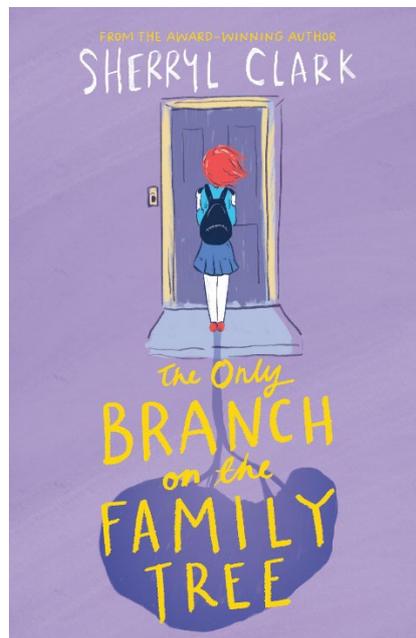


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THE ONLY BRANCH ON THE FAMILY TREE

Sherryl Clark



Teachers' Notes

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SYNOPSIS

When her class is given the task of exploring their family trees, Gemma is left with more questions than answers. Why do other families have so many branches on their trees? Why doesn't she know anything about her grandparents? Why has hers only ever been a family of two?

But when she discovers that her nan, who she believed to be dead, is in fact alive and living less than half an hour away, the biggest question mark of all hangs over Gemma: Why did her mum lie to her?

The Only Branch on the Family Tree is a thought-provoking verse novel about family, trust and forgiveness. More than that, it is a story about hope as Gemma finds the courage to uncover the truth, follow her heart and bring the two most important people in her life back together.

THEMES

- Identity
- Family; Diverse family structures
- Family estrangement
- Trust
- Acceptance
- Forgiveness
- Hope
- Poetry

WRITING STYLE

The Only Branch on the Family Tree is a verse novel told in first-person present tense. Sherryl Clark masterfully places readers amid Gemma's turmoil as she grapples with truth and lies, anger and happiness, hurt and love. Original and effective figurative language reveals a young girl torn between wanting to know her grandmother, loyalty to her mother and confusion about the deceit. Told with the perfect balance of angst and quiet restraint, the audience is given the space to make their own connections and absorb the emotive storyline. It is accessible to a range of middle readers.

STUDY NOTES

- In the opening verse, we are told that Gemma feels a 'big question mark/hanging over' her (p. 1). Why is this a powerful way to introduce the story's complication? How does this hook readers? How is the motif of this question mark used to make a cohesive story?
- What are you wondering after reading 'The Project' on pp. 4–5? What might Gemma be wishing for?
- How does Gemma discover the truth about her nan? In the role of Gemma, share your thoughts at discovering that your nan is alive.
- Why might Gemma's mother have lied to her about Nan? Why don't we find this out until much later in the story?
- At first, Gemma lashes out at her teacher and is silent with her mother. Why do you think this is?
- In pairs, find evidence in the text that shows how Gemma is feeling about her mother's lie. Join with another pair to compare your ideas. Share in a whole class discussion.
- Why does Gemma initially find it hard to talk to Marley about her situation? What finally prompts her to share? How does this help Gemma?
- Gemma finds it difficult to be honest with her mother upon discovering the photo of Nan. Why is this? What advice would you give Gemma?
- Do you agree that finding Nan on her own is 'the chicken's way / of doing it' (p. 22)? Discuss.
- Why, after deciding to find Nan on her own, does Gemma 'feel different ... no longer frozen or/ stuck in a black hole' (p. 23)? Have you ever felt frozen or stuck and then felt different once you had a plan? Share in a reflection.
- Make predictions about the role of *The Weird Story of Nan and Me* in the story. Why do you think creating this book makes the 'big question mark ... a little bit smaller' (p. 24)?
- How does getting her thoughts out in two lists, one neatly written and the other in a scrawl, help Gemma to process what's happening? Why is the second list messy (pp. 28–29)?
- Why does Gemma cry when she finds the date of death for the grandpa she never knew? What does this share with us about the things Gemma has missed out on?
- Discuss the symbolism of the 'thick blue line' on the online map when Gemma searches for her Nan's house (p. 38).
- Using the illustration of the fence (see below), use evidence from the text to note the 'truth' and 'lies' that make Gemma feel 'stuck' sitting on its edge (see pp. 38–39).
- What is Gemma most angry about when she discovers her mother's lie? Why do you think her mother acted in this way?

