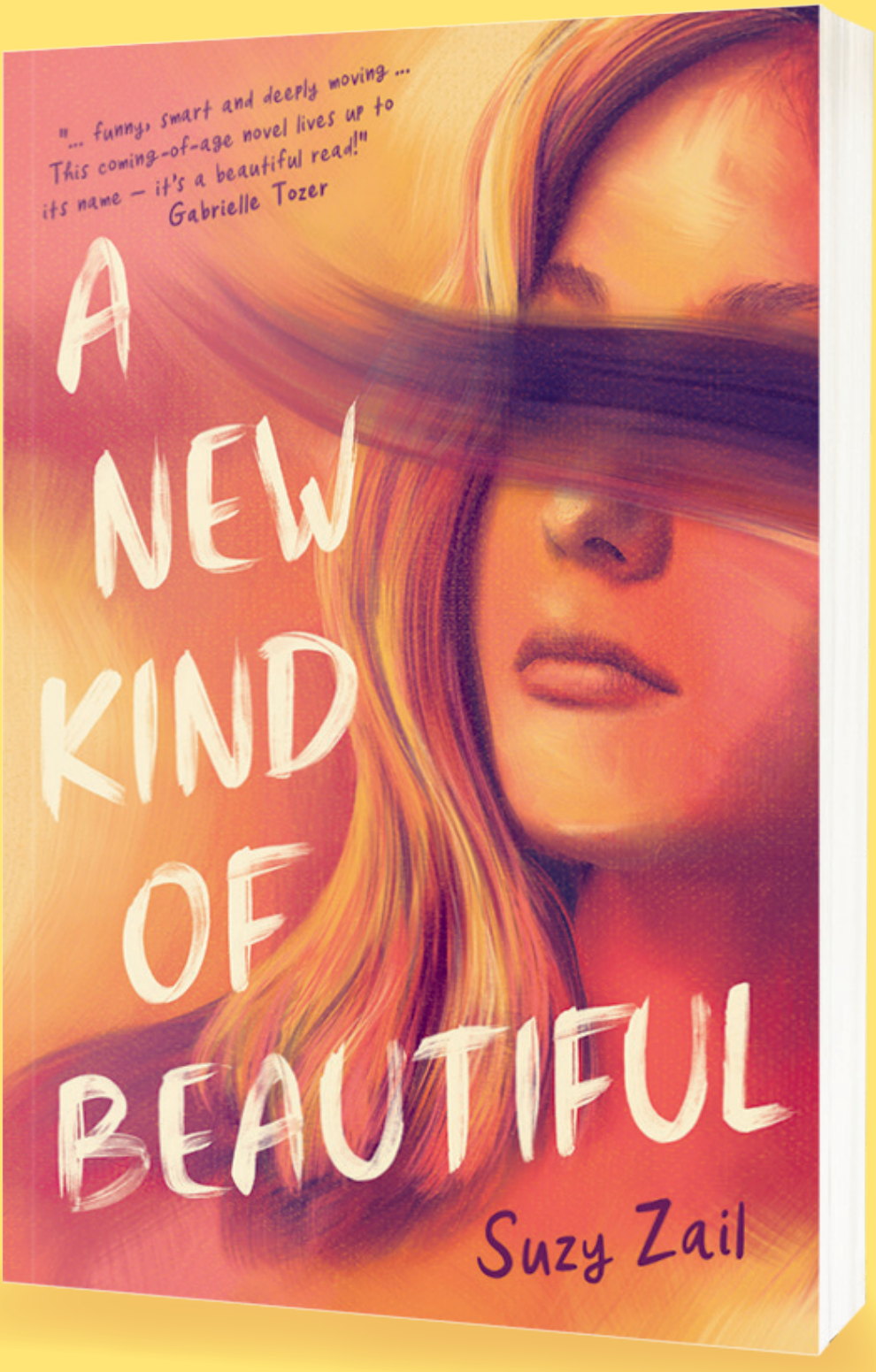
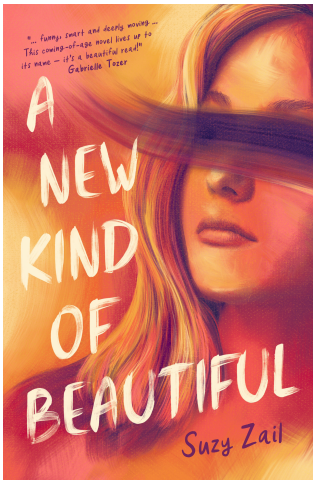


