

Title: The Minnow	Author: Diana Sweeney	Recommended: Year 9-10
About the author: The Minnow is Diana Sweeney's first novel and was winner of The Text Prize in 2013. Born in New Zealand, but now living northern NSW, Diana is a University lecturer and fashion model.		
Synopsis: In the wake of devastating floods that have taken the life of her family, Tom, whose real name is Holly, tries to rebuild her life. Torn between memories of the past and the pending changes, Tom searches for a way to fill the gap left by the family she has lost. The answer comes in the form of the Minnow. The Minnow is someone to talk to, someone to love and to love her in return. The Minnow represents the future, not only for Tom but for others in the community. <i>The Minnow</i> explores the nature of family, loss and life. It raises questions about how communities connect in the face of tragedy. While life changes at a rapid rate for Tom, she must learn to find her own voice rather than listening to the voices of the past.		

BEFORE READING

1. Write a description of a place where you are most content. Attempt to take your reader into the place in their imagination so that they can understand your connection to it. Then write a reflection on why you connect with this place.
2. Australia is a landscape that experiences extremes from bush fire to flood. Research recent disaster events. What happens to communities and people within those communities when tragedy occurs? What do they do to overcome them and move on?
3. How many different ways can we define family? What are the most important qualities in defining family?
4. Consider how your imagination can help you tackle life's challenges. Is it better to face reality or allow your imagination to take over? Present an argument (either written or oral) offering your point of view.

WHILE READING

1. In the opening lines of Chapter 1, Tom is 'confid[ing] in an undersized blue swimmer crab'. What does this reveal about the character?
2. For each chapter, note the following on the table below:

Chapter	Key moment in the chapter	Examples of language devices	Recurring motifs/symbols
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		such as metaphors, similes...	

3. Why do you think Nana hands out pictures of her late husband to the residents of the Mavis Orstein Home for the Elderly?
4. Tom has a natural curiosity about words? Why do you think the writer has included this characteristic?
5. Make a list of the 'sayings' that Tom refers to in the novel (many of them from Nana). Consider the link between the saying and the moment in the story. In what way does the saying add to our understanding of that moment? Create a list of your own familiar saying and swap with others. See if you can work out what they mean and where they might have come from. 🗨️
6. Explain the following quotations from the novel, identifying literacy devices (such as metaphors) in the extract.
 - a) 'In the quiet that follows, I watch Mrs Peck's mouth open and close. I notice little marks around her neck where she's gotten herself all tangled in someone's line.' (P.19)
 - b) 'Jonah loves the new school. "Better than the old building" he says. "All the rooms have air conditioning and there's a basketball hoop and they've fixed up the netball court and the toilets don't leak anymore and the boys have got a stainless steel urinal that flashes automatically."
"Anything else?" I ask.
"Lots of kids are missing."
"Anything else?"
"Miss Pearson is there, but Mr Buckle drowned and Mrs Lee is too upset to return."(P.31)
 - c) I can hear voices, far away.
I let my mind drift.
I feel weightless, calm.
Someone is humming.
'Tommy?' Is that you?
7. Tom's descriptions of the Minnow suggest that she and the Minnow are different entities but connected at the same time. Find evidence of this in the novel and explain what this tells us about the relationship.
8. Tom is caught between two friendships, but which is better for her. Why is she drawn to the less beneficial one?
9. Explore the way that the recurrent references to the flood are used as a symbol of threat throughout the novel.
10. Why are memories so important in the novel?

11. 'Before the flood, I always felt relieved when I woke from a bad dream.' What does this tell us about how Tom feels now? (P.138)
12. Re-read the passage on page 194 from 'The tube? I try to listen for the answer... I'm suffocating and there's nothing I can do.' Explain the significance of the passage.
13. How and why does the writer draw parallels between the memory of the flood and the birth of the Minnow on page 197?

AFTER READING

Character

1. Both Jonah and Tom seek independence, but are they both ready for it?
2. In what way is Tom reliant on the characters around her?
3. In what way has the flood made Tom vulnerable? Is she the only vulnerable character in the novel?
4. Tom refers to Nanna's expression of sorting the 'wheat from the chaff'. Explain what the expression means. Who would you describe as the 'wheat' in Tom's life and why?
5. What does the Minnow mean to each character? Why?
6. 'I was looking for a word to describe Dad, but I'm not sure solivagant is the one.' Conduct a word search to find words that describe the key characters in 'The Minnows'.
7. Why is the shift of name from 'Tom' to 'Holly' significant?

Style and Structure

1. The events of the flood are revealed to readers in snippets. Why do you think the writer made this choice? What effect does it have on the reader?
2. Make a list of the words that Tom loves and what do they reveal about her character?
3. In what way does the first person narrative add to our understanding of Tom? Would the novel work in third person? Why and why not?
4. Tom says 'I really like the word 'paradox'. And I like all its alternative words except 'absurdity'. I don't understand how that one fits.' Consider the definition of 'paradox' and its variations. Is this a good word to describe the novel? Explain your answer with evidence from the novel.
5. How is the flood used as a marker of time in the novel?

Themes

Family

1. Explore the significance of Mothers' Day in the novel.

2. Tom creates her own version of family in the novel. Explain the role that those around her play in this.
3. Despite them having died, Tom still sees some members of her family. What does their appearance tell you?
4. Create a new family tree for Tom, including her old family members and her new ones.

Life and Death

1. Death is a constant presence in the novel. Explore the different ways that it is portrayed.
2. The characters are haunted by the past. In what way does this influence their actions?
3. Consider the way that life and death are linked in the novel?
4. The Minnow is a reflection of new life and hope. Find 3 quotations from the novel that illustrate this.
5. 'Generally speaking, when Nana loses a friend, it is through old age. I envy her that.' (P.131) What difference does Tom see between her grandmother's loss and her own?
6. 'Humans can't conceive of life as a continuous state.' What does Professor the seahorse mean? Where is this evident in the novel?

Place

1. The River means different things for different people. Explain what it means for three characters in the novel.
2. Make a list of the different locations in the novel. What roles do they play?
3. It is clear to the reader that Bill's place is not the best place to be, yet Tom is constantly drawn back. Why do you think this is the case?
4. Places also contain memories. Why is it that some people return after life changing events, yet others choose never to go back? Find some real life examples that reflect the suggestion in the novel.

RESPONDING

1. Tragedy can change more than those directly involved in it. Discuss.
2. There is more than one way to define family. Explore the role of family in 'The Minnow'.
3. The true effect of tragedy or natural disaster is not always evident until years later. Explore the long term impact of the flood on Tom's life.
4. You have been appointed by the government to help rebuild the town both physically and emotionally. Write a report outlining the needs of the community and what can be done to address these. You could present this as a written or oral report.

5. 'I learned that just a flicker of an expression could betray the truth.' In what way is the truth disguised in the novel?
6. While some memories fade, new memories are created. Is it necessary to forget the past to embrace the future? Discuss in relation to *The Minnow*.
7. 'You got to hand it to the Minnow; she changes everything.' How does life change for the characters in *The Minnow*?
8. After a tragic event, not all memories are negative ones. Do you agree?
9. We don't know a lot about what happened to Tom on the night of the flood. Using the small snippets of information given to us in the novel, write your version of the flood from Tom's point of view.
10. While a minnow may be a small fish, the role that the Minnow plays in the lives of the characters in the novel is far greater than its size suggests. Discuss.
11. Consider the cover design for *The Minnow*. What does it tell you about the novel? Create your own cover design and write an explanation of what you have chosen to focus on.