



Sweet Adversity

By Sheryl Gwyther

There's never a good time to be orphaned - or abandoned ... especially when you are twelve years old, and it's the Great Depression.

In 1928, Shakespearean actors, the McAllisters, are forced to leave their daughter Adversity at the Emu Swamp Children's Home.

They fully intend to return, but things don't go according to plan.

Then, to make matters worse, Scrimshaw, a villainous theatrical agent, hears the talented Addie sing. He plots to use her in his next money-making venture, but when he turns up at Emu Swamp to collect his prize, Scrimshaw finds she's run away.

Together with Macbeth, her Shakespeare-quoting cockatiel, Addie is about to embark on the adventure of a lifetime.

Themes

Shakespearean Theatre, Drama and Melodrama

Vaudeville/ Variety Theatre and Musical Theatre Performance

Great Depression
Orphaned or Abandoned Children
Authority
Values

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BOOK SUMMARY

'Talented children show their value in the end. If they survive.' (pp vii-viii)

In 1928, the talented young performer twelve-year-old Adversity Isabel McAllister was left at the Emu Swamp Children's Home by her theatrical parents Kenneth and Isabel, and eighteen months later she is still there. The evil Matron Maddock, who runs the home with the assistance of Algernon Parris, has told Addie that her parents have died crossing a river, and later, that she is now her guardian. Meanwhile, the unscrupulous agent Scrimshaw has heard young Addie sing and has plans to exploit her talents for his own nefarious ends. Addie gets wind of the plot that he and the Matron have hatched and although sad to leave her friend Young Jack Roo, Addie escapes with the help of Mary and Tomas, servants at the Home, in a caravan hauled by a horse named Ned. When Scrimshaw turns up at the Home to collect her, he discovers that she has run away with Macbeth, her Shakespeare-quoting cockatiel. Addie wants nothing more than to be a Shakespearean actress, while also being able to entertain audiences with her glorious voice, but without an evil impresario controlling her career. So Addie embarks on a hair-raising escapade – an adventure of a lifetime – but also a journey to discover her *modus operandi* in order to survive in the mercurial world of theatre.

Addie is advised to head to the Camp of Lost Children where she makes a friend in Samuel Lloyd, but encounters her old enemy Emily Barrow, who also used to live at the Home. She is again forced to flee when Mr Parris arrives in search of her, but on the road, finds solace in the home of Nell and Joe Baker. Unfortunately, Scrimshaw has arrived at their blacksmith's shop and garage before Addie and kidnaps her again to take her back to the Home. In an effort to escape, Addie enlists the help of her friend Jack, but they are captured again and taken to Sydney by Scrimshaw, where Addie's talents are sold to a theatre director named Harry Couture. Scrimshaw gets wind of their plans to escape again, and they end up on the edge of the Harbour in a desperate scene that ends with Scrimshaw falling into the water and disappearing.

Addie and Jack make their way to Sam Lloyd's parents' home in the Rocks and are reunited with Samuel. Finally, Addie discovers her parents acting in 'Romeo and Juliet' at a Redfern theatre, and they return to share a joyously celebratory chicken dinner at the Lloyds. This emotional adventure ends with Addie, her parents, and her friends sharing the heartwarming message that *'All's well that ends well'*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sheryl Gwyther is an award-winning author from Brisbane, Australia. Her first children's novel, *Secrets of Eromanga* was published by Lothian Books/Hachette Australia in 2006.

Her chapter books are also in many Australian schools and across the globe. Sheryl's short stories and plays are found in Australia's *The School Magazine*, Ireland's *The Looking Glass Magazine* and New Zealand's *Junior Journal*, and most recently, a new chapbook of children's flash fiction, *Seven Tales*.

Sheryl's awards include two Australian Society of Authors' Mentorships, two May Gibbs Children's Literature Trust Fellowship Residencies; and a 2015 Work-of-Outstanding-Progress Grant from SCBWI International (the first non-American to win) for her manuscript, *Sweet Adversity*.

Visit her website for further information: <https://www.sherylgwyther.net/>

AUTHOR INSPIRATION

Writing *SWEET ADVERSITY* has been like that famous line from Shakespeare's play, *As You Like It* ... 'Sweet are the uses of adversity.' ... so it has been for Addie and also for me.

For Addie, facing adversity leads her into isolation and life-threatening danger, but it is tempered by the sweetness of friendship and loyalty.

