

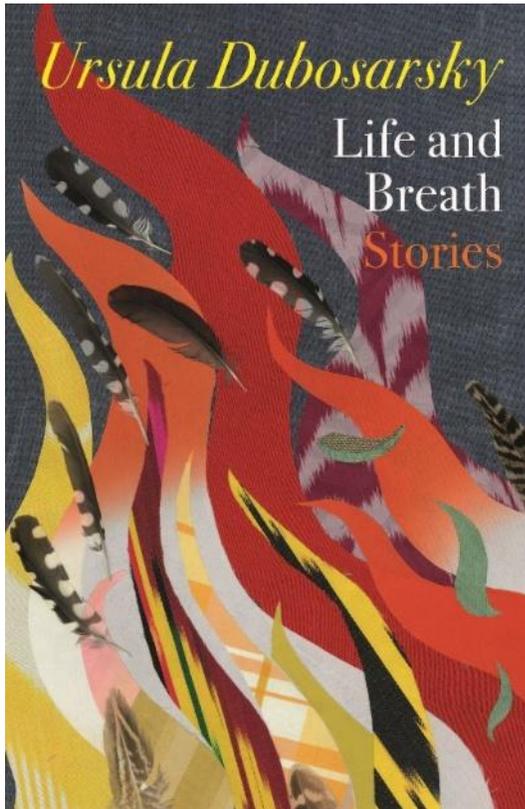
Life and Breath

Stories

Ursula Dubosarsky

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KS2 / KS3 Teachers' Notes by Chris Baker



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THE BOOK

It was a sunny, light-aired day, and we walked quickly down the street strewn with gumnuts. I remember taking several deep breaths, as if to reassure myself that whatever had happened to my strong, smiling uncle, I was still alive and was going to keep on living, and that life and breath were very good things.

Discoveries from the past, hopes for the future – and the decisions we make on a knife edge that clarify our own sense of self. These elements inform Ursula Dubosarsky's multi-award-winning novels and are in sharp, bright evidence in these thirteen beautifully crafted short stories.

URSULA DUBOSARSKY



For more than thirty-five years, Ursula Dubosarsky – who wanted to be a writer from the age of six – has been one of Australia's best-loved and most acclaimed authors. Ursula was the Australian Children's Laureate from 2020-2021. She has won nine state literary awards in Australia, the Children's Book Council Book of the Year Award, and has been nominated internationally for both the Astrid Lindgren (multiple times) and Hans Christian Andersen awards. Her books have been published widely throughout the English-speaking world and translated into fifteen languages. Ursula lives in Sydney with her husband Avi. They have a daughter, Maisie, two sons, Dover and Bruno, and a granddaughter, Lucy. For more information, visit ursuladubosarsky.squarespace.com

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Introduction

Short stories offer so much to teachers today. They can be read in one or two lessons and help students to build familiarity with different genres and different authors. Short stories avoid the problem of a book remaining unfinished due to insufficient time to read the entire book, or long gaps between sessions resulting in a lack of momentum and waning interest.

Short fiction certainly should not replace the need to read longer novels, which demand that readers keep the plot (and often multiple sub-plots) in their heads over time. However, a mixed menu of shorter and longer texts across the year is highly recommended, and we hope that this collection will find a home on your shelf.

The structure and length of short stories is more relevant to students in Key Stage 2 and 3, and is likely to support their writing more effectively. Rather than the more complex structures of novel writing, excellent short stories model beginnings, middles and ends, all in the space of a few pages.

Clearly, short stories can be shared with your students simply for the pleasure of the story, with no desire (or time!) to delve into analysis or discussion. For this reason, we have included approximate timings for the story to be read aloud, uninterrupted.

In instances where you would like to use a story to support your students' comprehension or writing skills, we hope the suggested activities and question prompts are helpful. You may wish to break the story up and facilitate short activities or discussions at different points.

At the top of each page we provide short synopses of each story. These include spoilers and, where relevant, trigger warnings. We hope that this helps you to make an informed decision about which of these fantastically rich stories to share with your students.

Useful approaches in the classroom

There are several techniques that can aid students' engagement and enjoyment of short stories. Keep these in mind as you work with your students. You may find that some are more useful than others; choose those which fit best with you and your class.

Thinking Aloud

Good teachers model 'thinking aloud' while reading, showing where their understanding is changing, what predictions they are making, how the story is being visualised, and where questions or wonderings remain. When done well, students come to realise that this technique can help them to monitor their own comprehension. Some useful phrases to use when thinking aloud:

- OK, so I will re-read from the start to check what's going on here ...
- So far, I think...
- By telling us that, I think the author wants us to think...
- I don't quite understand this bit...
- Ah, now I see why the author said ... that makes sense now
- This bit made me think of something I read ... (or have seen, or happened to me)
- I wonder why...