TEACHER NOTES

Teacher Notes by Mandy Newman

WALKER BOOKS

ABOUT THE BOOK



A NEW KIND OF BEAUTIFUL
CREATOR: SUZY ZAIL
ISBN 9781760653743 PAPERBACK
AUGUST 2026

A moving novel about love, loss, and the beauty in the things we can't always see.

Paige Wilding has her future mapped out – the Year 10 Art prize. Graduation. A coveted spot in an elite art school in New York. But when she's diagnosed with an incurable eye disease, the perfect life she's planned starts to blur.

She makes a choice to keep her condition secret and live louder, love wilder, and paint like her life depends on it.

But as her sight fades and she's forced to give up painting, it's Zac, her rival for the art prize, who helps Paige find a way back to her art and a new kind of beautiful; messy and imperfect but also raw, unfiltered and fiercely alive.

For ages: 13+ years

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

An award-winning, internationally published author of more than a dozen books, Suzy Zail is best known for her young adult novels *The Wrong Boy*, *Alexander Altmann* and *I Am Change* - books that shine a light on injustice. Her most recent novel, *Inkflower*, draws on her childhood and tells the story of a man who, in his last months with motor neurone disease, reveals to his daughter a Holocaust story he has kept hidden. *Inkflower* has been shortlisted for the CBCA Awards, the Book Links Award for Children's Historical Fiction, the YABBAs, and the ASLA DANZ Children's Book Award, and won the Shadow Judging Book of the Year Award, Older Readers at the 2024 CBCA Awards.

THEMES

Inclusion, Empathy, Disability awareness, Lived experience, Representation, Family and relationships, Coming of Age, Identity, Love, Courage, Resilience, Low Vision, Self-image, Art and Beauty, Grief.

CURRICULUM LINKS

English (narratives that shape the world, individual and social identity)

Humanities and Social Sciences (inclusion, social attitudes, the impact of social environments on individuals)

Health and Physical Education (identity, relationships, wellbeing, diversity)

GENERAL CAPABILITIES

Personal and Social Capability

Ethical Understanding

Critical and Creative Thinking

Literacy

REVIEWS

"*A New Kind of Beautiful* offers an impressively in-depth exploration of the psyche of a young woman navigating some typical challenges of one's teenage years, compounded by the added pressure of coming to terms with a fundamentally life-altering medical condition. The novel will appeal to readers of John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* and Nicola Yoon's *Everything, Everything*."

— Books + Publishing

"*A New Kind of Beautiful* is achingly real and deeply moving and an essential addition to secondary school libraries and classrooms. Suzy writes with remarkable authenticity and emotional depth about Paige's rollercoaster journey through deep loss, capturing her challenges, self-discovery, resilience, and acceptance while sparking authentic, rich opportunities for reflection and encouraging meaningful discussions about identity, creativity and empathy."

— Martha Itzcovitz

President, Australian School Library Association (ASLA)

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Hi, thanks for studying *A New Kind of Beautiful* with your class. The novel tells the story of Paige Wilding, an artist who has her future mapped out – the Year 10 Art prize. Graduation. A coveted spot in an elite art school in New York. But when she's diagnosed with an incurable eye disease, the perfect life she's sketched starts to blur.

The story is fictional but also deeply personal, inspired by my husband's aunt Lil, who lost most of her sight by the time she was sixteen. Born in South Africa in the 1930s, her parents hid her away, a ghost in her own home, told to keep quiet. It was only after her parents died and she joined her sister in Australia that she learned to read braille, use a cane, cook a meal. It was the first time she lived in a home she could call her own. The first time she fell in love. She was sixty.