For me, adversity came with the ups and downs of writing this novel over nine years ... of sorting out the structure over many rewrites and changes / of delving deeply into the life and times of the Hard Times in Australia / of following up on my instincts to follow the 'Shakespeare trail' after finding an antique copy of *The Works of William Shakespeare* (about to be chewed up by white ants) in my mother-in-law's garage. The book once belonged to her mother, a travelling actor back in the late 1880s.

I never gave up on this novel when the going got tough. I just put it aside to work on one of the other stories I have. Then I got back into it because I knew my story 'had legs' - that it could be even better.

This story is now all the better for surviving the fires of perseverance.

And best news of all ... the team working on *Sweet Adversity* at my publisher, HarperCollins Australia, is brilliant! I ♥ them! And so do Addie and Macbeth.

All's well that ends well!

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CHARACTERS

- **The Significance of Character:** Characters are the heart of any narrative, the catalysts for action, and the central core around which all other narrative aspects must revolve and work. In this novel, there are a few major characters and a cast of minor ones.
- **Major Characters:** Adversity McAllister, and her cockatiel Macbeth, Matron Moira Maddock, Algernon Parris, Young Jack Roo, Barnett E. Scrimshaw, and Samuel Lloyd.

Discussion Point: Discuss the character of Matron Maddock.

- **Minor Characters:** Bill, Mary, Doctor Hughes, Tomas, Billy Bugsby, Emily Barrow, Nell and Joe Baker, Mrs Mills and her children, Monsieur Couture and Miss Judy Punch, Mr and Mrs Lloyd and their daughters, Kenneth and Isabel McAllister, Addie's parents.
- *Discussion Point:* Is there a minor character who might have played a larger part? Why would you have liked to have seen more of this character?
- **Character Arcs** are the curve on which key events show how a character grows or develops in response to events and to interactions with other characters in the novel. Trace the character arc of anyone in this novel, eg. Algernon Parris.

Connecting to Prior Knowledge

- What did your students know about any of the topics below before reading this novel?
- What did your students know about the conventions of Shakespearean Theatre or of Vaudeville or Variety Theatre, before reading this novel?

Exploring the text in context

Invite students to explore aspects of the novel which reflect a particular context such as those listed in the themes below.

Rich Assessment Task

Research any of the topics suggested in these notes more thoroughly and create a unique project related to one of them.

Responding to the text

Invite students to respond to the novel in the following ways:

- Discuss any of the themes listed below.
- Write a review of the novel.
- Create a new cover and back cover blurb for the novel.
- Create a book trailer for the novel.
- Read other novels and graphic novels which relate to *Sweet Adversity* in dealing with travelling theatre performers or Shakespeare's plays, and compare to it. [See **Bibliography**.]
- Create a graphic novel interpretation in one page of any event which occurred in this novel.
- If Addie were to have further adventures what might they be? Write a synopsis for a sequel to this novel.

Exploring Theme, Plot and Setting

Theme

- Shakespearean Theatre, Drama and Melodrama

Discussion Point: Addie's parents' letter (pp 117–18) reveals the travails of travelling performers often having to play many parts and to make do with rudimentary props and sets. What other **aspects of the theatre** were detailed in this novel?

Activity: *Sweet Adversity* opens with a quote from **Shakespeare's play** 'As you Like It' and is divided into 'acts' rather than 'parts'. Within each act there are chapters with titles drawn from Shakespeare's many plays. How does Shakespeare relate to this novel? Discuss each chapter heading quote and what it means or signifies.

Activity: Read either a Shakespearean play, or a summary of one, with students and discuss.

Activity: Addie's parents tour with their small company of two in the Shakespearean Theatrical Troupe. Research the Shakespearean theatre tradition in Australia including the work of *Bell Shakespeare* <<https://www.bellshakespeare.com.au/about-us/>>

Discussion Point: This novel is a **melodramatic escapade** worthy of Shakespeare and his fellow bards. There are orphaned children, missing parents, villains, twists and turns in plot, and several cases of false identity. Addie leads Scrimshaw on a merry chase which ends fittingly in a moment of 'poetic justice'. (p 303) and in one joyous reunion (p 311) and another equally joyous if tearful reunion (p 321). What other **tropes of melodrama** did you discover in this novel? [See Gregory Roger's inspired picture book trilogy *The boy, the bear, the baron, the bard; and other dramatic tales* (2015) which plays with these tropes in hilarious fashion.]

