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WALKING HOME WITH MARIE CLAIRE

Teachers' Notes (Secondary) by Hamish Curry

Walking Home
with Marie-Claire

by Kirsty Murray

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Recommended
for ages 10-14

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Introduction

Walking Home with Marie-Claire tells of the changes Pauline Janet McArdle goes through during the turbulent 1970s. Political change was in the air, with opposition to the Vietnam War swelling and the election of a Labor government imminent after more than two decades of Liberal dominance. Ideas about family, authority, sexuality and individual morality were also shifting radically. Many families felt these changes in personal and emotional ways. Pauline's world is shaken by the defiance of her anti-conscriptionist brother Brian and her outspoken sister Sue - although neither has a greater impact than Marie-Claire, an energetic, mischievous and imaginative girl who suddenly enters Pauline's life. In the novel we follow Pauline's transition from 'Bubs' to 'PJ', and the discoveries and growth of this time of change.

The activities, questions, and suggestions that follow are designed to show how a study of *Walking Home with Marie-Claire* could become part of your school curriculum. This novel fits well with programs for English, SOSE and Personal Development, which allow students to explore their attitudes towards difficult situations and ethical choices.

This guide has been divided into five sections:

- Character-based questions and activities (relevant to a study of the novel).
- Key Learning Area-based issues & activities (English and SOSE/HSIE).
- Thematic activities (including Personal Development ideas)
- The 'Marie-Claire' board game activity
- Resources & Further Reading

Character-based Questions and Activities

Pauline Janet McArdle (12 – 13 years old) 1972-1973

Pauline, or PJ, endures a lot of upheaval with her family, her friends, and her values.

1. Do you think she is discontented or out of step with her friends Melinda and Jenny?
Look at pages 3, 4, 40-2, 86-7.
2. In what ways does Pauline admire Marie-Claire? Read page 10 to help with your answer.
3. How does Pauline start to mimic Marie-Claire? Read page 18 to help with your answer.
4. On page 26, Pauline and Marie-Claire seal their friendship. *'There you go – a sacred vow signed in blood by both of us. Marie-Claire Tierney and PJ forever.'*
How does this make things more stressful for Pauline further down the track?
5. Explain how Pauline & Marie-Claire bonded with the stories about their brothers (page 20).
6. On page 40 we read that *'PJ found herself looking for Marie-Claire, even though she knew she wasn't invited.'* What do you think Pauline is looking for in the friendship with Marie-Claire?
7. Pauline wants to see Marie-Claire's 'groovy' home (page 43).
What does this tell you of her feelings about her own family and about Marie-Claire?
8. At other times PJ resists being 'groovy' or sophisticated – indeed, she is quite innocent (see pages 86, 103, 123).
9. Why does Marie-Claire try to kiss PJ (page 83)? Write a 'thought bubble' for this as a comic strip scene.
10. Explain why PJ was so disappointed with Marie-Claire for giving her the *kadaicha* boots (page 146).
11. Like all friends, Pauline and Marie-Claire have arguments. On pages 147-8, who do you think is most convincing? Why?

