solo' which involves spending the night alone in the bush. On the Solo, Mackenzie must face her past and the demons that lie within if she is to remain whole and sane. As the Solo progresses, the experience which has brought Mackenzie to this point in her life is slowly revealed. Hers is a life marred by drug-addicted and drug-dealing parents, homelessness, abuse and neglect, and a sense of guilt that has affected her deeply.

This is a fast paced, often shocking, thriller. It is also a story of awakening and growth that encourages readers to think on the value of family, the importance of truth and the power of guilt and the subconscious.

STRUCTURE

PART TITLES

The titles for the respective six parts of the story chart the progression of the narrative. Consider their significance and discuss what you believe each represents. The titles are:

Part OneCamp
Part TwoThe Liar Paradox
Part ThreeTravelling into Flames
Part FourTruths
Part FiveDescent
Part SixGoing Sane

CHAPTER TITLES

Many of the chapter headings are also interesting in relation to Mackenzie's story and her progress towards healing. Discuss the significance of some of them to the text. For example:

- Asterisks
- Away on business
- Trust fund
- Going Sane
- Metaphorical Ducks
- Calves and Cars

SHORT CHAPTERS

Brugman uses very short chapters to create a sense of tension. Each short chapter also offers up a complicated story in bite-sized chunks that satisfy readers and encourage them to keep reading. Consider this technique and the way it impacts upon how we read.

- Ask the students to write a story that is constructed as a series of very short chapters.

CLIFF-HANGERS

At the end of the chapter 'The Chemists Shop' Brugman leaves the reader with a cliff-hanger ending - nothing but 'because...' (p. 59)

- How effective is this device?
- Can you leave your reading there? Or must you go on to see what happens?
- Discuss how this device could be used in a story and create a short one of your own. Consider other possible cliff-hanger phrases such as: 'and then....'

Writing activity

On page 157 Mackenzie imagines a series of different cars approaching her. She describes each car, its driver, the contents of the car and the destination. Through each brief paragraph Brugman manages to create a slice of this person's life and give us insight into what their life might be like in the broader sense.

As a writing activity ask the students to recreate this device. They need to give a sense of a person by describing the driver, the car, and the destination as Brugman does heading towards them down a long country road. The aim is to give the flavour of a person and their life in only a few words.

PLOT

Solo is an excellent example of the psychological thriller. The thriller genre is one with which all students will be familiar. Film previews of thrillers can be extremely exciting, scary or confronting, because they are a condensed version of the tension-building plot but don't give away the 'key' to the thriller.

Activity

Using a program such as Microsoft Photo Story, construct a promotional video for *Solo* which combines images, text and music. By carefully selecting the elements which you believe best represent the book, attempt to capture the tension and texture of the story as it moves towards its final revelations.

For an example of this type of activity, look at the promotional short video for *The Butcherbird* by Geoffrey Cousins that is located on the Allen & Unwin website at:

http://www.allenandunwin.com/teaching/images/Butcherbird_Trailer.wmv

LANGUAGE

THE RED MAN

'The Red Man' is a vivid and frightening character in *Solo* that dominates Mackenzie's imagination. Consider the potential of colour in creating an image.

- Why does Bethany's mum hang the clothes on the line in colour groupings? (p. 21)
- Quote words from Mackenzie's mind that describe 'The Red Man'.
- If we were describing a different character, perhaps 'the green man' or 'the white man', for instance, explore the different immediate perceptions that the change in colour offers. What else changes our perception in this scenario? Different gender? Different age? Eg. 'The red woman', 'the green boy' 'the orange baby'. Discussions such as this, with the context of the book as impetus, help us to

explore the ways simple words come with many inbuilt perceptions and assumptions.