I asked her once what her childhood was like and received a one-word answer: fine. Lil didn't have the words to describe what it felt like: the sting of her parents' embarrassment, the creeping darkness and all those firsts. Growing up, no one had ever asked her how she felt. What would it have been like for sixteen-year-old Lil, I found myself wondering. And what was life like now for a teen with low vision? Was the world still inhospitable?

Writing this story helped me find the answers.

Meeting, spending time with and learning from so many in the low vision community revealed all the things I'd failed to see: the barriers and discrimination people with disabilities encounter every day, our complicity in their exclusion and the need to shift from a medical model of disability, where the impairment needs fixing, to a social model that focuses on dismantling the societal barriers that limit full participation.

Reimagining the stories of all the people I'd met allowed me to give them another life and, I hoped, a new audience who might come to understand that living with a disability means not just the hurt of being overlooked and underestimated, but deep grief and soaring happiness and new ways of connecting.What do I hope for your students? I hope reading the novel illuminates what life might be like for a person with low vision and acts as a reminder that everyone carries invisible challenges. I hope it encourages them to own and love who they are, to understand others, rather than judge, and to connect as humans. And for those living with a disability, I hope it allows them to see themselves within the pages of a novel and know that their stories matter.

Paige's story is just one story: one way to live, lose, grieve and grow. There are many. Each of us hurt, and heal, differently and my hope is that, like Paige, we all come to understand that by opening ourselves up to new ways of seeing, a deeper, more textured kind of beauty reveals itself, one that embraces the messiness of being human.

– Suzy Zail, 2026

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

What are your passions and dreams? How do you envision your life as an adult?

Conduct a research project on living with low vision.

Websites about low vision:

https://retinaaustralia.com.au/inherited-retinal-disease/#retinaldiseases
https://braillebug.org/

Websites about the low vision experience:

https://myblurredworld.com/2026/01/04/26-actions-you-can-take-to-create-inclusion-in-2026/
https://myblurredworld.com/
https://wheresyourdog.com/

YouTube:

- Every Way Being Blind Makes My Life Different (Ft. Molly Burke): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zE9U7zuLDFI
- Do All Blind People Think The Same? https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dbgmWtvAQdQ
- Seven Worst things about Being Blind: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oen6CBUf2UY
- Jessica Parsell: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ALQMX5trag

What do you think might be some challenges for high school students who are blind or have low vision? What adjustments can schools, teachers and other students make to enable blind and low vision students to be independent?

How would you feel if you were in Year 10 and were told that you had a medical condition that was going to alter your life forever?

An accident, illness, medical condition, violence, loss of income or fatality can alter the course of a life and mean that a life must be reconstructed. What does a teenager who is facing a catastrophe need to help them to get through it?

Why is the setting of a high school an interesting place to set a story about a young woman who discovers she is legally blind? What possibilities does it offer for storytelling?

IN-DEPTH TEXT STUDY

PROLOGUE AND CHAPTER ONE

CONFLICT

A successful story is structured around layers of conflict. From the beginning of the story, the main character and the other characters around them must experience inner and outer conflicts - conflict within themselves and conflict with the outer world at the same time. The story is an opportunity to explore the conflicts and to see if the inner and outer conflicts can be resolved.

Draw up a table with three headings across the top. Identify the inner and outer conflict for each character and how they are resolved by the end of the novel. You can return to the table while reading and after finishing the novel to complete the final column.

CHARACTER	INNER CONFLICT / OUTER CONFLICT	ENDING - CONFLICTS RESOLVED?
PAIGE		
DAD		
MUM		
JAZZ		
ZAC		
TEACHERS		
MS DILLON		

- What do you as a reader learn?
- What does the novel tell us about individual and collective desires and needs?
- What does it tell us about individual and collective identity?
- Why is school important?

WRITING EXERCISE

Imagine you have been told the worst news possible. Mirroring Paige's tone, write a confessional diary entry about how you truly feel about what happened.

