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Butterflies

By Susanne Gervay

Book Summary:

Coping with severe burns, the hospital and doctors is not easy when all you want to do is be a teenage girl. Katherine was severely burnt in an accident when she was two years old. Now 17, she lives with her mother and 22 year-old sister. Their father left the family when they were very young. Katherine still needs regular skin grafts. This is a moving and well-written tale of emotional and physical damage and Katherine's need to overcome her fears. It is a positive story of individual strength and family love. Whether a person is physically damaged or 'perfectly normal' life still has to be lived and the story of Katherine and her friends relates to all teenagers.

Endorsed by Dr Hugh Martin, President of the ANZ Burn Association and Head of Burn Unit, the Children's Hospital, Westmead.

* Highly commended for the Older Readers in the Australian Family therapists' Award for Children's Literature 2002

Curriculum Areas and Key Learning Outcomes:

Identity, disability, challenges, gender, youth culture, humour, identity, sexuality, peer group pressure, boys, friendship.

Appropriate Ages:

Ages 12+

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ACELA1541; ACELA1551; ACELA1553; ACPPS090; ACPPS093
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INTRODUCTION

Butterflies is Katherine's story. At seventeen, she is facing all the normal angst of a young adult with end of year exams, school, friendships, relationships and home life. However at the age of three, Katherine was severely burnt and has endured much pain and trauma and long terms in hospital with surgery to try and correct her disfigurement. All she really wants is to be normal, like everyone else. Told in the present, the story unfolds through a series of flashbacks, third person narrative and internal monologue which enables the reader to empathise with each of the characters.

THE AUTHOR'S JOURNEY WRITING BUTTERFLIES

I was asked by a girl to write about growing up with burns. I initially said no. I felt inadequate. Eventually I became drawn into writing *Butterflies*. It was a rocky journey of 18 months that challenged my values, taking me into relationships and experiences that would change me. How to begin? We all understand challenges because life gets rocky. However I had to understand the challenge of burns to seriously grapple with *Butterflies*. Initially I trawled through second-hand bookshops in Sydney's student area and emerged with heavy medical books. The graphic nature of burns, grafts and scarring was hard. To cope, I covered the photos with my hand as I read. Doubts about my ability to understand the medical process continued to undermine my confidence. I sought the help of Dr Hugh Martin, Head of the Burn Unit at the Children's Hospital, Westmead. It was a beginning. I investigated the Burn Unit in The Children's Hospital with its routines of bandages, heat lamps, dressing and undressing wounds, the creams, the pressure suits, and processes of healing. At times, human relationships were under extreme stress. An outlet was the Burn Support Foundation, where parents created a community for their children and the families. The highlight was the burn camps sponsored by the Fire Brigades, where children in pressure suits and splints, with their scars and restrictions played without the fear of being socially ostracized. I interviewed children and parents extensively until I felt that I understood the experience of burns - the medical facts and socialisation, the viewpoint of the victim and survivor, the family's perspective, the role of health workers and community. When the emotional experience of burns was internalized and melded into my own personal experience of growing up, only then did I put away the research and begin the year long journey of writing *Butterflies*.

I had a definite agenda. *Butterflies* would be medically accurate, but it would not be a medical book. It would be psychologically accurate, but not a didactic textbook. It

would reflect the stories of young people and families whom I had interviewed. I wanted to write a book where disability and challenge are part of the fabric of life, but not life itself. The main character Katherine would be burnt but never be a one dimensional stereotype. Katherine would be complex like all human beings with a real family, a background and a personality that reaches from the page into the lives of readers. Katherine's life would show that disability does not separate survivors from the community, but unites them in the common bond of humanity. *Butterflies* would be good literature and a powerful tool in understanding our differences, meeting challenges and understanding the commonality of us all.

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ISSUES AND THEMES

1. Impact of burns on an individual and family

- Survival
- Disfigurement
- Impact on a child's growth and development
- Prolonged hospitalization and years of surgery
- Pressure on the family
- Living in two worlds – the hospital and the outside world
- Emotional, psychological and physical impact of burns on the family
- The role of the Burn Unit team such as the Unit at the Children's Hospital, Westmead; the family; and support groups.
- Rehabilitation and return to normal or near normal life
- Role of the community in developing tolerance and understanding

1. To look beyond surface scars and find the person inside.

A burn victim has the same search for identity as those who are not burnt. However it requires strength and courage to meet those challenges. Set against burns, *Butterflies* explores Katherine's search for identity:-

- Independence
- Sexuality
- Family
- Friends
- Career
- A future

2. "Challenges are faced by each of us, every day of our life.