DESCRIPTIVE PASSAGES

Brugman does an extraordinary job of evoking feeling in *Solo*. Encourage the students to find and discuss some of the passages, sentences or phrases that they find interesting. Some possible examples:

- 'Then ugly perverse thoughts barged in like bullies' (page 40)
- 'The paddocks on the way into the valley were lush, crayon green. The cattle were so fat their low swinging bellies dragged the skin taut over their bones. They pitched and rolled on graceless legs and stared at us with faces vague and crude. They looked as though they had been pinched out of clay.' (p. 35)
- 'The Red Man. The man shaped liked scissors. My monster, not in the night-time, electric-cage of my mind, but outside, out here in the daylight.' (p. 156)

CHARACTERS

MACKENZIE

Despite feeling like she is 'in limbo without a script' (p. 36) Mackenzie is a very street-savvy and intelligent young woman. She has survived an unbelievably difficult childhood that has left her with immeasurable emotional scars.

On page 134, Mackenzie describes herself as 'physically and emotionally disposable'. Why?

Callum describes Mackenzie as a 'crazy warrior woman'. (p. 171)

- In what ways is this description apt?

CALLUM

Mackenzie first describes her interaction with Callum on pages 7-8.

What does Callum represent for Mackenzie?

Towards the end of the book, after Mackenzie has returned from her Solo, Callum confesses something about his own past (p. 171).

- How does this make Mackenzie feel?
Do you think a relationship between the two has a future? Why / why not?

MOTHER

Why does Mackenzie call her mother "Itsy"?

Mackenzie only started calling her this after she spent the trust money. (p. 72)

Mackenzie's mother's behaviour is only described through Mackenzie's eyes. We see her mother:

- Abandoning Mackenzie (pp. 52 – 3, 76 - 77)
- Claiming she smoked when pregnant to reduce the size of the baby's head (p. 69)
- Spending Mackenzie's trust money (72)

Consider these events in conjunction with the following:

- 'Of all the things Itsy has done to me, it's the memory of this day that makes me rumble full of hate for her with a thickness and force like boiling oil. She can make my present life a misery, but there is something particularly spiteful and uncaring about stealing my future as well.' (p. 72)
- 'Itsy looked glamorous, but something underneath was decayed and you knew if you pressed too hard it would all crumble away to dust. Now I think of Itsy like a penguin in an oil-slick – clogged, miserable and without hope of saving herself.' (p. 75)
- The chapter titled 'Breaking up with Mum'. (p. 76)
- 'My Mum doesn't love me because she's a junkie. Junkies can only love people temporarily. They are emotionally nomadic.' (p. 93)

Now discuss:

- How do you feel about Mackenzie's mother's behaviour?
- How does she compare to other mothers found in fiction?
- How does she compare to reality?

FATHER

Mackenzie's relationship with her father is equally destructive. At one point she imagines him as a cancer patient (pp. 55-56) thinking that this would be better than reality. At times in her life her father has offered a much-needed sense of 'contentment' (p. 67) and a sense she could 'crawl into Dad's lap' (p. 67) and everything would be better. A great deal of the guilt that Mackenzie carries is directly related to her father and his imprisonment.

What does Mackenzie need from her dad during her visit to him in jail? She says she wants him to know, to perceive. But she recognises that 'he was too busy thinking about himself' (p. 141). Mackenzie is relieved, though, that her father does notice. Why?

- Why does her father begin to cry?
- Where is Mackenzie's father? Why does he think that she 'broke him'? (p. 141)
- Is it really possible for Mackenzie's father to rescue her as she suggests? (p. 142) Or can this only be done by someone else?

BROTHER - SCOTT

Though Mackenzie often describes Scott only as 'runner boy', she does intimate that he is family to her early on during one of her first descriptions of him (p. 58).

Scott, unlike Mackenzie, has been in and out of foster care, 'no hippo-therapy for him.' (p. 67)

She says of him:

It wasn't that I didn't like him, he just wasn't anything to me. He was like a fellow commuter on a train. You both look out the window. You make sure that no part of you touches any part of them. You make polite conversation if you have to, and then you get on with your life. (p. 68)

- If this is true, why does Scott feature so heavily in her 'Solo'?
- Scott's death is described on page 151. On page 160 Mackenzie says about Scott, 'He's my monster'. Why?

GRANDPARENTS

Mackenzie describes how she wants to become part of her grandparent's lives.