12. Describe Pauline's feelings as she approached Marie-Claire's home (pages 168-169).
13. The title of the novel has a number of symbolic meanings. One of the things it does is suggest the strength of the friendship between Pauline and Marie-Claire. Explain why. Consider pages 42, 77, and 189.
14. PJ's family seems to disintegrate when Brian and Susan leave.
Write some imaginative diary entries about these events, as PJ might have written them. You might write an entry for a particular time (for example, at Christmas, page 66). Consider this comment also: '*PJ picked at the chenille bedspread and wondered what it would be like to be an only child*' (page 55).
15. 'What was *wrong* with her family?' (page 163)
This is one of Pauline's descriptions: '*It was as if they were all raw and tender, like a family of snails without shells, and they had to be careful not to wound each other*' (page 164).
What are some other comparisons or images you could use to describe Pauline's family?
16. Why does she think '*the next time someone called her 'Bubs' she was going to scream*' (page 112)?
Compare this to her feelings on page 28.
17. Draw a picture or diagram to represent the pressures on Pauline's life.
18. PJ says "*I'm not so sure about a lot of things anymore.*" (page 91)
What is she unsure about, do you think? What kinds of things have you been unsure about?
19. '*I couldn't figure out what was more important – the truth or the promise*' (page 160).
Why do you think Pauline chose 'the truth' over 'the promise'? How do the two concepts reflect Pauline's brother and sister?
20. *What is now proved was once, only imagin'd...*
"It's by William Blake," said PJ tucking it into her jeans pocket carefully. "It means coming down to St. Kilda to see you guys was a good idea. It means I imagined us being together and now I've proved it can happen." (page 156) In what other ways can you see this concept applied in the novel?

Marie-Claire Tierney

1. Marie-Claire arrives in Grade 6 as the new girl at Wellington Street Primary, and on her first day, corrects the Principal. What does this suggest to you about Marie-Claire?
2. Marie-Claire's knowledge of poems and books is strong. See page 76: "*The world is so full of a number of things, I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings. That's Robert Louis Stevenson*". Also look at page 61.
What does this tell you about her?
What do you think of the idea that she uses stories and poems to 'escape'?
3. How do you explain the differences in the two girls' reactions towards the notion of escaping?
"I'd like that," said PJ.
"I'd love it," said Marie-Claire fiercely. (page 64)
4. Marie-Claire has a vibrant imagination, one she uses to help her deal with a variety of situations.
Discuss some of the ways she does this, and whether you have ever tried these: pages 5, 8, 71, 74.
5. What was Marie-Claire trying to prove by playing on the train tracks? Consider the way she creates stories around her experiences (page 22).
6. Why do you think Marie-Claire and Tracy Grogan became 'friends'?

7. Marie-Claire becomes infamous for her lies and stories. Here is one of them:
I had a big brother once. He was a champion horseman. He rode a big black stallion and he used to pick me up from my old school every day and we'd go riding through the bush together. He'd put both his arms around me and we'd ride for hours and hours. (page 20)
Does she tell these stories just to impress, or is there another reason?
8. Imagine you are a school psychologist or counsellor who has had to review Marie-Claire's behaviour. How would you diagnose the reasons behind Marie-Claire's actions and lies? Consider pages 49, 54, 58, 62, 119.
9. PJ also begins to suspect Marie-Claire's honesty (pages 50, 62). Why does this weaken their friendship?
10. Dr. Crusoe and PJ talk about Marie-Claire:
"She sounds like a wise child." PJ thought about Marie-Claire filling her pockets with sweets at the supermarket and her face clouded with doubt. "I hope so," she said. "I really hope so." (pages 107-8)
Do you think Marie-Claire is wise?
11. What would you be thinking if Marie-Claire had been your friend and responded like this:
Marie-Claire frowned and looked out over the bay. *"I don't want to go back to my place. Your place is more interesting."* (page 43)
12. Do you understand Marie-Claire's reasons for lying to Pauline?
"I wanted to make us sound exciting. At first, it was that I wanted you to like me. And then when I found out about your brother, how could I tell you about my brother?"
Explain your opinion about her confession.

Brian McArdle

1. What happened when Brian was called up for National Service? What were his parents' wishes?
2. Why did Brian end up in Pentridge Prison?
3. What were Brian's reasons for being anti-conscription? Was he also against the Vietnam War? See page 15.
4. What do you think has caused Brian to feel and behave differently towards his parents after Pauline visits him? See page 154.