Those 'challenges' are greater for some than others." ...says Louise Savage, the remarkable World Sportsperson of the Year with a Disability *Butterflies* is about the courage and strength to meet and overcome those challenges. Burns is a specific challenge, yet it is also representative of all those hardships individuals face – be it:

- Intellectual disability
- Physical disability
- Emotional illness
- Social challenges, such as conflict within the family, violence, divorce
- Political hardships such as war, migration

Or it may be the personal but often difficult challenge of growing up and finding your place in the world:-

- Developing self esteem
- Relating to family
- Coping with examinations
 - Relationships
- Hopes and expectations
- The future

Butterflies is about harnessing individual's strengths to overcome the challenges of life and moving towards a positive future.

4. People do not exist in isolation. In ***Butterflies*** the issue of dependence – independence of a young person moving from childhood to adulthood is heightened through Katherine being burnt.

It explores:-

- The strength and need for family support
- The values of family and how it translates to the children
- The struggle to gain independence by the young adult
- The establishment of an adult relationship by the child with the parent

5. What is disability?

- Should a person be treated differently?
 - Are they „less“ than a normal person or „more“?
- How does society deal with disability?
- How does a person feel about a disability or special problem?
- Should Katherine be part of the community or separated?

STYLE:

“Butterflies is ‘cleverly told through flashbacks and current day scenes with natural dialogue and episodes from school and home. Through these we can understand Katherine’s gritty courage and stoic determination forged through many painful hospital surgeries. These same qualities drive Katherine to excel in school and in sport, and we cheer with her as she succeeds. The author’s smooth storytelling style adds to that feeling that we are part of this young woman’s life.” Associate Professor Belle Alderman, Lecturer in creative writing for young people, University of Canberra, and Head of School of Information Management and Tourism, Division of Communication and Education, University of Canberra.

Stylistic techniques used in *Butterflies*:

- In general, it is written in third person present tense. Present tense gives a sense of immediacy and engages the reader. Third person enables the narrator to present an omnipresent viewpoint, not just Katherine’s as would be the case through first person only narration.
- Internal monologue in first person present tense reveals Katherine’s feelings.
- Flashbacks to the past are in the present tense, third person with the use of dialogue. Italics are used in these passages to denote the past and a time and place change. This effectively brings the past to life through the immediacy of present tense with an active voice rather than the more traditional stylistic method of retelling what happened using past tense and a passive voice.

Significant variation of technique used - ranging from but not limited to:-

- a. natural dialogue
- b. letters
- c. descriptive passages
- d. poetry
- e. flashbacks to the past
- f. dream sequences
- g. humorous incidents
- h. dramatic scenes
- i. symbolism, notably the butterfly

CHARACTERS:

All the characters in Butterflies change and grow in understanding

- Katherine
- Her mother
- Her sister Rachel
- William
- Marc
- Jessie
- Her Father
- Teachers

QUESTIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM:

1. Katherine is burnt. However is she burnt inside? Why does she think she is the „Beast“?
2. How do Katherine“s burns help develop inner strength and courage? Can challenges such as divorce and war, make you stronger or weaker?
3. Sometimes Katherine is angry about her burns. Sometimes she is angry with her friends and other people because they don“t understand. Is it okay to be angry?
4. Male-female relationships and sexuality are part of adolescent identity. It can be a confronting time when young people feel unsure about themselves. How does having burns make it even tougher? How do Katherine“s relationships with Marc and William show this? Why do Marc and William behave as they do?
5. What is a disability? Is Katherine disabled?
6. In what way does the swimming coach shock Katherine into thinking about her disability? Do you think Katherine“s response is right?
7. Why do some schools say Katherine is disabled and others don“t?
8. What is the conflict in the medical area about her disability? Is having no hair a disability? Is being scarred a disability or just a cosmetic problem?

9. In what way does the Surf Life Saving Club help Katherine develop inner strength and belief in herself?
10. How is Katherine torn between two worlds – the hospital and life outside? What adjustments would she have to make? How does she cope?
11. What is the emotional and physical impact of burns on Katherine? How does it affect her mother and sister?
12. Close friendships are part of adolescence. Why is Jessie and Katherine's friendship so important? What do they argue about? How do they help each other in developing who they are?
13. How does Katherine cope with her father leaving? How does it affect her relationship with her mother and sister? What do you feel about it?
14. Why does Katherine see her mother as hero? Why does she hate her mother at times?

"I write about things that are important to me. *Butterflies* was tough to write. I was drawn into the world of third degree burns through circumstances. In the end I believe that I have managed to portray some of the pain and emotion that a burn victim may experience. Whatever you do in life, I believe that you should care about it"

SUSANNE GERVAY