

# Butterflies

## Reading notes

### 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 survivor
- Emotional and psychological 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

2. 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 more strength and courage to meet those challenges. Set against burns, *Butterflies* explores Katherine's search for identity:-

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

3. "Challenges are faced by each of us, every day of our life. Those 'challenges' are greater for some than other." says Louise Sauvage, 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 an 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 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:-
  - Natural dialogue
  - Letters
  - Descriptive passages

- Poetry
- Flashbacks to the past
- Dream sequences
- Humorous incidents
- Dramatic scenes
- Symbolism, notably the butterfly

## **CHARACTERS**

All the characters in *Butterflies* change and grow in understanding.

### Katherine

"Katherine's burn experiences are sufficiently detailed to enable readers to fulfil their curiosity and fears about what it means to be a burn survivor. No longer are we outside this traumatic experience. We can now empathise. Characters that we come to care about very much doubly enrich the whole experience." *Associate Professor Belle Alderman, University of Canberra.*

*Butterflies* "traces the development of the personality from insecurity and relative isolation to a healthier level of self-esteem that enables the individual to form balanced relationships with family and friends.

Those of us who are involved in the world of burns know how survivors need help from time to time, but slowly develop a depth of character and an inner strength which is rarely seen in others. Like tempering steel, the process of passing through the fire helps create a person of exceptional quality." *Dr Hugh Martin, Head of the Burn Unit, The Children's Hospital, Westmead, NSW*

Katherine's character changes and grows as she relates differently to characters:-

- Her mother
- Sister, Rachel
- William
- Marc
- Jessie
- Father
- Grandparents

And issues:-

- Sexuality
- Being different
- Self esteem
- Independence
- Her relationship with her father
- Her relationship with her mother
- Friendship
- Hospitalization and her life with burns
- Her aspirations - school, sport, career

### Characters who change and grow in *Butterflies*

- Mother

- Sister, Rachel
- William
- Jessie
- Marc
- Father
- Teachers

The needs of a burns patient are numerous. Their treatment must not only cater for their physical needs but also their emotional needs.

Burns patients require specialised treatment in the short and the long term. For severe burns patients this treatment can only be found in a specialised Burns Unit. A major burn is followed by a life threatening disease characterised by shock and metabolic derangement.

Healing the wound, usually by skin grafting, has a high priority and needs specialised surgical care. Once the wounds are healed the patient can leave hospital. Prolonged treatment is needed to minimise scarring and maximise their physical and emotional recovery.

A Burns Unit provides all this treatment, collecting the skills of doctors, nurses, therapists and others, all of whom have specialised knowledge and experience in the treatment of burns. Whilst we all recognise that this unit would include doctors and nurses, it would also include physiotherapists, recreational therapists, occupational therapists, dieticians, social workers, psychologists chaplains and educators.

The doctors include surgeons, pain specialists, anaesthetists, intensivists, and a full range of consultants to deal with the many and varied complications which can occur after a major burn.

Emotional care is challenging but vitally important. How well a burns survivor adapts to their injury depends more on the success of their emotional care than anything else. Each member of the Burns Unit team provides some emotional care and support, but there have to be some members of the unit whose training and expertise is solely directed at emotional care.

The New South Wales paediatric Burns Unit is located at The New Children's Hospital at Westmead, Sydney. It provides care for children in New South Wales, Noumea and other Pacific Rim countries.

The unit has eight beds. Up to 20 nurses provide care not only for children on the ward but also for those critically injured children who start their treatment in the Hospital's Intensive Care Unit.

Children are happiest in their own environments and this aids their recovery. The child's stay in hospital is kept to a minimum. Daily, and later weekly, treatment on an outpatient basis provides the care needed after their stay in hospital. The outpatients facility, the NSW Fire Brigades Burns and Plastic Surgery Treatment Centre, also provides care for a large number of children with minor burns.

The Hospital organises a burns camp, proudly sponsored by NSW Fire Brigades, where burns survivors can come together to encourage self reliance and self esteem. These camps are an invaluable part of the reintegration and rehabilitation of the burns survivor.

The Hospital is also an ardent advocate for children. It was a strong voice in the move to introduce reduced hot water temperatures in new homes and public buildings. The Hospital encourages safe practices by families and individuals to minimise the risk of death or injury from many accidents including burns. The Unit has close ties with other organisations dedicated to child safety including Kidsafe.

- The Burn Unit,  
The Children's Hospital, Westmead, NSW Australia