Susan McArdle

1. How would you respond to a sister who said this to you:
"You don't know her, PJ. You don't know it yet but you'll find out. Old people, they hate our generation. They're shit-scared of us." (page 102)
Write then read out your responses in the tone you think would suit.
2. Sue is quite spiteful towards her parents (page 67), but cannot hide the hurt to her inner feelings:
Sue snorted and PJ realised she was crying. *"She said I was a Jezebel – it's the same thing in her book. It's what she calls Julie. She must hate me."* (page 69).
How do you explain the change in her? Also consider page 117.
3. How does Sue use Brian as a catalyst for changes in her own life?
4. Imagine you are Sue's Mum or Dad. You are writing a letter to her, asking her to return home, or at least change her lifestyle. What would you say?
5. Sue's relationships are unstable. Why does she lead this lifestyle? See pages 53, 114, 115.

6. What do you think Sue is trying to do by changing herself physically?

Dr. Crusoe

1. Dr. Crusoe is widely experienced and well travelled: list the places she has been to. How does this help her guide Pauline?
2. Describe her home as though you are directing a scene in a film. Perhaps draw pictures of some of the angles you could take to capture the atmosphere, or even choose some music that would suit a tour of her house.
3. What is the significance of Dr. Crusoe's comment: *"You get used to things when you live with them all the time. Like old Friday here"* (page 31).
4. *"Ah well, sometimes the friends we choose, or as with Friday, who choose us, sometimes friends can become like family."* (page 34) What meaning does this have for the relationships in the novel?
5. Do you agree with this caution from Dr. Crusoe? *"My dear girl," said Dr Crusoe, "our friend Mr Blake said A truth that's told with bad intent, beats all the lies one can invent. It was not a kindness to tell this young man about his sister's invention."* (page 177)
6. What do you think Dr. Crusoe meant by: *"Perhaps Friday could see straight through her. Perhaps she could see that Marie-Claire needed her. Whereas you might have a lot more layers, so Friday hasn't quite worked you out."* (page 90)

Key Learning Area-based Issues and Activities

English

Sample Essay Topics

1. *"I don't think I like things changing too fast,"* said PJ (page 33)
In what way is Pauline both resisting and accepting change as a natural part of her life?
How is change both beneficial and detrimental to her?
2. *'Families are often more important than we give them credit for'.*
To what extent do you agree with this statement in light of *Walking Home with Marie-Claire*?
3. Escape and rebellion are key themes of the novel.
How do they become part of the lives characters lead?
Support your interpretation of these themes in the novel by referring to at least two characters.

Poetry

Have students discuss and brainstorm this concept by poet William Blake: *Those who restrain desire do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained* (pages 106-7). They should do this as a small group, writing their words and phrases onto large paper (for example: emotions – love, anger, loss, relationships; hobbies).

Using these ideas, students could begin to think about a way of creating their own poem to express this concept. Have students experiment with their words & ideas and the format of the poem. For example, photocopy the sheets, cut them up and arrange them in a pattern that builds in intensity.

Debate (Also a moral issue that could integrate with SOSE)

Consider this statement by Brian:

"I've told you before, there's a moral issue at stake. I'm not allowed to vote until I'm twenty-one, but I can be sent to Vietnam to be killed." (page 15)

Allow students time to discuss the implications of this statement. What issues are being raised here (ie. rights, democracy, national security & defence, individuality)?

Explain and list the legitimacy of both sides of the issue from the feedback of the students.

Have students choose a position: the rights of the individual or the rights of the nation. The debate can be set-up like a courtroom, with students taking on the personae of possible characters: those who have been conscripted, parents, government/military officials, lawyers.

They can then begin to research their role, and conduct the debate shortly after.

Writing & Expression

1. Read through the references to Friday's eyes, especially pages 45, 47, 90. Explain the concept of metaphors and similes. Ask the students to create their own metaphors or similes for describing an animal's eyes or other qualities.
2. Ask students to write a **short** story about someone who wears kadaicha boots. Stress the importance of atmosphere, description and context in the self-contained piece. Have students read through the references to the boots as a starting point: pages 32-2, 46, 105.
3. Another activity that could be used to trigger short story or descriptive writing is to have students look through the list of chapter titles for the novel. Students should choose a title that interests them and begin to list some of the ideas that were sparked off by the title. These form the basis for building a story, a play, or even a talk. Have them develop characters and settings to go with the titles.