- Vaudeville/ Variety Theatre and Musical Theatre Performance

Activity: Aspects of the McAllister family's repertoire also hark from the Vaudevillian or variety theatre tradition popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from about 1850 to 1930. For example, Addie has her cockatiel, Macbeth, perform tricks on a trapeze. And when she signs up

with Harry Couture she suggests that she swing above the stage in a giant birdcage since they have given her the nickname 'Songbird'. These early troubadours not only sang, danced and acted but sometimes put on demonstrations of boxing prowess, acrobatics, tightrope walking and other skills akin to circus performance. Invite students to research this style of theatre. Research the **performers** (such as Gladys Moncrieff (1892-1976), Arthur Tauchert (1877-1933) who later starred in the film *The Sentimental Bloke* (1919), and James(Jim) Gerald (1891-1971) and Roy (Mo) Rene (1891-1954)); **troupes** (such as Nat Phillips' Whirligigs (1925-27); (1928-1932)); **entrepreneurs** (such as J.C. Williamson (1845-1913), and Harry Rickards (1843- 1911) and his Tivoli Circuit); and **theatres** (Bijou Theatre, Bourke Street Melbourne (1890-1934)) engaged in the industry. Visit this comprehensive website which archives information about the 'golden years of minstrelsy and vaudeville' in Australia: *Australian Variety Theatre Archive* <<https://ozvta.com/>> [See also **Bibliography**.]

Activity: Such theatre survived even until the late twentieth century in television programs such as George Wallace Junior's *Theatre Royal* on BTQ-7 which began in 1961. Research his work and that of his father George Wallace on sites such as:

Evans, Raymond 'Wallace, George Leonard (1918-1968),' *Australian Dictionary of Biography* Volume 16, (MUP), 2002

<<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/wallace-george-leonard-11942>>

Sayers, Stuart 'Wallace, George Stevenson (1895-1960),' *Australian Dictionary of Biography* Volume 12, (MUP), 1990

<<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/wallace-george-stevenson-8961>>

Activity: Child performers achieve earlier recognition than peers who become performers in their late teens or adulthood, and thus may have an advantage in their careers. But they are also at risk due to a lack of formal education, and also from exploitation or abuse. Discuss with students Addie's likely trajectory after the end of the novel. Theatre has given her a rich education in language, theatre and singing techniques, and in empathy. But is she equipped for life?

- Great Depression

Activity: Research the Great Depression (which began with the Wall Street Crash of 1929) and its impact on Australia.

Discussion Point: The plight of Bill the hobo or 'swagman' whom Adversity meets outside the home (p 11) is typical of many people during these

strained times; he was forced to leave the bookshop he owned in Sydney and to take to the road seeking work as an itinerant. Research further the experiences of swagmen in that era.

Discussion Point: Sam's story of the miners' strike and his da's injury (pp 139–40) is also typical of the times. Because of the shortage of work, men either accepted wages that were a pittance or went on strike, in which case they were often challenged by police or laid off and replaced by non-union workers. Research this topic further.

Discussion Point: The plight of the grubby Mrs Mills who does favours for Scrimshaw in return for money and food is pitiful: 'But *he* helps me sometimes. I have to help him back.' (p 222) The family's food consists of stale bread and cheese that has been nibbled by rodents. Her children are sent to scavenge for bits of coal, firewood and fish heads. This was the reality for many poor families during the Depression. Discuss with students how they might have survived in similar circumstances. Discuss the recipes and food prepared, which was cheap and filling, eg. At one point Addie eats a sandwich made with dripping.

Discussion Point: When Addie and Jack are searching for the Lloyd family's home in the Rocks they are driven away by signs saying 'NO SQUATTERS ALLOWED!' (p 308) In these desperate times people frequently resorted to claiming refuge in places which belonged to others. Research this topic further.

- Orphaned or Abandoned Children

Discussion Point: The theme of orphaned or abandoned children is often explored in children's literature. Why?

Discussion Point: 'And it wasn't only Jack who needed a mother in this place. All thirty of them did.' (p 33) The Emu Swamp Children's Home is a desperate place for these children. Matron Maddock is a grim guardian and the only kindness they receive is from Mary and Tomas. 'They were like a family, this tribe of lost children. Perhaps she could become part of the tribe. A child of the river camp.' (p 138) Addie's search for her family is mirrored in the searches of nearly every child encountered in this narrative. Discuss.

Discussion Point: Addie is shocked to discover that Mr Parris had been an orphan (p 54) and then discovers from Matron's diary how her parents and brother died aboard ship travelling to Australia (p 94). Some might suggest that their lack of parents may partly explain their awfulness as adults?

Discuss with students the idea of 'nurture or nature'? Are we the people we are innately or do we develop as a result of our environment and upbringing?