- 'I wanted to work my way into the place backwards or sideways' (p. 79)
'stick like a barnacle to the underside of their life' (80)
- Why is this so important to her? What do her 'grandparents' represent in her life?

Mackenzie explores the pain caused by her 'grandparents' not taking her in. She says:

'They were fakers. They put on caring as though it were a costume' (p. 107).

Is this true? Consider Pop's initial reaction. (p. 80)

- Why don't they take Mackenzie in? Why does she burn down their garage? (pp. 107-8)

Nan and Pop are not Mackenzie's real grandparents. (p. 111)

- Should they have taken her in anyway? Where are her real grandparents?

ARTISTIC INTERPRETATION

MUSIC

Play the students a piece of music by Billie Holiday, preferably the song 'I got a right to sing the blues', which is quoted on page 3.

- Discuss the quality of her voice and the depth of emotion that she conveys through her pronunciation and delivery.
Consider how this song relates to the character of Mackenzie and the book *Solo* as a whole.

Consider the song words:

'And she's got a little tin cup with her heart in it
To bang along the bars of her rib cage'

'Fierce Flawless' by Ani Di Franco (page 117)

The words are very evocative of the emotions that Mackenzie is experiencing. Play the music.

- Explore how powerful the words are when used with music.

It is well accepted that music or song has enormous potential to powerfully convey strong emotions. It can often cut through the veneer of cold, uncaring reactions, melting even the stoutest of hearts.

- Explore with the students music that moves them emotionally.
Play a selection of their suggestions, and your own, to the class. Try to include a variety of styles in your selection. Ask students to list words that describe how the song makes them feel.

- Discuss the meaning, and relevance to the text, of the quote from the Marilyn Manson song 'Irresponsible Hate Anthem' on page 99.

'I wasn't born with enough middle fingers'

How is so much hate possible?

ART

During Mackenzie's hallucinatory episodes on her *Solo*, she is described as being like the figure in Munch's painting 'The Scream' (page 96).

- Find copies of this painting and consider how this artistically represents the words that Brugman has used to describe the place that Mackenzie is at in her own mind.
- Brainstorm with others any words that further describe what Mackenzie is going through. Respond to this mood in an art form of your choice.
- Read the story 'Listening to Mondrian' from the short story collection *Listening to Mondrian* by Nadia Wheatley (Allen & Unwin, 2006). Discuss the power of art in this story to capture and evoke feeling and state of mind.
- Discuss Wheatley's work in relation to *Solo*. Brugman is exploring this power herself in references to paintings and music. Share with each other works of art that you find equally evocative of human feeling.

THEMES

FAMILY

In relation to the families in *Solo*, and families you may know, discuss the following quotations:

- 'Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way'. Leo Tolstoy (1828 - 1910), *Anna Karenina*, Chapter 1, first line
- 'The family is the country of the heart'. Giuseppe Mazzini (1805 - 1872)
- 'A family is a place where minds come in contact with one another. If these minds love one another the home will be as beautiful as a flower garden. But if these minds get out of harmony with one another it is like a storm that plays havoc with the garden'. Buddha (563 BC - 483 BC)
- 'The family is the nucleus of civilization'. William James Durant

On page 22 Bethany says: 'I reckon the worst monsters are the ones you know.'

Consider the rock-throwing incident which Callum describes (p. 29). Are there choices or is it just about the family you get?

On page 101 Mackenzie says:

Every day I see other people my age who have won just by being born into the right family. I have been set up to fail. I have all the excuses in the world.

I'm in the lowest percentile range, the long-term, repeat offender, intergenerational transgressor. I'm locked in the rock-throwing cycle. I'd lost before I was ever born. (p. 101)

- Are these just excuses?
Is it fair to 'blame'?
Is the cycle referred to by Mackenzie impossible to break?

She goes on to say: 'Every now and then I deserve a few wins of my own – the occasional skirmish towards balancing the universe.' (p. 101)

- What kind of balance is Mackenzie looking for?
Is this what we all strive for with varying degrees of success?