Active Questioning

Asking and answering questions about a text are at the heart of comprehension activities.

Students may wish to record questions on Post-it notes while they read the story independently, or they may verbalise their questions while listening. Either way, questions build connections within a classroom and help everyone to see the multiple ways in which a story can be interpreted.

For younger readers, spend time on simpler retrieval questions to check their understanding: Who was the main character? What happened at the start? Where did the characters go? How do we know the girl feels sad?

Once understanding is secure, and also for older readers, more open-ended questions can generate fruitful discussion: What is the main message of this story? Why did the author choose to end the story like this? What is missing from the story? How would the story differ if it was told from a different character's perspective?

The stories at a glance...

The thirteen stories in *Life and Breath* are presented in these teacher notes in two groups; those more suited for Key Stage 2 (ages 7-11) and those more suited for Key Stage 3 (ages 11-14). In the latter group, there are two stories that have difficult themes or topics. Summaries and trigger warnings are provided to help inform your choices.

Key Stage 2

- ★ The Little Green Leaf (read aloud time: approx. 2 minutes)

A short and gently mysterious story about a leaf who doesn't fall when all of its brothers and sisters fall to the ground in the autumn.

- ★ Famous Guinea Pigs in History:
The Tragic Life of King Charles the Unusual (read aloud time: approx. 5-6 minutes)

A fantastical story highlighting the author's rich imagination - children will enjoy immersing themselves in the idea that an everyday pet could have such an intricate and majestic life.

- ★ Jerry (read aloud time: approx. 5-6 minutes)

A tribute to a real-life horse, whose stoic presence in a field opposite a school, provides comfort to the community. A beautiful story to support discussions about the cycle of life and death.

- ★ Poor Teddy (read aloud time: approx. 8 minutes)

Wonderful personification of a teddy bear as the author looks back on a beloved toy koala and the unfair treatment it received. A super model for students to borrow from when writing.

- ★ The Night Parrot (read aloud time: approx. 12 minutes)

Spanning twenty-four hours in the life of a young girl as she waits for her mother to give birth. Fast-paced and colourful, this story has some magical realism and an intriguing main character.

- ★ The Poisoned Apple (read aloud time: approx. 8 minutes)

An unusual story, in which an apparent poisoning leads the main character to reflect on life's meaning against the backdrop of a festive national holiday.

- ★ The Birthday Party (read aloud time: approx. 10 minutes)

A hilarious romp of a story, which explores what would happen if your older brother was responsible for the games at your 7th birthday party.

Key Stage 3

- ★ Like a Long-Legged Fly (read aloud time: approx. 15 minutes)

High-school student Snow befriends Martin - a mysterious, introverted boy in her class. A realistic story highlighting the hidden challenges people can face.

- ★ Sarsaparilla (read aloud time: approx. 12 minutes)

On her return from school, Rosabel is followed into her house by a mysterious man in a grey suit. The two converse before he disappears, leaving a brown paper bag.

- ★ Little Wars (read aloud time: approx. 25-30 minutes)

A movingly realistic story that beautifully juxtaposes backyard games with the all-too-real signing-up of Australian men to the war effort.

- ★ The Golden Gate (read aloud time: approx. 18 minutes)

A darker story, with opportunities to discuss psychological responses to war and bereavement. In the later half of the story, a child dies in a freak accident, with intense descriptions of the moments this is witnessed by the child's sister.

- ★ Alone Like a Stone (read aloud time: approx. 14 minutes)

A darker story of a mother waiting to give birth seen through the eyes of her young daughter, Some mysterious elements left unexplained should generate fruitful discussions.

- ★ Percival (read aloud time: approx. 15 minutes)

A powerful story with themes of protection, freedom and risk. A final twist may well convince you and your students to re-read this moving portrait of a devoted mother.

Notes and guidance on individual stories

Key Stage 2

The Little Green Leaf

An excitable little green leaf grows on a tree and sees all of the others turn from proud green to crackly brown. The little green leaf remains on the tree when all others have fallen off and been swept away. At the end, as Spring approaches once again, the little green leaf is still there and notices tiny buds appearing on the branches.

Activity Ideas:

Write the next chapter in the little green leaf's life. Perhaps the new tiny buds would have questions for the green leaf still attached to the branch? Would the little green leaf warn the new leaves of their fate?