Studies of Society and Environment (sose/hsie/s&e)**Australia and the Vietnam War**

A key area for utilising this novel would be to study the period in which the book was set (the 1970s) and attitudes and policies towards the Vietnam War in Australia.

1. Obtaining copies of the newspapers from the period would provide a context for students' research. Students (based in small groups) could take different angles of the society. Video documentaries would assist further.
2. The key topic of conscription, rights/conscience vs. the State, could be taken up and linked in with the English debate activity mentioned above. Students should research attitudes from the public in the newspapers of this time, and this can also be conducted as a real survey.
Have students also consider this excerpt from the text:
The caption read: "Brian McArdle being led from the courthouse after being sentenced to 21 days for resisting the draft and tearing up his medical certificate." (page 17)
3. Combining these activities, students could experiment with designing and making their own political propaganda (what would get your vote? What slogans would you use?). The setting could be classroom based, or more broadly based depending on the knowledge and skill level of the students.

Social Rebellion and Political Change

1. The concept of change is dealt with through the push for the election of the Labor Party. The process of elections, and election promises could be addressed via this. The profile of Gough Whitlam could also be explored. Direct references in the novel are on pages 41, 42, 48.
2. Other political protagonists are also referred to. Che Guevara (page 38) is on one of the posters in Brian's room. Students can link his role as a symbol of change and challenge to authority to that of Brian's struggle with his family and the government.
3. In order to reflect on the vast differences in the reactions of those that fought and those that saw them return, students could carefully read and analyse the comments made by Marie-Claire (page 186, 187). If appropriate, elements of the film *Born on the Fourth of July* could be used to help place these in context. Students could compose a fictional diary entry for Kevin about his return and the emotional impact his experiences had.

Thematic Activities

Regret

Walking Home with Marie-Claire deals with a number of characters that express regret for their actions and attitudes. Marie-Claire, Susan, and Pauline all experience some form of regret during the novel. *"I want things to be the way they used to be," said PJ...* (page 123)

1. As a class or in small groups, students can discuss (and list) some of the times when they have felt regret. Ask students if they can distinguish what causes regret, and whether examples have logical causes (e.g. you are unable to do something because of money or time), or are more emotionally complex.
2. Once some categories have been established, students should think about what can be done to avoid feeling regret – having them write slogans or philosophical messages works well. Give them some examples, such as 'regret is the pain of the future', 'time is only hands on a clock', 'don't dream it – do it'.

Rebellion

Many characters in *Walking Home with Marie-Claire* rebel against authority that they perceive to be 'suffocating' or narrow-minded. Brian, Susan, Marie-Claire, Tracy Grogan all provide examples of this. Parental pressure and teenage angst often lead to this rejection of authority: *"I don't have to take this bull crap from you anymore," Brian shouted.*

1. Students should be asked to bring in something that symbolises 'rebellion' to them: it may be music from a CD, a picture or photo, a piece of artwork, or an object.
2. Depending on the range of items, students should form a group for those who have the same item. In those groups, students should discuss their reasons why it signifies 'rebellion'.
3. Compile a class list of some of the elements of 'rebellion'. Are they reasonable/logical? What causes 'rebellion'? What caused the characters in *Walking Home with Marie-Claire* to rebel?
4. As a follow-up, ask students, in light of the discussion, to write their own opinion of how their item symbolises 'rebellion'.

Transition

Throughout the novel, characters are going through a stage of finding out where they belong, what friends are 'valuable', and what role family plays in supporting them through this period of change.