Discussion Point: There is an undercurrent of ugly truth beneath the action in this theatrical escapade. The cage in the back of Scrimshaw's car (p 192) suggests to Addie that he has stolen children like herself before. This is a nasty concept cemented once Matron has been arrested. How easy must it have been to kidnap children in such desperate times?

Discussion Point: Some recent novels parody such experiences, eg. *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (13 book series) by Lemony Snicket. Why is this topic so often parodied?

- **Authority**

Discussion Point: Algernon Parris loses control (p 42) when trying to discipline the younger children and Addie realises what that means – a person thwarted in his authority is a dangerous adversary.

Discussion Point: Matron's rule is cruel and brutal. She saves money by selling the vegetables grown by Tomas and feeding the children in her charge poorly and by leaving the boiler unrepaired which leads to Billy being burned; she canes Adversity with Stinging Bessie (p 62) for her impertinence in mimicking her; she orders Mr Parris to kill the bird (p 63). Discuss notions of authority and how the Matron should have behaved.

Discussion Point: Matron's cruelty extends to her treatment of her Aboriginal servant, Mary, whom she describes with contempt: 'Typical of someone born in a lean-to by a billabong' (p 45) Matron fails to recognise that Mary is kind and resourceful. For example, she administers a salve of 'bush medicine' (p 86) to Addie's hand after she is caned. Were there any other references to Matron's attitude to her servants in this novel?

Discussion Point: Read Matron Maddock's 'Rules for Obedient Children' (p 36). Discuss whether these rules are fair or even useful.

- **Values**

Discussion Point: Discuss some of the incidents that reveal values or morals in this text, for example, Sam feels that he can't go home because he was a coward when his father was being beaten by the guards at the strike (pp 140–1). Addie wants Macbeth to hurt Emily (p 152) but in her heart of hearts knows it is wrong, not just because 'Emily was now a worse enemy than before.' (p 152) Addie rescues Mr Parris from the river (p 167) despite the

fact that he has been pursuing her to take her back to the home. She also gives him back the ledger of the accounts (p 169) in the hope that he will do the right thing and reveal that Matron has been siphoning government funds for her own purposes. Nell feeds Addie, and her husband, Joe repairs Ned's hoof for no payment (pp 180–1). Jack overcomes his fear of the dark to rescue Addie in the cage above the stage (pp 288–9). Addie risks her own life to rescue Jack (p 310).

Discussion Point: 'Look for the good in people. It's there hiding in the shadows, waiting for them to let in the light.' (p 291) Do you agree/disagree?

Plot

Discussion Point: The plot of this novel relies on **suspense**. Matron refers to Adversity as her 'little golden hen' (p 70) when speaking to Mr Parris, suggesting that in agreeing to be her guardian she had more than kindness in mind. Later Addie finds the letter Matron had received from her parents (p 95) and how she'd lied to them about Addie having run away, and also the plot she's hatched with agent Scrimshaw to indenture Addie as a performer (pp 98–9). She also finds a cache of her parents' letters hidden in Matron's office, and discovers that hers, too, were not sent to them. Parris reveals (p 169) that Matron is also a forger. Such a gradual release of information maintains suspense and gives structure to a narrative. What other mysteries or clues did you notice in this novel?

Setting

Discussion Point: The novel is set in the rural locality of Emu Swamp and then in Sydney. Compare the two locales and how they are contrasted in description in this novel.

Examining text structure and organisation

Discussion Point: This novel is structured in three acts with chapters within the acts. Discuss why the story is broken at particular points in the plot into these three acts. What does each act signify? Trace a chart of the action in dramatic arcs.

Discussion Point: Chapters open and close with impact, for example, Chapter 3 ends: 'But how could she forget her parents?' (p 30) Chapter 8 begins: 'Wake up, Addie.' (p 73) How important are beginnings and endings in structuring a narrative?

Examining grammar and vocabulary

Discussion Point: Discuss the use of simile and metaphor in passages such as: 'It squatted beneath the trees – a giant shabby toad of a building with mould-streaked walls, leaf-choked gutters and window frames peeling paint like sunburned skin.' (p 8) OR 'The faded grey-wood buildings sat on short wooden stumps their splintery verandas ran the length of each, and push-up corrugated tin shutters jutted over the windows like sleepy eyelids.' (p 35)

Discussion Point: Read the letter sent to Addie by her parents (pp 117–8). Discuss the use of language and grammar in this letter that is written differently to how we speak today. Re-write the letter in contemporary language.

Discussion Point: Read these Shakespearean insults: 'Away, you starveling. You elf-skin. You dried neat's tongue, bull's pizzle. You stock-fish.' (p 150) Discuss what they might mean.

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