Hot-Seating. Students can take turns to step into the role of the leaf while others interview them.

Discuss the cycle of life and the inevitability of change. Do students think the little green leaf is going to live on the tree forever? What would it be like to see new leaves come and go each year?

Famous Guinea Pigs in History: The Tragic Life of King Charles the Unusual

In this story, an epic struggle for power is played out among guinea pigs! Children should enjoy the absurdity of the premise and some will undoubtedly make connections to the guinea pigs they know. The main character is King Charles - a conceited King ruling impulsively. His advisor, the sneaky and possibly deceitful Orlovo seems to have ulterior motives behind his guidance, while King Charles' sister, Belubulub, remains wise and overlooked.

Activity Ideas:

Hot-Seating: Students can take turns to step into the shoes of the main characters while others interview them to find out more about their motivations and desires. Ask students to prepare questions for each of the three main characters and then invite individuals to become these characters when they sit in the hot seat. Alternatively, a chat show style panel would be fun - with all three characters interacting with each other after the events of the story. Who feels the most wronged? What would they like to say to each other now?

Question Prompts:

- Why did the author choose guinea pigs to tell this story?
- How would the story have been different if the character were real (human) kings and queens?

Language Notes:

"slipped out the back door" = to pass away, to die (euphemism)

Jerry

This story is inspired by a real horse the author knew while working in a rural school in Australia. The main character Martha has a strong attachment to Jerry, an old and sickly horse living in a field near her school. The story may open up conversations about students' own experiences of losing beloved animals or family members. If this happens, focus on positive memories and the ways in which have been recorded and treasured.

Activity Ideas:

Ask the children to compare the descriptions of the real Jerry:

"Look how his ribs stick out, the poor old thing"

"...old skinny cranky..."

with the Jerry that appears to Martha in her dreams:

"He came galloping towards her. He looked strong and wild..."

"His mane and his coat shone like the light of the moon."

Why does Jerry appear differently in Martha's dreams?

Question Prompts:

- Why do our dreams sometimes offer us a better version of the truth (or a preferred reality)?
- What might Jerry's wings signify?
- Do you agree with Martha's mum when she consoles Martha?
"Try not to be too sad. He was so old."

Poor Teddy

A wonderful story that children will connect easily with. A girl recalls receiving a wonderful present on her sixth birthday. Teddy is *'a toy koala, about the size of a big can of peaches.'* She recounts the various ordeals that her darling Teddy goes through in subsequent years, and the reader sees how Teddy becomes increasingly ragged. Children will be keen to share stories of their own "Teddy", a toy that has been looked after a little *too* well, or that has survived various near-death experiences.

Activity Ideas:

Open a conversation about treasured toys. Perhaps ask students to bring in a toy (or a photograph of one). How have they been treated? Have they been through the wars? Perhaps they have been loved a little too hard? What would you say to your toy if you knew it could hear and understand you?

Ask students to draw a treasured toy and label some of their imperfections - how did they come about?

Alternatively, ask students to write a diary entry from the toy's point of view. Encourage personification to humanise the toy, like the author does in Teddy:

"black pupils that stared at me in a desperate, wet, sad sort of way."

"Help! Help! I heard him say in his little silent undemanding voice."

"Perhaps he thought I might leave him behind."

"...while poor Teddy valiantly kept playing 'Waltzing Matilda', plink plonk plink."

The Night Parrot

A chaotic Christmas Eve party, seen through a young girl's eyes, ends with a neighbourhood blackout, and a magical interaction between the girl and a beautiful, stuffed bird.

Activity Ideas:

Listen to "Carol of the Birds", a popular Australian Christmas Carol to help students imagine the atmosphere in the party.

Write about a party. Encourage students to use sensory detail to help convey the sights, sounds, smells and tastes. In *The Night Parrot*, the author includes several vivid descriptions of things Bridget sees:

"...an oozing, wet chocolate cake"

"The moon looked huge and heavy, as though it might tumble down."

"...its green silky wings and tail speckled with brown spots, its glorious yellow breast."

Questions Prompts:

- What is the significance of the blackout?
- Bridget is shaken awake by her father at two different points of the story. How does this repeated moment affect the story?
- Bridget seems indifferent to the other children. How does this help us understand her character?
- Why was it only Bridget who seemed to hear the Night Parrot?

The Poisoned Apple

The main character eats lunch with their family and a neighbour, Mrs Banks, before fainting and being seen by a doctor. Fearing that they have been poisoned, the child lies outside and reflects on life, while national holiday celebrations continue in the distance.