Then imagine going to school the next day and write a conversation between you and your best friend and then write a scene in a classroom with a teacher.

- Would you tell everyone about the news you received?
- Why or why not?
- Do we say what we want to say all the time?
- Why is there a difference between our inner worlds and what we project to the outside world?
- Why is that important in fiction?
- Does it create tension?
- Is tension important to encourage the reader to keep reading?

HOLDING BACK

In addition to layers of conflict, another technique to keep the reader reading is to hide details, foreshadow and drop symbols at the beginning of a story. The writer doesn't tell the reader the character's whole life story, rather they begin with a few clues, some ambiguous statements and then let the reader put the pieces together.

List some of the clues Suzy Zail drops in the first chapter about Paige's condition.

- What do you learn?
- Why is this better than the author telling the reader exactly what is happening to Paige?

WRITING EXERCISE

Write the opening paragraph of a story in which a character has received news, but we never learn what the news is. Show us their physical reaction, what they do with their hands or one object they pick up or put down. Do not name the news, the feeling, or the cause. Let the gap do the work.

- Begin with the character, not the news...

PROTAGONIST

A successful story contains layers of conflict, and the main character has to want something which intensifies all the conflicts.

- What does Paige love and what does she want?
- Where does she want to go to university?
- How does she want to be treated?
  - What is getting in the way?
- When the reader learns of her medical condition, how does the reader feel knowing the plan Paige has for her life?
  - Is this a narrative feature?
  - How does it assist in making the book interesting?
- Do you feel empathy for her?
  - Why?
  - Is this important as a reader?

CHAPTER TWO

- In pairs, research and define Stargardt disease: https://www.seeway.com.au/topics/vision-conditions/inherited-retinal-conditions/stargardt-disease
- How do Paige's parents respond to her diagnosis?
  - Do they differ in their approach? Why?
- What does Paige want?
- How does the diagnosis create problems for Paige and her parents?
- What does this tell us about individual identity and living in a family?
- What challenges does Paige face at school?
- How do the teachers respond to Paige?
- Why is school important to a teenager?
- What makes school complicated?
- Are parts of Paige's world inhospitable?
- What are her conflicting desires?
- Why doesn't she want her friends and teachers to know about her diagnosis?
- Do you feel empathy for her?
  - Why or why not? Is this important as a reader?
- What values do Ben, Skye, Jazz and Zac represent?
- What are the qualities we seek in a best friend? Predict the possible future conflicts between Paige and Jazz.
- What kind of paintings does Paige like to paint? How does her art style differ from Zac's? What do you think Paige is going to learn about art, Zac and herself over the course of the novel? How will art become an extended metaphor?

EXTRACT

Read this extract:

"Paige, wake up! You're going to miss the sunrise," Mum calls from the hallway. I pull on bathers and a hoodie, grab my backpack and meet her at the car.

The streets are empty. Mum parks and I follow her through the long grass until we find our spot on the dunes. She strips down to her bathers, picks her way across the sand and disappears into the black water. It's dawn-dark, but with the sky and sea for company, I don't feel alone; I must have been a seagull in a past life.

I pull out my phone and wait for the day to show off its colours. Finally, the sun makes an appearance, crouching at the horizon, and I click, click, click the fragile grey sky as it lightens to pink. I want a sky like this to be the last thing I see.

The last thing I see.

That last repeated line in italics does a lot of quiet work. It lets the reader know how Paige really feels, when the rest of the characters in the novel do not. It also sets up a theme about art, seeing and feeling.

WRITING EXERCISE

Write a short scene (150 – 250 words) in which a character witnesses a natural moment – a sunrise, a storm rolling in, the tide going out, the first cold snap of autumn, while carrying a secret the reader doesn't yet fully understand.

CHAPTER THREE

As a class, discuss all the reasons why Paige doesn't want to disclose her illness.

- How would you feel if what happened to Paige happened to you?
- How would your best friend feel if you were not ready to disclose?
- Is it okay to lie?
- Why is Ben important to Paige?

Paige solves the problem of her diagnosis by choosing not to tell, but this creates a series of new problems.

