



A Million Things

EMILY SPURR

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Fiction

RECOMMENDED READING AGE: 16+

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CURRICULUM GUIDE

The following teaching guide has been designed to embrace shared curriculum values. Students are encouraged to communicate their understanding of a text through speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing.

The learning activities aim to encourage students to think critically, creatively and independently, to reflect on their learning and connect it to an audience, purpose and context. They encompass a range of forms with a focus on language, literature and literacy. Where appropriate, they promote the integration of ICT and life skills.

SYNOPSIS

Rae is ten years old, and she's tough. She's had to be: life with her mother has taught her the world is not her friend. Now suddenly her mum is gone and Rae is alone, except for her dog Splinter.

Rae can do a lot of things pretty well for a kid. She can take care of herself and Splinters, stay under the radar at school and keep the front yard neat enough that the neighbours won't get curious. But she is gnawed at by fear and sadness; haunted by the shadow of a terrible secret.

Lettie, who lives next door, might know more about Rae than she lets on. But she has her own reasons for keeping the world at arm's length. When Rae finds out what they are, it seems like she and Lettie could help each other.

But how long can a friendship last when it's based on secrets?

Tender, funny, heartbreaking—*A Million Things* is a story of grief and resilience, told with eloquent simplicity. In brave, spiky Rae, Emily Spurr has created a character you will never forget.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Tasmania, Emily lives in Melbourne with her partner, their twin sons and a deaf, geriatric cat. Shortlisted for the prestigious Victorian Premier's Unpublished Manuscript Prize, *A Million Things* is her first novel.

BEFORE READING

1. Complete a sensory writing activity with students. You will need to collect objects that evoke the five senses; sight, touch, taste, sound and smell. Get students to experience each of these senses, for example having the student dip their hand in a glass of water or eating a lolly. Ask that students describe these experiences by authoring imagery in a creative piece of writing.
2. Ask students to reflect on the relationship between smell and memory. Ask students to reflect on the smells that bring back the most powerful memories for them. For example, the memories of Christmas that are evoked through the smell of pine needles. Get students to jot down the most powerful smells they can think of and the memories they bring back.
3. Separate students into small groups. Ask them to come up with a list of ten things that makes a home, a home. Each group will need to present this list to the class and justify their decisions.

WHILE READING

1. 'Sometimes I'd flip through the fat blue dictionary, looking for the right word for it, the feeling inside.' (p. 4) Rae has a habit of looking up words in the dictionary to describe her feelings but also to describe the world around her. How does language help us understand each other, the world and ourselves?
2. Create a list of the new words you come across while reading *A Million Things*. Similarly to Rae,



use your own dictionary to discover their meaning. Why do you think it is important to expand our vocabulary?

3. 'I slipped Schoolkid on like a jumper, without thinking.' (p. 14) How does Rae compartmentalise her home life and school life? What emotional toll may this have on her?
4. 'Fear hates action.' (p. 21) How does Rae keep busy to distract herself from the reality of her situation? Is this a good way of dealing with grief?
5. 'I'm no closer—you're the music and the silence.' (p. 25) How can Rae's mother be described as both music and silence? Despite being a contradiction, how is this an accurate way to describe her lost mother?
6. Rae describes that sometimes she feels like she has 'a head full of bees' (p. 27) What emotion do you think Rae might be feeling? What may be a good way of managing a 'head full of bees'?
7. 'I wonder how you get words into the dictionary. Do you just email someone?' (p. 27) Research how words are included in the dictionary each year.
8. When Rae finds an old inscription from her mum inside one of her books, she remarks: 'The meaning's changed since you wrote it.' (p. 192) How can the meaning of words change over time?
9. 'I'm so used to keeping things in my head I don't know how to let them out.' (p. 252) Why is it important to talk to others about our feelings?

AFTER READING

CHARACTERS

1. Rae initially perceives Lettie to be a 'nosy old goat'. Who is Lettie eventually revealed to truly be?
2. 'No, you ninny. It was because you reminded me of me.' (p. 185) How are Rae and Lettie similar?
3. 'We have been like this always, me carrying him. Him carrying me.' (p. 237) How do Rae and Splinter rely on each other?

STYLE AND STRUCTURE

1. 'All that lovely greenery and no one sits under it.' (p. 17) Appearances are often misleading in *A Million Things*. How does Spurr's imagery contradict the true nature of people and places? What lesson does this teach readers?
2. Even though Rae's mum isn't alive in the story, we are able to learn about her in other ways. How does Spurr characterise Rae's mum even though she is no longer alive?
3. How and why does Spurr use italics in the text?

THEMES

Memory

1. 'Collecting something to fill the space. To mark it.' (p. 49) Lettie's house is the result of 'hoarding'. What is hoarding? What causes people to hoard their things? Why do people find it difficult to part with material objects?
2. 'She needs those things to keep her head full. If all that's taken away, there's nothing.' (p. 148) Other than collecting mementos, how can we ensure that we can hold onto our most precious memories?
3. On p. 209, Rae reflects on the relationship between houses and memories. Do you agree with Rae? Are homes and memories ephemeral and temporary?

Community

1. How do the people on Rae's street look out for her? Do you have a similar relationship with the people in your street or in your community? Do we have a social responsibility to look after our community?
2. 'Things need to be tended to be kept alive, even in winter.' (p. 70) How is this statement true not only of plants, but humans too?
3. 'You didn't talk to her, didn't offer any help, you told on her.' (p. 170) How does Spurr show the importance of compassion and kindness?

Home

1. What is the difference between a house and a home?
2. 'I arrange the chairs to give them that we've just stepped away look. A loved house. I think about that show I watched late at night in the first week you were gone, *Funeral Directors of Ohio*. How they painted the faces of dead people to make them look alive.' (p. 23) How is something looking loved different to being loved?
3. 'The home part of it died and all that was left was a house. I don't suppose that makes much sense.' (p. 180) It is often the people that make a place a home. How do Lettie and Rae both help each other's houses feel more like a home?

RESPONDING

1. Spurr creates profound sensory imagery in *A Million Things*. Create your own sensory imagery of your home, detailing the sights, sounds, feels, tastes and smells.
2. 'I wonder about them: how it would be to live in them.' On p. 16, Rae and Splinter go walking through their neighbourhood and observe the various houses. Go on your own walking tour and select a house at random to write about. Write a story about a made-up family that lives inside that house.



3. After reading Oscar's book, Rae says: 'It made me uncomfortable. Like he wasn't telling me the story to tell me a story. Like he was trying to make me see his way.' (p. 62) How do authors manipulate their readers into reading the story in a particular way?
4. 'But when I went to put them in the box, it wasn't like I was throwing toys out; it was like I was throwing memories away.' (p. 97) How do objects represent memories? Write a story about an object that you have at home that you would struggle to part with.
5. 'Being able to ask for help is more important than being brave.' Discuss with reference to Emily Spurr's *A Million Things*.