Activity Ideas:

Consider the contrast between the banal conversation topics of ants and the deeper reflections on life's purpose and trajectory. The main character feels optimistic about life at the end - are you positive about the future?

Question Prompts:

- What smells would cause you to wake up and sense disaster?
- How do we know that Mrs Banks isn't quite as welcome as she could be?
- The unnamed child's thoughts ramble while they are recovering from the "poison" - how do these thoughts and images contrast with what is happening around her?
- What does the child mean when she describes herself as "*perched on the rim of a vast and incorrigible world*"?

The Birthday Party

Mischievous Claudie plans the games for his sister Griselda's 7th birthday party. Unsurprisingly, they do not go to plan and the day ends with the boy and his friends reporting that they would not be keen to involve themselves again. The story is packed with hilarious moments that will generate discussion among younger readers.

Activity Ideas:

A bustling, chaotic birthday party which doesn't go to plan? Perfect for some freeze-frames! Choose someone to represent Griselda at various stages of her day:

- demanding that Claudie follows her instructions exactly,
- waiting patiently for all the guests to arrive,
- locking herself in the bathroom to open the presents,
- seeing one of the many dogs gobbling up the contents of the soggy pinata.

Questions Prompts:

- Would you be happy with a party like this?
- Have you been to any disappointing birthday parties?
- How would the story differ if it was told from Griselda's point of view?

Language Notes:

Through Claudie's informal tone, we build a picture of a precocious brother who seeks to constantly prank those around him. He often talks directly to us as the reader - this technique is called **first-person direct address**:

"In case you don't know, furtive is how you look when you're doing something you shouldn't and you think someone might see."

"(I know, mermaids don't even have wands, but try telling Griselda that."

Ask students how this device helps engage the reader.

Key Stage 3

Like a Long-Legged Fly

Early in this story, we meet a mysterious boy called Martin. We build a picture of him through observations of his classmate, Snow. After a few days Martin invites Snow to visit his home, and the two travel by train to “*the very end of the line*” where Snow discovers that Martin lives with, and cares for, his elderly, sick grandmother.

Activity Ideas:

Martin appears as an unconventional, aloof student;

“He didn’t have friends, neither boys nor girls”

“It was as though he was asleep with his eyes open.”

“He would turn his head mildly, like a lizard in response to a sudden noise...”

Compare Snow and Vivi’s initial views on Martin. Perhaps ask students who they are most in agreement with? Why are we often suspicious of people who are unlike us?

Question Prompts:

- Pause at the top of Page 18 - ask students to predict where the story might go next. Have there been any clues in the first half of the story?
- How do you predict Snow and Martin’s friendship continuing after her visit to his home?
- Explore the poem by W. B. Yeats - which character seems similar to “*our master Caesar*”?

Sarsaparilla

The preamble of the story describes an Article of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, stating that “Nobody has the right to come into our home, open our letters, or bother us or our family without a very good reason.”, linking directly to the plot of this story. Rosabel returns home from school and is followed into her house by a strange man who seems preoccupied with the contents of a paper bag that he has brought with him. The two characters converse for a short while, before he disappears.

Activity Ideas:

Show the students a list of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - form groups and ask each group to prepare a storyline that would highlight the importance of one or two rights? How can a simple story help young people to understand the significance of human rights?

Question Prompts:

- How did your feelings change throughout the story?
- Did these feelings change at certain points in the story?
- Why does the author delay the moment in which the paper bag’s contents are revealed?
- The baffling ending does not resolve the story in the traditional sense - what do you think Rosabel does next?
- Discuss the surreal / dreamlike nature of the story. The confident yet rambling, almost incoherent musings of the mysterious man do not reveal much about his identity - how does this affect the reader?

Language Notes:

Sarsaparilla is a type of root beer, popular in the USA, Australia and many South-East Asian countries. It has a distinct, earthy taste.

Little Wars

A young boy named March plays avidly with toy soldiers in his garden. We learn that they were bought on the street from “*some poor fellow*”, likely a war veteran. March’s sister becomes fixated on watching him play with the toy soldiers in their back yard, at first on his own, then later with a boy from the neighbourhood called Arly.

Activity Ideas:

Pause after the first line on page 101: “*‘One’s missing,’ he said.*”

Ask students to predict what will happen next in the story. They could write dialogue between March, Jemima and Arly.

Question Prompts:

- March is an unusual name - why might the author have chosen it?
- Jemima’s mum says that she “*can’t spend your life watching the boys play*” - why do you think she says this? Do you agree?
- How does our understanding of Arly change throughout the story?

