



Walker Books Classroom Ideas



The Wearing of the Green

Author: Claire Saxby
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*Notes may be downloaded and printed for regular classroom use only.

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Outline:

When Biddy arrives in Melbourne from Ireland in 1850, she knows exactly what she's going to do – find her rebellious big brother, Ewen. Her plans are derailed when he's not there to meet her and she's forced into a situation that is nothing like she expected. Faced with challenges and chased by luck, bad and good, Biddy must find a strength within herself to build a new life – and to find her missing brother.

Author/Illustrator Information:

Claire Saxby lives in Melbourne, Australia and loves her city. She is the bestselling and award-winning author of many books. *There Was an Old Sailor* (illustrated by Cassandra Allen) won the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators Crystal Kite Award. *Big Red Kangaroo* and *Emu* (both illustrated by Graham Byrne) and *Koala* (illustrated by Julie Vivas) have won numerous awards including the Whitley Award, the Environment Award for Children's Literature, and Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA) Crichton Award. *Koala* was a CBCA Honour Book. *Dingo* (illustrated by Tannya Harricks) was joint winner of the Patricia Wrightson Prize for Children's Literature at the NSW Premier's Literary Award (2019); won the Royal Zoological Society of NSW's Whitley Award (2018); was shortlisted in 2019 for the CBCA New Illustrator Award, and Best Picture Book in the Educational Publishing awards.

How to Use These Notes:

This story works on many levels. The suggested activities are therefore for a wide age and ability range. Please select accordingly.

These notes are for:

- Primary years 5-6
- Secondary years 7-8
- Ages 11-15

Key Learning Areas:

- English

Example of:

- Historical Fiction

Themes/Ideas:

- Family
- Resilience
- Loss
- Immigration



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Before Reading:

Based on the cover and title, what do you think this story is about? How do you think it will begin/end? Revisit your answer when you've completed the book. Was your answer correct?

Exploring the Text:

What are some of the themes in this novel? As a class or in small groups identify and list the themes. Individually write a statement of belief about each theme.

Read the full song lyrics for "The Wearing of the Green" and discuss it as the title of the book. Do you think this is a good title? Why or why not? What does the song mean to both Ewen and Bidy, and how does it reflect some of the themes of the novel?

Why is it important to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, as author Claire Saxby does in her dedication? Do you think more Australian writers should do this? Why or why not?

What is an epigraph, and why do you think Claire Saxby chose to include one in *The Wearing of the Green*? How does the epigraph from A J P Taylor relate to the events of the novel?

The Wearing of the Green is a historical novel, but primarily a work of fiction. Identify the elements of the text which can be viewed as historically accurate and those where the author has used creative licence to invent or embellish. How reliable do you think this novel is in presenting a realistic portrait of life in Melbourne in 1850?

"They say Melbourne is a town where anything is possible – everything you do turns to gold! Won't it be wonderful?" (page 5). How do Bidy's perceptions of Melbourne shift throughout the novel? What are some of the key ways Melbourne has changed as a city from 1850 to today?

"They'd all had nightmares about the potato blight, about starvation and being evicted from their homes. About the sickness that stole their families," (page 3*). Research the Great Famine (a good place to start would be <https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Famine-Irish-history>).

What lasting impact did the famine have on Ireland as we know it today, and on the wider world?

As an orphan, Bidy is sent to Australia as a last resort to escape the workhouses. What are other reasons people may have had for immigrating to Australia? Were they voluntary or involuntary?

"Bidy wasn't sure what she'd been expecting, but it wasn't this. How, came her mother's voice in her head, how could you have expectations? You were moving away from Ireland, not to anywhere. Look to what is, not what was," (page 8). What expectations did Bidy have about her potential life in Australia? How was the reality similar or different?

Bidy feels as though she's let Ewen down by not fulfilling her promise to protect the rest of their family. Do you think she is right to feel guilty about this? Why or why not?

How does *The Wearing of the Green* shine a light on the immigrant experience? Did you learn anything that surprised you?

Australia has had many waves of migration, with immigrants arriving here from many parts of the world and for many reasons. Where have Australian immigrants come from and why?

Except for Aboriginal Australians, we are all immigrants. How are our experiences similar?

How does Bidy shape and define her identity and sense of self after arriving in Australia? How does she change as a character as a result of the events of the novel?

In small groups, explain how Bidy demonstrates the following character traits in the novel:

- Resourcefulness
- Courage
- Persistence
- Compassion
- Resilience

"Just because she spoke differently and came from a different country, that didn't mean people could say those things," (page 137). Discuss this quote, and how racism and discrimination are explored in *The Wearing of the Green*. What are some of the moments in the novel when people discriminate against Bidy due to her heritage?



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The Wearing of the Green is set in and around Melbourne in 1850. Find examples of language in the text (it could be particular phrases of dialogue, descriptions of landscape, etc.) that you think help the book feel distinctly Australian. Why do you think it does this? How would the book feel different if it were set in another country?

"I've heard a whisper of a land that lies beyond the sea, Where rich and poor stand equal in the light of Freedom's day," (page 49). How does the novel explore class divide? Do you think this line from the song "The Wearing of the Green" was true about Australia in 1850? Do you think it's true today? Why or why not?