When Mackenzie has completed her *Solo* and come to terms with her situation, she describes the disintegration of her family:

'My father stole my mother from me in dolly steps. In his absence she wasted away a minute at a time. The other dealers scuttled all over her like spiders, and she melted away.' (p. 170)

- Consider the imagery Brugman has used here. Especially the references to time passing, illness and spiders.

The last two sentences in the book are: 'It's a risk but there are 20 543 840 people in this country who are not my mum and dad. Sometimes you have got to take a chance.' (p. 173)

- What does she mean?
How hard is it to contemplate Mackenzie's view? Her mother and father are her closest family yet they are the ones she cannot trust.
What do you think she feels for her family at the end of the book? What varied emotions do they conjure up?
How easy will it be for Mackenzie to make a life without the support of family?

TRUTH

On page 12 Mackenzie says:

Your opening line tells people what you care about and what sort of attitude you have. It makes a picture in the other person's mind and it doesn't really matter what else you say after that. They already have an image of you in their head. (p. 12)

Mackenzie goes on to create a story about herself that is far from the truth, as do the others at the camp. Mackenzie comments, 'I wondered if my opening line was as see-through as theirs'. (p. 14)

- Do you think that people make up their minds about others on first impression? What other factors come into play apart from what the person first says? Write a brief interplay between two people who meet, including dialogue and their reactions to each other. Consider the power of perceptions and the often incorrect assumptions we may make.

On page 101 Mackenzie says: Things aren't as 'Poor me' as I might make out. I'm a liar. I'm not even honest with myself. Sometimes when I am close to the truth I just re-remember it a different way.'

- Are we all liars?
Do we all distort the truth to suit ourselves?
- How do you interpret Mackenzie's 'taxing' of the Guidmans? (p. 102–3)
- and her stealing Lorelei's shoes? (p. 105). Why does she do it? Is it more than the thrill of thieving? What does it mean to Mackenzie?

On page 132 we find out that Mackenzie was actually raped by Joshua – not that she used her intelligence to escape him, as was suggested earlier.

- Why does she lie to herself?
- Are some events in our life just too painful to face?

On page 134 Mackenzie questions the reasons for remembering, letting certain thoughts force their way into her head. Rather than remembering, she chooses to fabricate her own truth to shield her from her memories.

- Is she right to see it this way? Or, is Mackenzie's ability to acknowledge the truth (p. 132) part of her healing?

GUILT

The guilt that Mackenzie feels, even as a very young child, is extreme.

- Discuss the impact of drug use upon a family and a community. Consider the different kinds of impact – financial, emotional, physical etc.

When Mackenzie faces reality during her Solo experience she relives the moment in the courtroom when Katie's dad testifies about her father's drug dealings. She says:

'He said he'd received a tip-off and his glance flickered around the courtroom, landed on my face, cold and flat, like a slap, and then continued on towards the jury'. (p. 153)

- Mackenzie perceives her guilt as a physical assault. Why is this so damaging to her?
- How does her guilt in this matter compare to other 'wrong' things that she has done eg. burning the garage or stealing from neighbours. Consider the motives in each case.

DRUGS

Read over Mackenzie's description of the 'chemist shop'. (p. 57 onwards)

- How far from the truth is Mackenzie's description?
- Why does Mackenzie see it this way?

The effects of drug abuse on families are extreme – emotionally and physically. Discuss Mackenzie's summation of her mother's abilities:

My Mum doesn't love me because she's a junkie. Junkies can only love people temporarily. They are emotionally nomadic. (p. 93)

At one point Mackenzie 'dobs' on her mother after another visit to the hospital, telling a nurse that her mother's problem was caused by an infection after a bad injection. But this has no effect as the hospital already knows.

...but a hospital is not a jail. I cried because this time I had dobbed and nothing happened. I don't know if it's worse when something happens or when nothing does. (p. 109)

- What could Mackenzie have done?
- Consider the effects of drugs on families in the community.

In the chapter 'Choked' (p. 149 – 151) Mackenzie admits to herself what her family was involved in and the circumstances of her brother's death. She ends the chapter with the words 'Scott's choked. He's choked to death on Dad's drugs'. (p. 151)

- What is Mackenzie's part in this? Why does she feel such guilt?