Historical Context:

In the background of this story, local men have been signing up to support the war effort. Jemima describes seeing men march “*to the edge of the ocean to get on a boat to go to the war*”. Some understanding of Britain’s relationship with Australia may provide useful context, including the Gallipoli Campaign of 1915-16

The Golden Gate

This story may be more suitable for private reading or carefully planned discussion as a class. Teachers should consider how the themes and topics in the story may affect particular students.

A girl describes a crumbling war memorial that she visits frequently with her younger sister. The girls are aware that their uncle has been called up to the war in Vietnam, and they observe his candid discussion about the risks of dying. He speaks to the girls about his matter-of-fact views about dying. Two months later, the girls learn that their uncle has been killed. They discuss the funeral and worry about their mother who has sunk into depression. Davy believes their uncle is trying to take their mother, who becomes so unwell that a nurse moves in to help. In a swift, final scene - the girl sees Davy fall into a storm drain next to the war memorial, and her body is found the following day. The girl reasons that the 'death' came for the sister, to join their uncle in the afterlife.

Trigger warnings:

This story was written in response to a call for a horror story, and the author says she *“wanted the horror to come not so much from what happened as to what the main character thought happened.”* The descriptions of the young sister drowning are not detailed, but the suggestion that hand had been *“reaching up from the dark, stinking netherworld... tightening its grip around Davy’s small pale neck”* may distress some readers.

Question Prompts:

As with most of Dubosarsky’s stories, the adult world is viewed through an innocent child’s eyes.

How does the focus on the child’s perspective affect our understanding of the story?

Water is a key metaphor in this story. Consider the symbolism of the ferries pulling out from the wharf below the war memorial, and the *“muffled gurgle of discarded water”* in the storm drain. How does this imagery help us understand the themes in the story?

Alone Like a Stone

This story may be more suitable for private reading or carefully planned discussion as a class. Teachers should consider how the themes and topics in the story may affect particular students.

A young girl waits for her mother to give birth, knowing that when the labour starts, she and her brothers will be sent off to stay with their Aunt Barbara. As the mother's labour begins, the girl's father rushes her and her brothers in to say a quick goodbye. They are taken to a train station and the story ends with the brothers flicking elastic bands about the carriage. The narration is full of a child's wonder about things which they do not understand.

Trigger warnings:

This story has vivid descriptions of childbirth, including blood, *"tearing tissue, umbilical cords a mile long, great throbbing placentas"*. There is reference to a newborn baby being pronounced dead with the cord around its neck (though once untangled the baby survives) . In the background, the girl's father has lung cancer, and she accepts that he *"was going to die, that was clear."*

Question Prompts:

- How does the title relate to the story?
- Are we all "suddenly alone" once we are born?
- What do you make of the character of Glenda? She appears to be underqualified, yet the girl's mother is keen to have her support during the childbirth. How might this help us understand the story's setting (both time and place)?
- When the girl and her brothers board the train, she feels *"as if we were crossing the Styx into the afterlife."* How is this description significant, given the events happening at the children's home?
- The story captures the awe and philosophical wonder a child has about the creation of a new life; *"How could there be two lives where now there was one?"* How do the girl's questions add to the effect of the story?

Percival

Perry lives with his mother in a small house in a forest. One day he learns that he had two older brothers that he has never been told about, and all he knows about his father is that he was 'lost'. The man living with them insists that Perry should have opportunities to play with other children, an idea his mother is resistant to. Soon, she relents, and twin boys are brought to play with Perry. They ask where his toy cars are, and Perry is confused. One day, while exploring in the forest, Perry stumbles across a drag car racing around a track and is immediately transfixed. Perry tells his mother what he has seen and she reveals the racing car accident that killed his father and brothers.

Question Prompts:

- Early on, we learn that Perry's mother is hiding things from him: she "*smelled of endless secrets*" - how does this shape the mood in the story?
- What moments in the story help to forewarn us about the real reason Perry is living in such isolation?
- Why was there no television or computer? What would "very carefully chosen" books look like?
- Are you sympathetic to Perry's mother? Why or why not?

Literary Context:

Students will be interested to think about this story as a modern retelling of the story of Percival (sometimes written as Perceval, Parzival or Parsifal) who was a figure in the legend of King Arthur. In many versions of the story, Percival's mother takes him to the forest, away from the influence of heroic knights. He remains ignorant of their ways until his adolescence when a group of knights passes by. Percival is awestruck by their heroism and decides to travel to King Arthur's court to pursue a life as a knight. In some versions, his mother faints in shock upon seeing her son leave.