- What are they?
- How does this make you feel as a reader?

CHAPTER FOUR

- Why does Paige want to deny what is happening to her?
- Do you think Ben is Paige's true love?
  - Why or why not?
- What role do you think Madame Durand, Zac and the art room might play over the course of the story?

CHAPTER FIVE

- Why are Paige's parents in conflict?
- If you were a parent of Paige, what would you think is the right course of action?
- Who gets to decide? The parent or the child? What happens if you don't agree?

CHAPTERS FIVE – TEN

- Who is Mrs Haines?
- What does Paige think about the student support meeting?
- Why is it so difficult?
- Why can't she have what she wants?
- What is so hard about the truth?
- What should a parent and school principal and teachers do in this situation?
- What do you think about the information shared by Dr Collins?
- How does Paige's life become more complicated once the teachers know?

- What does Grandpa's easel symbolise?
- What role do Madam Durand, Zac and the art room play at this point?
- How do they differ from the world of Skye and her friends?
- Why does Paige set all her art supplies alight?
- Who is Kat? What does she represent?
- What can you see in the character of Zac that Paige can't?
- What is happening to Jazz and Paige's friendship?

CHAPTERS ELEVEN – NINETEEN

- When Paige exits the smash room she says, "Of all the wrecked and splintered things in that room, I'm the most broken." (p.147) What might she be referring to, apart from her eyesight?
- Why is the friendship between Paige and Jazz under pressure?
- Who is right and who is wrong?
- What new challenge does Paige complete, as a consequence of fighting with Jazz?
  - Is this important? Why?
- How does a friendship hold a catastrophe?
- Why is Zac's speech an important turning point for Paige?
- Why does Paige's Mum say, "That's it… We're done tiptoeing around this"?
- Why is the Vanilla Bean café significant? What can happen there that cannot happen at school?
- Why is Ms Dillon refreshing?
  - How does she help Paige?
  - Paige says, "I don't hate talking to Ms Dillon". As Paige moves towards acceptance, what is helping her make peace with her new reality?
- How does Zac help Paige?
  - What does Paige learn about herself and what she thought of him?
- Why is Paige now seeing Stargardt's as a detour?

CHAPTER TWENTY

- What are the revelations in this chapter?
- Why does Paige change her mind?
  - What role do Zac and Kat play in helping Paige change her mind?
  - Does the summer break impact her decision? Why?
- How do you as a reader feel about her shift in point of view?
- What role do you think the support group will play?
- Why doesn't Paige want anyone at school to know?
- What does Paige tell us about being human?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

- What does Paige learn about Zac when she goes to his home?
- How is Melanie's advice helpful?
- What is the significance of this quote near the end of the chapter? How has Paige changed?

"All I'll ever have of this beautiful boy is a collection of smells and the way his skin feels. And maybe that's okay, I think, realising for the first time that things can be beautiful for the first time that things can be beautiful without me having to see them."

Have a class discussion or write 300 words on the following topics:

- Art is a metaphor for…
- Schools are important because…
- I wish I lived on an island all by myself…
- It is acceptable to lie when…
- I don't know everything…

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

- In what ways have Paige's parents changed?
- How has the dynamic in the family changed?
  - Why did it change?
- What revelation does Paige have in the studio?
  - What does she discover about herself?
  - How does her art change?
  - Does she go beyond the surface of things?

WRITING EXERCISE

Using *A New Kind of Beautiful* as inspiration, write 500 words about what you think in response to this quote: "When life fractures under our feet - we can deny or suspend, or evolve or radically change what we believe to make of a life."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

- How important is Jazz in helping Paige return to school?
- What role does Madam Durand play in the novel?

HOW EXCLUSION HAPPENS

After Paige tells her classmates that she has Stargardt's disease, list the different ways classmates exclude, avoid or treat her differently. Then sort the examples into:

- direct exclusion
- avoidance or discomfort
- assumptions about what Paige can or cannot do
- well-meaning behaviour that still takes away her agency

Choose two examples and discuss why the classmate may have behaved that way, what impact it has on Paige and what they could have done differently. Finish with a class discussion: Does exclusion have to be deliberate to be harmful?