THERAPY – THE SOLO

'I'm already nutty and I'm out here to go sane'. (p. 40)

- How would you fare on a Solo?
- What benefits does the experience provide?
- Could a Solo take place in a built-up environment? Does the natural world play a part?
- Why do we often turn to nature for solace in times of stress or crisis?

- Explore, in words or art, what you feel would be a perfect environment for an effective 'Solo' for you.
- Is Mackenzie nervous about the Solo (p. 33) or what the Solo represents?
- Does she really need to go into the bush to experience what the Solo means to her?
- What impact do insects and animals have on her Solo experience? (p. 65)
- What is meant by: 'Predator becomes prey. There is no justice, only stealth, speed and opportunity'? (p. 66)
- Why does Mackenzie say 'No wonder humans invented Nintendo'? (p. 41)

How does Mackenzie interact with the health care professionals and counsellors that she meets? Consider her description of herself from her counsellor's point of view (p. 88) – 'a smorgasbord of challenges'. (p. 88)

Read over how Mackenzie describes the food she cooks and eats at the start of her Solo (p. 94). What does this food and drink mean to Mackenzie?

What is the significance of the tangerine orange sprite, the small boy in white makeup, the pacing woman by the water's edge and the choking boy that Mackenzie sees while at the fire? (p. 95)

- Who, or what, do they represent?

Read over Mackenzie's description of her intense experience as she undergoes an anxiety attack during her time on the Solo. (p. 119 onwards)

- Why does she think 'I'm safe inside all that noise'? (p. 121)

On the Solo, with the encouragement of The Red Man, Mackenzie faces what she feels are the worst things she has done. Read over this section. (pp. 135–9)

- Why is this event the worst thing that Mackenzie has done?
What are the ramifications of what she does?

As Mackenzie's anxiety attack dissipates, she says:

'I don't know which way to go, because freedom isn't a place. I head up the hill, because it looks like the wrong way, and it's harder, and life is like that.' (p. 155)

- If freedom is not a place what is it? Or, more specifically, what is it for Mackenzie?
Do you agree with Mackenzie that life is hard?

As Mackenzie's experience on Solo comes to an end, she realises that there is a world beyond that which she has experienced to date. She says:

'There are 20 543 840 people in this country. They can't all be bad. Sometimes you've got to take a chance.' (p. 158) She repeats this at the end of the book as well. (p. 173)

- What does this revelation represent for Mackenzie?

Mackenzie says: 'That's what I came out here to do, because it's all about what you can get away with. It's not about justice, only stealth, speed and opportunity.' (p. 161)

- What does she mean by this?

When Mackenzie perceives The Red Man to be moving toward her again she decides 'I have to do this, or he'll chase me forever.' (p. 162) But it is not as simple as beating The Red Man. She says: 'The Red Man is waiting. I need to decide if I am the sort of person who throws rocks at cars just because there's no net.' (p. 163)

- What does she mean by this? Refer back to the text to help explain her viewpoint.

- Why is Mackenzie 'repentant'? (p. 164)
- To what is the Red Man referring when he says: "You can't kill your history...You have to live with it." (p. 165)

Read over the description of the swim Mackenzie takes when she returns to camp. (p. 166)

- What might be the significance of this?

After it she feels 'exposed and hardy at the same time, like a cactus flower'. (p. 167) She goes on to describe herself as 'never having felt so clean'.

On returning to camp Mackenzie tells Callum the true story of her background. (p. 169) What does this represent in terms of her growth and journey on the Solo?

She goes on to say: 'I can be different from them both. That's what I decided out there.' (p. 170)

- What does Mackenzie mean by this?
Do you think this will be enough to help her survive through whatever is to come?
What do you see for her future?

MENTAL ILLNESS

On pages 20 - 22 Bethany and Mackenzie consider the fine line between normality and serial killers. They feel 'most people are a little bit nutty.' (p. 21)

- Do you agree?