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- Discuss the verse 'Present' on p. 43.
- When her mum first sees Gemma's project, she says, '... you have a few gaps there' (p. 45). How has the author left 'space' for the reader to make their own connections to the text's themes and storyline? Why is this important?
- After reading 'Longest Journey' on pp. 48–49 and 'The Front Door' on p. 50, make predictions about what might happen next. Share in a journal written in the role of Gemma.
- Write a list of the 'really big question[s]' Gemma and Nan might have upon meeting one another. Choose some of these questions to use in a whole class *Character's Chair*, in which students take turns assuming the roles of Gemma and Nan to respond.
- After arguing with her mother, what does Gemma mean when she says, 'nothing is normal' (p. 80)?
- Why, when hanging out with her friends at school, does Gemma feel like she's 'in a bubble' (p. 80)? Have you ever felt this way when things in your life are going awry? Share in a reflection.
- Why, if Gemma is so cross with her mum, does she feel concerned about being 'in trouble' for her actions (p. 82)? What does this share about the true nature of their relationship?
- Discuss the use of repetition in 'Heavy' on pp. 83–84. Why is this such a powerful device? Explain what is happening in this verse. Why doesn't Gemma follow her usual routines? How does it help build the tension that bursts in the next verse, 'Fight'?
- What changes in Gemma when she sees her mum crying 'like / a little girl' (p. 87)?
- Why does Gemma stop herself from saying 'you can't stop me' when telling her mum she plans to 'keep visiting Nan' (p. 91)? What does this show about Gemma's growth?
- Discuss the scene depicted in 'Silence' starting on p. 92. How does the author use *Show Don't Tell* to create such a vivid passage? Try using some of these poetic devices to describe a different scenario from the story.
- Apart from using them to fill in gaps, why else might Gemma use six copies of her selfie with Nan on her project?
- Gemma says she doesn't 'understand grown-ups' (p. 94). Why is this? Have you ever felt this way? Share in a reflection.
- In 'Handing It In', Mrs Wellcome has 'some great ideas' to help Gemma (pp. 95–96). At the start of the next verse, we know that time has passed as Gemma sticks her project on the wall with a 'big blue A on it' (p. 97). Why has the author left readers this space to speculate? What do you think some of these 'great ideas' were?

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- How does Gemma's poem on pp. 97–98 help her mum to see things a little differently?
- How does Gemma's outburst at the café help her mum and nan to move forward?
- Discuss how the final photo of Gemma with her mum and nan 'fills the empty space / perfectly' (p. 110).
- How does Gemma '[pull] down the fence' (p. 111)?
- Discuss the new title of Gemma's notebook – *The Amazing Story of Nan and Me!* Why has she changed the word 'weird' to 'amazing' (p. 112)?
- How has Gemma processed her thoughts and feelings? How does *The Only Branch on the Family Tree* share the value and importance of communication?
- Gemma decides to make a collage of her family rather than a tree like some of her classmates. How does this reflect the themes of diversity and acceptance in the text?
- What role does Mrs Wellcome play in *The Only Branch on the Family Tree*? How does she support Gemma? How would the story be different without her?
- Using the illustrations of the trees throughout the text (see the table below), create a story map of *The Only Branch on the Family Tree*. In addition, summarise Gemma's journey and that of her mum and nan in the box provided.
- Like Gemma and her classmates, create a visual representation of your family. Which is your favourite photo? Why is this your favourite? Share in a reflection.
- Create a *Thought Tunnel* by lining up two rows of students facing one another. Choose volunteers to assume the roles of Gemma, Mum and Nan. As these characters walk through the tunnel, have students ask questions of them to help better understand and unpack the story.
- Explain what Mrs Wellcome means when she says that 'every family is different / but maybe also / every family is alike' (p. 26).
- In what ways is Marley a good friend? Use evidence from the text to support your thinking.
- How important are apologies? What makes a good apology? Why do Gemma's mum and nan find it so hard to apologise to one another? What advice would you give them?
- Discuss the significance of the title of this text.
- What have you learnt about yourself from reading *The Only Branch on the Family Tree*?
- Select various scenes from the text to act out in Freeze Frames. Alternatively, in pairs, recreate one of the scenes to perform to the class.