1. Look at the impact of Jenny and Melinda being against PJ's relationship with Marie-Claire (page 59). List some causes of this and some outcomes.
2. When Tracy Grogan became part of Pauline and Marie-Claire's experiences, how did things change? What influences did she bring? For example look at pages 98-9, 137.
3. Having responded to these questions, ask students why friendships often go through these ups and downs. What results do they think they can expect? Look at and compare pages 174 and 189.
4. Have students consider this comment from PJ: *'All of a sudden, it seemed that was the way everything was going. Everything was burnt out and ruined.'* (page 134). Ask students to represent this attitude in the form of a poem, but it must include a resolution.

Change

At the core of *Walking Home with Marie-Claire* is the theme of change. It surfaces through a range of characters' attitudes and behaviours.

1. Dr. Crusoe states: *"Growing older is a great adventure, PJ, and having doubts along the way is very natural. Everything changes."* (page 92). Students should discuss their feelings about this in small groups, and have them decide if this is a comforting statement or one that builds anxiety. Why?
2. After this, have students now consider how external changes have an impact on our lives. Look at this interaction on page 110:
*"Everyone changes," said Marie-Claire. "Especially brothers."
"Not me," said PJ stubbornly. "You can count on me staying exactly the same."*
3. Have students use this statement as a starting point for an informal debate: 'Change is always a good thing. It's our emotions that trick us'. Also read page 191.
4. Finish off by asking students to write a reflection on changes they'd like in their lives, but to consider the implications of such changes. Look at page 48 as an example.

Escaping

A great many of the characters in *Walking Home with Marie-Claire* seek to run from a reality that they reject. It seems change can make escape much more appealing, and escape can be a way of providing space for change to begin.

1. The bathing box is one of the strongest symbols of escape in the novel. It's a place where the girls can be free of pressure, and imagine their life in other ways.
"One day we'll sail out through the Heads," said Marie-Claire dreamily. "When we grow up, we should go and live somewhere exotic and really far away, in a castle or something. We'll live somewhere so secret that not even our families will find us." (page 61)
Ask students where they would 'escape' to in the world and how it would make them feel.
2. *"You don't want to meet my family. What we need is our own place, so we don't have to go to each other's houses," said Marie-Claire. "Some sort of secret place that's only for us. Like a cave or a cubby or some place where it can be just the two of us."* (page 62)
Why does Marie-Claire respond in this way?
What do you think is causing this attitude?
Also look at Pauline's reactions on pages 70 and 92.

3. Students should write down their interpretation of the relationship between escaping and imagination. Look at Marie-Claire's comment:

"That's because this is a secret tide," said Marie-Claire. "Like this is a secret place. The tide's especially coming right now 'cause we're inside. It's going to wash away the stumps and the whole bathing box is going to float out to sea on this secret tide. We'll sail right out – right out through the Heads and away from here. A long, long way, all the way around the world. And a magic albatross will come and sit on the roof and be our scout and watch over us. And we'll fall asleep and tomorrow we'll open the doors and there'll be nothing to see but the ocean in every direction." (page 63-4)

Think about the impact that dreams have on our mental state (see page 183)

4. Holidays are a way of 'escaping' the stress of a routine lifestyle. Have students design (in small groups if they wish) their ultimate 'Holiday Escape', one that takes into account price, time, and atmosphere. They can try to 'sell' their concept to other students (think about the 'escape' style TV programs). They should think about what effect an escape has: *'At the bathing box, they wouldn't have to worry about their families or kissing boys. At the bathing box they could be themselves.'* (page 84). Also look at pages 102 and 104.

Rejecting Change

Sometimes rejecting change is a deliberate and entirely sensible move.

1. Dr. Crusoe believes very strongly in change:

"Miss McArdle," said Dr Crusoe, suddenly fierce, "You can expect poison from standing water. Without movement, without change, there can be no growth. Terrible events have happened in this country and we need to promise ourselves and each other that things will change for the better." (page 33, look at page 34 also). From what *angle* does she view change?