Mackenzie is told by her counsellor that physical symptoms of illness can be manufactured by the mind. (p. 30) Discuss this in relation to Mackenzie's behaviour on the Solo.

What does Mackenzie mean by:

'Sometimes I can't bear to be in my own skin. It's like being embarrassed but ten times worse. I want to run until I have left myself behind, but I can't run that fast...There's only one way to truly leave.' (p. 30)

How does the liar paradox (p. 45) relate to Mackenzie's feelings and mental state while on the Solo?

What is meant by: 'What would you do if you were afraid of spiders *and* ducks? You'd be stuffed.' (p. 91)

- To who, or what, is Mackenzie referring?

Why is the chapter that begins on page 111 titled 'Baskets'?

The opening paragraph of the following chapter, 'Incident at the Bakery', contains a lot of terminology that relates to the way Mackenzie has been compartmentalised.

- Is there power in such words for the lay person?
- What does it all mean in relation to Mackenzie?
- Why does Mackenzie behave as she does at the bakery?

RECURRING MOTIFS

THE RED MAN

Read over the chapter 'Red' (p. 122) and the following chapter 'Positive Scenario Projection' (p. 126).

- What / who is the Red Man?
Is it the projection of a single person? Or a number of people?
- Why does Callum appear during Mackenzie's thoughts of the Red Man? (p. 127)
Why does Dad inject the Red Man? (p. 130) What / who does this represent to Mackenzie?

When she feels the Red Man may be leaving her Mackenzie says: 'I know that what is worse than being with the Red Man is being without him.' (p. 144)

- Why?

The Red Man is always described in raw and frightening terms, at one point Mackenzie says of him: 'The Red Man. The man shaped like scissors. My monster, not in the night-time, electric-cage of my mind, but outside, out here in the daylight'. (p. 156)

- How can a man be shaped like scissors?
What images or associations does this phrase evoke?
What is more horrifying for Mackenzie - monsters of the day or night?

STORIES

Stories are part of Mackenzie's life. In fact, they become her life as she creates stories to replace much of what is real.

She creates a series of stories to explain her father - 'stormy night-spy story' 'away on business' story (p. 50), a professional golfer (p. 54), cancer patient (p. 55) and owner of a chemist shop (p. 57).

- Why is it so hard for Mackenzie to face reality?

At one point Mackenzie is worried about starting an imaginary friend as this might create in her a multiple personality disorder. Or perhaps she might create an enemy rather than a friend (p. 70).

- But, have Mackenzie's troubles already brought her to this level of psychological distress?

The first version of how Mackenzie talked around Joshua (p. 86–7) to avoid sex with him is not true. It is a story. Later Mackenzie recognises that the true story is much darker. (p. 134)

- Are stories one of the things that keep Mackenzie sane?
- Can stories become real?

FAIRYTALES

When Mackenzie is being left at the camp at the beginning of her Solo she describes herself as feeling like Gretel of fairytale fame. (p. 37) Many fairytales describe a character's fight for justice or recognition but they usually live happily ever after.

- Is Mackenzie in any way like a fairytale character?

When Mackenzie starts to hallucinate during her Solo therapy, she imagines the manifestation of her fears to be the giant from the Jack and the Beanstalk fairytale. (p. 119)

- How does such a reference make you feel as you read it?
- It is a dark version of the fairytale giant. Why do you think Brugman has used such a recognisable image?

During Mackenzie's anxiety attack and her 'discussions' with the Red Man, she says:

'I'm Gretel. I'm Briar Rose and Little Red Cap. Why is it always the girls who suffer in those fairytales? The boys find tricky ways out. The boys come home with a fortune in gold.' (p. 143)

- Is this true?
- Why does Mackenzie so readily identify with fairytale characters?
- Mackenzie describes her mother (p. 170) as having 'melted away', which conjures images of the wicked witch of Oz and her death.
- Is Mackenzie's mother to be seen as a wicked witch? Or is this an over-simplification?