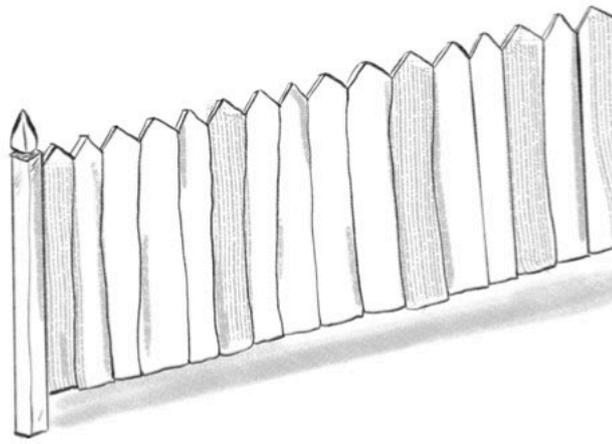
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- Discuss the formatting of the poems, particularly the choice of line breaks and the minimal punctuation. How do these choices add meaning to the text?
- Verse novels are as much about what is *not* said as that which *is*. Choose verses from *The Only Branch on the Family Tree* to explore the ‘space’ the author has given readers to infer, predict and visualise. Why is this important?
- After finishing *The Only Branch on the Family Tree*, re-read the first few pages. What clues has the author given in these opening verses about the story?
- Explore the various poetic devices used throughout the text, discussing how they contribute to the narrative. Examples include:
 - it was like a bucket
of ice-cold water
above my head
ready to drench me (p. 12).
 - it would be like pulling
all those Olympic rings
apart (p. 15).
 - I held all the questions
inside me
where they bubbled and groaned
and grew boiling hot
and erupted onto Mrs Wellcome
with a roar (p. 15).
 - the words are right here
wanting to spill from my mouth (p. 16).
 - two big tears roll down
my face and drip
onto my shorts (p. 17).
 - I need to wait
until the huge bucket of words
gets a bit smaller
and I can let some out
safely (p. 19).
 - the potatoes turn to mud
in my mouth (p. 20).
 - there are more than two tears
there are hundreds (p. 22).
 - it gives me a shivery feeling
up my spine (p. 25).
 - my throat aches (p. 34).
 - I feel tingles inside (p. 44).

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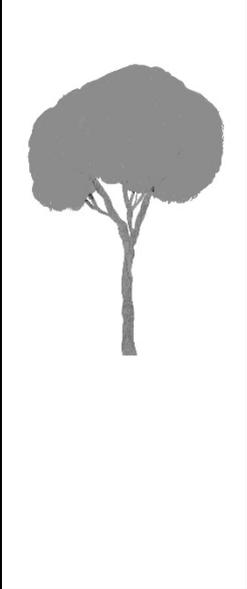
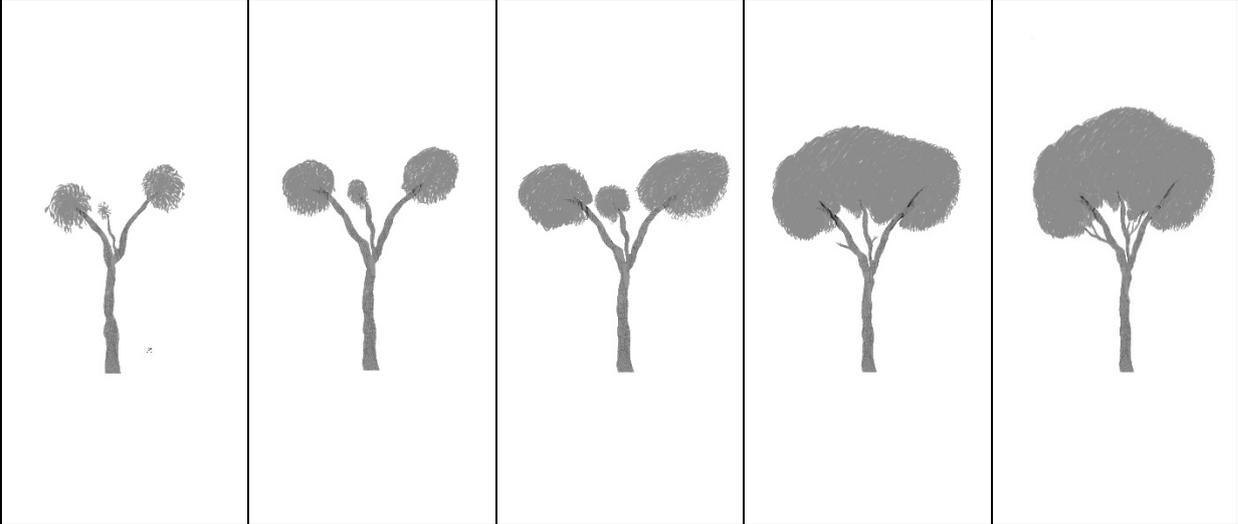
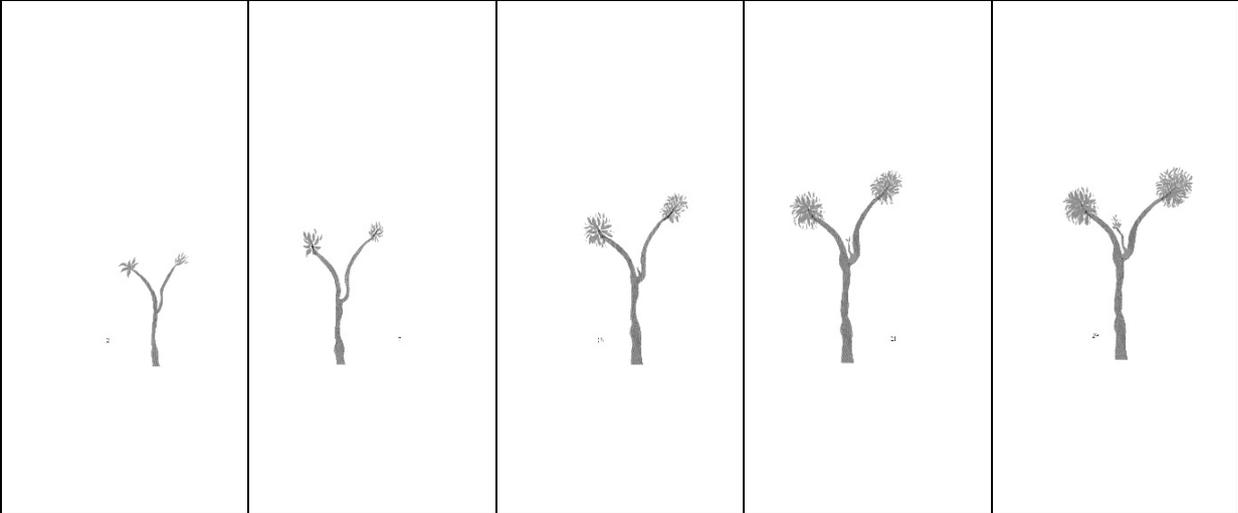
- I really don't like
this sharp fence (p. 72).
- her eyes flash
and her voice is sharp (p. 73).
- my heart is beating
so fast and so hard
I can hardly breathe (p. 74).
- Mum huffs out a breath (p. 76).
- I ...
slam the door
shut (p. 77).
- my body
... is made of concrete (p. 83).
- I go from concrete
to volcanic lava (p. 86).
- She laces her hands
bows her head
and tears drip onto her jeans (p. 87).
- Mum cries like
a little girl (p. 87).
- ... my hope begins to fade (p. 90)
- her face is like a blank mask (p. 100)
- words burst out of me (p. 105).
- a funny little smile
that's a bit wobbly (p. 107).
- suddenly
inside me is
fireworks! (p. 108).