The attitude and actions towards Aboriginal people in the past can be confronting to read. Do you think it's important for us to know and understand how Aboriginal people were treated in the past? Why or why not? Have a class discussion about the Aboriginal characters' representation in *The Wearing of the Green*.

"Her attempts to pronounce the unfamiliar words had them all in fits of laughter. When Biddu got it right – which took plenty of practice – Kanyul would clap her hands in delight. But sometimes they said nothing, just sat or walked side by side. Friends," (page 47). Biddu and Kanyul don't share a language. How do they still find ways to communicate and connect? What are some ways to communicate without words?

Do some further research into how the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were affected by early settlers. Questions to consider could include: what was life like for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples before the arrival of the Europeans? Why did the Europeans settle in Australia? What was the nature and consequence of contact between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and early traders, explorers and settlers?

Leaving Ireland is a traumatic experience for Biddu, and there are many moments of sadness and loss in the book. In what ways does she grieve the loss of her family and her former life back home? Is there a right or wrong way to process this kind of grief?

"Family isn't just blood," said Mrs Myrtle gently. "Family is everyone who loves you. Who cares about you... And if you are the last of your blood family, you have to live the biggest life you can, the life they'd all want to be living," (page 158). How is the theme of family explored in the novel, both through blood relatives and 'found' family? You could consider how and when Biddu

hears her mother's voice, her memories of her family, her connection to characters like Mr Owen and Mrs Carmichael, and her search for Ewen.

To what degree is Biddu motivated by her desire to find Ewen? What are the other things that give Biddu strength?

Biddu and her shipmates arrived in Australia as part of the Earl Grey Scheme, a plan to reduce crowding in Irish poorhouses, and to address gender imbalance in Australia. 22 shiploads of Irish girls and young women arrived in Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne between 1848 and 1850. The girls were given a chest of clothes, regular meals and some were taught to read and write. Most, but not all of these girls were orphans. How would you respond if you'd been offered a berth on one of these ships, knowing that you were leaving everything you've ever known (good and bad)?

"They were examined minutely as if they were animals that may have value, but it was as though they were part of a mob, totally invisible as individuals," (page 18). *"Again, he demanded to know where Biddu was. "She's a thief and a liar," he yelled. "You don't want to help her. She belongs to me!"* (page 71). Discuss these quotes in relation to how the girls and women are treated in *The Wearing of the Green*. How have gender norms changed since 1850? Are there any ways in which you believe they have stayed the same?

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While some people like the Morrisons are cruel to Biddu, she is also shown empathy and kindness from many characters, both minor and major. Consider how both positive and negative sides of human nature are demonstrated through the characters and how they're treated in *The Wearing of the Green*, and write a short essay about which side you think we can see clearest in the novel, using examples to support your theory.

"It was always lovely to see Ellen, but after a few weeks, Biddu realised they no longer had as much in common."



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Was it just that their worlds were no longer as tightly linked as before?" (page 138). Why do you think Ellen and Biddy grew apart through their experiences in the novel? Do you believe they'll stay friends? Why or why not?

Trove is a website of newspapers (and more). Mr Owen works for the Port Phillip Gazette, a newspaper that was published in Melbourne between 1838 and 1845. Transcribe an article from the Port Phillip Gazette and explore what that article tells you about early Melbourne. Choose either an advertisement or an article.

What impact and influence does Mr Owen's writing have? Why do you think he chose to use a pen name? Do you think it's important to have a free press? Why or why not?

Keep a "Vocab Journal" while reading the novel. Make a note of any words you come across that are unfamiliar and look up their meaning. Also keep track of any words or phrases that you particularly like and write a note next to each explaining why you like that word/phrase.

What do you think about the ending of the novel? What do you believe the future looks like for Biddy? Write a short dramatic monologue from Biddy's perspective, set 5 years after the events of *The Wearing of the Green*. What do you think her life looks like now? Ask any students who would like to, to perform their monologue for the class.

Read the note from the author at the back of the novel. Does knowing the historical context for Biddy's story change your reading of the novel at all? Why or why not?

Creative Responses to the Text:

Write a book report on *The Wearing of the Green*. Write about what you thought of the book, using evidence from the text to support your evaluation. Make a recommendation about who would be interested in this book and draw connections to similar or related books.

Write a story from the perspective of a character other than Biddy (possible options could include Mrs Carmichael, Mr Owen, Ewen, or Ellen). What might they have experienced that Biddy was unaware of? How might they see things differently to Biddy?

Make a guide for an emigrant who has just arrived in Australia like Biddy. Write about what the emigrant should expect with regards to weather, food, living conditions and employment. Design your guide using digital tools or by hand.

Imagine that a movie was being made of *The Wearing of the Green*. In small groups, create a soundtrack to accompany some of the key scenes, thinking particularly about the mood you want to convey. You could either make a compilation of existing songs or compose your own musical pieces. Present your soundtrack to the class, explaining why you have chosen the pieces you have. Also choose your ideal cast for the movie and create a movie poster.

**please check page references against a final copy of the book.*