RELATED READING

THRILLERS WITH A TWIST

Catran, Ken (2000) *Talking to Blue*, Lothian.
Marchetta, Melina (2006) *On Jellicoe Road*, Penguin.
Caswell, Brian (2005) *Double Exposure*, UQP.
Jonsberg, Barry (2006) *Dreamrider*, Allen & Unwin.
Kelleher, Victor (2000) *Del-Del*, Random House.
Watson-Kell, Katy (2006) *Mama's Trippin'*, FACP

DRUGS

Brooks, Kevin (2005) *Candy*, Chicken House.
Clark, Margaret (1997) *Care-Factor Zero*, Random House.
Klein, Robin (1989) *Came Back to Show You I Could Fly*, Penguin.
'Drug Use in the Family': Australian National Council on Drugs report
<http://www.ancd.org.au/media/media106.htm> - see **Appendix** for more information.

MENTAL ILLNESS / DEPRESSION

Clarke, Judith (1998) *Night Train*, Penguin
Cormier, Robert (1998) *I am the Cheese*, Puffin.
McCord, Patricia (2005) *Pictures in the Dark*, Bloomsbury.
McCormick, Patricia (2002) *Cut*, HarperCollins.

ABOUT THE WRITERS

ALYSSA BRUGMAN

Solo is Alyssa Brugman's eighth novel. Alyssa's previous books – *Finding Grace*, *Walking Naked*, *Being Bindy*, *For Sale and Swap*, *Beginner's Luck*, *Hot Potato* and *Hide and Seek* – are distributed around the world and have been shortlisted for numerous literature and children's choice awards in Australia and overseas.

She lives in the Hunter Valley with her partner and their seven horses. Alyssa writes full time.

DR SUSAN LA MARCA

Susan La Marca is a secondary school teacher-librarian. Her PhD, completed in 2003, explored how a teacher-librarian creates a reading environment.

Susan works for the School Library Association of Victoria (SLAV) and edits their research journal *Synergy*. She is also an associate editor of the journal *Viewpoint: on books for young adults* and editor of a number of books on reading and school library design. She is the co author, with Dr Pam Macintyre, of *Knowing readers: unlocking the pleasures of reading* (2006).

As well as being the Children's Book Council of Australia awards judge for Victoria for 2006/7, Susan works as a consultant and writer in areas related to reading and teacher-librarianship. She has presented in these areas both nationally and internationally.

APPENDIX

DRUG USE IN THE FAMILY

On 21 May 2007 the Australian National Council on Drugs released a media statement about their report 'Drug Use in the Family'. It is available at <http://www.ancd.org.au/media/media106.htm>

The report includes recommendations regarding the content of treatment programs to meet the needs of children living in families with substance misuse.

The report builds on two earlier documents, one of which is *Hidden Harm: Responding to the Needs of Children of Problem Drug Users*, which was commissioned by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs in the UK

(http://www.drugscope.org.uk/uploads/goodpractice/documents/hidden_harm_summary.pdf)

Excerpts from *Drug Use in the Family* media release:

Major Report Released Today From The Australian National Council On Drugs On The Number Of Australian Children Living In Households Affected By Alcohol or Drugs, The Issues They Face And How We Can Improve This Situation.

After reviewing the many data sources the following figures represent the authors' best estimate at the numbers of children living in households with parental substance misuse.

- Over 230,000 children live in households where they are at risk of exposure to at least one adult binge drinker
- Over 40,000 children live in a household where one adult is taking cannabis daily

- Over 14,000 children live in a household where one adult uses methamphetamines monthly

This equates to an estimated 13% of Australian children compared to international surveys that suggest 10% of children live in households where there is alcohol misuse or substance dependence.

However, rather than simply focusing on these estimates the Australian National Council on Drugs chairman says it is critical that all the principles of good practice covered in the new report – *Drug Use in the Family: Impacts and Implications for Children* (http://www.ancd.org.au/publications/research_papers.htm) – are adopted. In particular it is vital that there are far more family-friendly treatment programs available for people with substance misuse problems.

One of the distressing findings of this major report being released on the 21st of May 2007 in Sydney is the high rate of adverse outcomes for children raised in families experiencing problems.