Extension: Rewrite one interaction so a classmate responds in a more respectful and inclusive way.

TITLE EXPLORATION

p.318: Paige realises that Zac is "a different kind of beautiful".

In pairs, find three moments where something Zac says or does helps explain why Paige sees him this way. Then discuss what else the title "A New Kind of Beautiful" might refer to.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

- What do you as a reader learn from the discussion at the support group?
- What comments made you reflect about what it must be like to have low vision in a world that assumes everyone can see?
- How has Jazz and Paige's friendship changed? How did they manage conflict? Write 400 words about a time when you were brave and terrified.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ART ACTIVITY

- Part 1: Research examples of hyperrealist, impressionist and abstract art.

- Part 2: Madame Durand says, "A good drawing reveals what the artist is thinking and feeling." Create two drawings of the same setting — your classroom, school grounds or another familiar place.

- Drawing 1. Draw what you see: make the first drawing as realistic and detailed as possible, focusing on the physical surroundings.

- Drawing 2. Draw what you feel: create a second version that shows how the place feels to you. Change colours, scale, shapes, perspective, details or mood to express your thoughts and emotions.

- Then compare the two drawings:

  - How are they different?
  - What does each one reveal?
  - Can both drawings be truthful, even if only one is visually realistic? Why?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

- Desmond Tutu said, "We are made for togetherness. We are made for community. We are made for a life of connection." Using *A New Kind of Beautiful* as inspiration, compose a 600-word analysis that explores the importance of community and connection.
- What do Paige, her parents, her friends and teachers learn over the course of the novel?
- What do you as a reader learn?
- What made you reflect? Why?

AFTER READING

HOW TO HELP

People who are blind or have low vision can face challenges getting around, connecting socially, performing daily tasks and taking part in community activities. You can help them feel included and supported by volunteering your time.

Vision Australia welcomes volunteers aged 12 and up. You can help people with low vision enjoy fun activities, get creative at day programs, or even help care for a guide dog in training. Find out more on their website: https://visionaustralia.org/

- If you're 17 or over and have a smartphone, you can volunteer with Be My Eyes and use their app to help blind and low-vision people with everyday tasks, like choosing clothes or navigating unfamiliar surroundings.

- If you're 18 or over, you can volunteer with Blind Sports & Recreation. You can help out with blind soccer, tennis or AFL, coach at blind sport and recreation programs, or become a regular walking buddy. Check out your state's website to find out more.

- If you're over 18, you can also volunteer for Guide Dogs Australia, assist with transport, provide support for special events and help walk, feed or groom guide dogs in training. Contact Guide Dogs in your state to get started. Find out more on their website here: https://guidedogs.com.au/

WHERE TO LEARN MORE

A load of great books, blogs, clips and movies served as resources for the writing of this novel.

TV shows and movies that authentically portray a character with vision loss:

- *All the Light We Cannot See*
- *The Lighthouse of the Orcas*
- *Avatar: The Last Airbender*
- *Blind Ambition*

Instagram accounts by low vision/blind social media influencers who share their experience of vision loss:

- Molly Burke (@mollyburkeofficial)
- Anastasia Pagonis (@anastasia_k_p)
- Elin Williams (@myblurredworld)
- Brad and Bryan Manning (@twoblindbrothers)

Apps that simulate visual impairment: As I See It (for Apple compatible devices)

Memoirs and novels that authentically portray a character with vision loss:

- *All the Light We Cannot See*, by Anthony Doerr
- *Now I See You: A Memoir*, by Nicole C. Kear
- *Unseen*, by Molly Burke
- *A Blind Guide to Stinkville*, by Beth Vrabel
- *Love and First Sight*, by Josh Sundquist
- *Squint*, by Chad Morris and Shelly Brown
- *100 Days of Sunlight*, Abbie Emmons

WALKER BOOKS CLASSROOM

Free education resources written to the Australian curriculum.

classroom.walkerbooks.com.au