Truth



Lies

The Only Branch on the Family Tree Story Map



Summary

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AUTHOR MOTIVATION

The idea for this story has been simmering away for more years than I can remember. What I do remember first is talking to a grandmother whose two beloved grandchildren had been moved interstate after her son (their dad) was divorced from their mum. While the upheaval was affecting that family, nobody seemed to have thought about Nana, and she was grieving.

A more recent story was told to me by a nana whose daughter-in-law (the nana discovered) was not allowing her children to keep any gifts from the nana, either throwing them out or hiding them in the garage. Then there have been stories I've either heard or read, of parents who feel their own parents are not good people, and decide to keep their children away, not allowing any communication. In every case, this is called 'family estrangement', involving adult children cut off from their parents. Statistics put it at between 6–25% of all families. That's a lot!

The reasons for it are myriad – stemming from disputes, old grudges, trauma, accusations, arguments, silences that don't end or sometimes even political differences. I kept thinking about the children, the ones who miss out on nanas and grandpas. I asked a kindergarten teacher what happened to these kids on grandparents' days. 'Those without grandparents get taken to another room for other activities.' I thought a lot about that, too.

One night, I was doing my exercises and the idea and the opening lines for *The Only Branch on the Family Tree* burst out. I had to run and write down as much as I could. This has happened to me before (with *Mina and the Whole Wide World*). It's as if the idea simmers and simmers and then it explodes! It wasn't an easy book to write, despite that beginning. I know some adults find this topic very difficult, but as I say at the back of the book there are many variations of estrangement – many questions, not many answers. Maybe we can simply start talking about it, as Gemma wanted for her family.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sherryl Clark is a writer, editor and writing teacher with an MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults and a PhD in Creative Writing. She has been writing poems and stories for children for over twenty years. Her verse novel *Farm Kid* won the NSW Premier's Literary Award for Children's Books in 2005, and *Sixth Grade Style Queen (Not!)* was an Honour Book in the 2008 Children's Book Council of Australia Awards. In 2022, Sherryl won the Prime Minister's Literary Award for Children's Literature for her verse novel, *Mina and the Whole Wide World*.