2. Pauline notices a number of changes in Marie-Claire when Tracy joins in with them. How do you know Pauline is trying to resist these changes to the friendship (ie. page 143)?
3. 'Resisting change takes a lot of courage'. Have students either write or debate their reactions to this statement.

Being Challenged by Change

Throughout *Walking Home with Marie-Claire* Pauline is confronted with experiences that conflict with her values and morals. Her inquisitiveness leads her on, but her conscience makes her feel guilty.

1. When Marie-Claire suggests wagging school to Pauline (page 19), how does she react? Why might she feel this way?
2. If you were asked by a friend to go to a place you knew was forbidden, what conflicts would it raise with your conscience? Consider the girls at the stormwater drain on page 24, or at the mansion on page 73.
3. Marie-Claire also tempts Pauline to drink her Mum's sherry (pages 80 and 81). What caused PJ to give in? In hindsight, have students make suggestions on ways Pauline could have diffused the situation. Act them out. How effective are they?

Walking Home with Marie-Claire Board Game

This final activity requires time, creativity, and detailed knowledge of the novel. The key aim is to make a 'Marie-Claire' board game, or a variation of some other game.

1. Students will first need to brainstorm the possible formats their game might take. This requires plenty of planning and discussion, as well as a catchy name for the game.
2. Consider some of the experiences the novel raises: truth or dare, risks (shoplifting, smoking, stormwater drain, train tracks, wagging, sex) questions, telling lies, dilemmas (page 19), breaking into the mansion, dealing with money and shoplifting (page 99-100, 120, 127-30). Then consider the environments in which it is set (shopping, beach, home, Dr. Crusoe's house) and the characters.
3. Depending on the approach chosen, points or positions in the game could be won or lost on choices made or questions answered in contexts drawn from these experiences, environments and characters.
4. The game can incorporate both the need for knowledge (the need to answer questions correctly) and also the element of chance (through a dice, snakes and ladders etc). This creates good assessment opportunities for the teacher and the students. Based on the game's design, originality, difficulty, depth and enjoyment, it is possible to gauge students' engagement with the text and how they have conceptualised the themes and characters.

Resources and Further Reading

For those who wish to follow up the stories and poems mentioned by Marie-Claire, the following may be interesting:

Novels

Rudyard Kipling: *The Jungle Book*
Jean Craighead George: *My Side of the Mountain*

See these resources also:

<http://www.lockhart.k12.tx.us/~elemresource/teachers/sschnautz/mysidefu.html>
<http://www.grizzlybear.org/jcg/myside.html> (**interactive**)

Poetry

William Blake

<http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/rp/authors/blake.html>
<http://www.shunsley.eril.net/armoore/poetry/blake.htm>
<http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/blakeinteractive/> (**interactive**)

Robert Louis Stevenson

<http://www.poetryloverspage.com/poets/stevenson/stevenson.html>

Meet the Authors**Kirsty Murray**

Kirsty Murray was born in Melbourne, the middle child in a family of seven kids. After several years of travel, she returned to Melbourne where she lives in a big chaotic household with her partner and a gang of teenagers.

She says her leisure interests include "reading (duh!), listening to music, especially the music made by my kids - a number of whom are terrific musicians, singing with the Word of Mouth Choir, walking with friends, mammoth camping expeditions with a convoy of families and teenagers, and throwing things out of cupboards and rearranging the furniture".

For Kirsty, sometimes the 'funnest' part of writing is doing the research and long afternoons spent drifting around in the State Library, reading old newspapers on microfiche, rummaging through boxes of archival material, interviewing people who know about how to fly on a trapeze, the bad habits of turn-of-the-century newspaper boys, or the secret lives of Irish runaways. In 2000, Kirsty travelled to Ireland to research her latest project, a series of novels about Irish orphan immigrants.

Hamish Curry

Hamish Curry is the City Campus Co-ordinator of Eltham College of Education, Melbourne.