

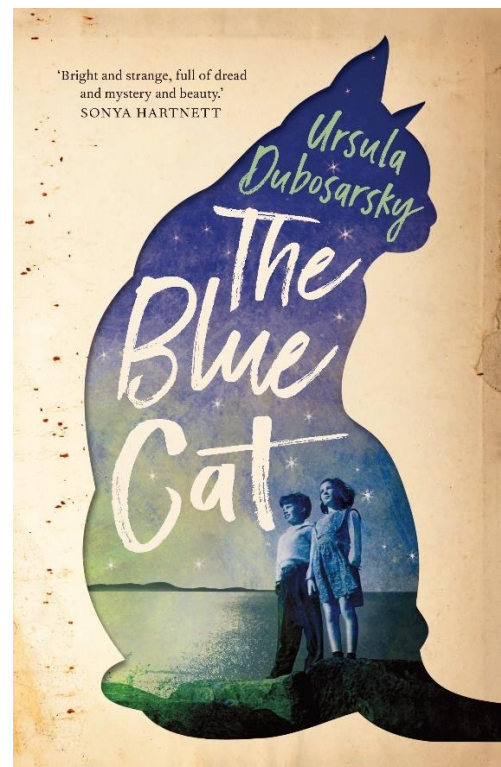
## **Teachers' Notes by Esther Smith**

# **The Blue Cat by Ursula Dubosarsky**

**ISBN 9781760292294**  
**Recommended for ages 10-14 yrs**

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## INTRODUCTION

*Sydney, 1942. The war is coming to Australia - not only with the threat of bombardment, but also the arrival of refugees from Europe. Dreamy Columba's world is growing larger. She is drawn to Ellery, the little boy from far away, and, together with her highly practical best friend Hilda, the three children embark on an adventure through the harbour-side streets—a journey of discovery and terror, in pursuit of the mysterious blue cat...*

### ABOUT THE BOOK

About writing *The Blue Cat*, Ursula Dubosarsky has said:

*After The Red Shoe set in the 1950s and The Golden Day set in the 1960s, I went back a decade and produced The Blue Cat set in the 1940s, inspired partly by the memories of my parents over the years, especially of the beauty of a smaller, quieter Sydney and the enormous social changes brought by the war.*

*I wandered around the Sydney harbour foreshore, spoke to people who were children at the time, read memoirs and newspapers and history books, watched film and listened to radio programs of the period. All the time the characters and the situation grew.*

The main feature and attraction of *The Blue Cat* is the atmosphere the author creates. Readers are taken into the dream-like state of an innocent child growing up in Sydney in 1942. It is up to the reader to make some of the connections that the child cannot.

Columba lives in a harbourside suburb and goes to school with her best friend, Hilda. One day a new boy appears: Ellery (Elias in his own language), the first refugee the children have encountered. Ellery seems troubled and out of compassion Columba develops a friendship with him. Through Columba's eyes, we see the neighbours; various war-time changes such as daylight saving, air raid warnings and rationing; the newspaper headlines about 'The Strangler'; and the local streets, hills and harbourside that form Columba's world.

Through the plot and the use of photographs and contemporary documents, we learn about the fate of the Jews in Hitler's Germany, the arrival of refugees in Australia and the sudden presence of American soldiers and sailors on the streets of Sydney. The more worldly Hilda reveals some common attitudes and prejudices of the time. The story climaxes when, led by Hilda, the three children wag school and head to Luna Park, ostensibly searching for a blue cat which has been seen in Columba's street. The ending is ambiguous and mysterious: Ellery jumps into a Gravitron-like carnival ride and disappears; Columba has a vision of Ellery fleeing his home; Columba returns home and is so ill she remains in bed for some days and will always have confused memories of that time. A little later, Columba receives a strange letter, apparently from Ellery to his mother.

### Review in *Books & Publishing (Junior newsletter)*, 27 February 2017

Slow, dreamlike and meandering, *The Blue Cat* is a glimpse into life in wartime Australia. Set in Sydney in 1942, it follows Columba in her adventures with her force-of-nature best friend Hilda and the new student at their school, Ellery—the boy running from the war in far-away Europe. Together they search for the beautiful blue cat that suddenly moved in next door and just as suddenly disappeared. *The Blue Cat* is gorgeously written and wildly evocative of wartime Sydney, exploring a time when the war has drawn closer to home, both through the bombings in Darwin and the arrival of refugees. Columba's quiet confusion is a perfect introduction to this time and place, and as small as her world is, the story is certainly well-placed within the

wider historical context. The inclusion of primary sources adds a layer of authenticity while also highlighting some uncomfortable truths about the treatment of refugees, both then and now. With an almost fairytale feel, *The Blue Cat* takes readers on a strange journey into a time of constant change and fear. It's perfect for ages 10 and up.

—Meg Whelan, *children's book buyer*,  
*Hill of Content Bookshop, Melbourne*

## IN THE CURRICULUM

*The Blue Cat* is best studied in middle years (grades 5 to 8), and can be used to teach to all three strands of the Australian English curriculum (Language, Literature, and Literacy). Its literary style and historical setting make it an excellent choice for interdisciplinary English/Humanities units, or English units in which historical context is emphasised.

## ACTIVITIES FOR THE CLASSROOM

### BEFORE READING THE BOOK

You might already know at least some things about this period of history. Use the KWL sheet ([see Blackline Master A](#)) to consolidate and expand your understanding of what our country was like at this time.

- In the first column write what you already know. It's okay if that's nothing – that just means there's more to discover!
- In the second column, write what you would like to know. For example, you might be interested in when Australia joined the war, or what women did during the war.
- Then go away and research your questions.
- Once you have the answers, fill in the final column with what you learned. You might find that you need extra room for all the information you gather, so just attach sheets to the back of the KWL table, or write in your book.

Look at the poem at the beginning of the book. Read it together as a class, and discuss:

- What does this poem make you feel?
- What images does it evoke?
- Why might Ursula Dubosarsky have chosen to begin her novel with this poem?

Consider the quote from Prime Minister John Curtin included at the beginning of the book:

*Australia is a British land of one race and one tongue.*

- Do you think this was true in 1942? What groups might the Prime Minister have been ignoring by making this statement?
- Why do you think he would have felt it was important to emphasise both Australia's British allegiance, and unified identity?
- Do you think a current Prime Minister would say these words? Why/why not?

Examine the cover of the novel. Consider what it might tell us about the story inside.

- What might the book be about?
- By looking at the cover, what might you infer about the role of the blue cat?
- Which relationship in the novel do you think might be most important?

- What do you think the mood of the story might be?
- What else can you predict?

Flip to the back of the book, and read Ursula Dubosarsky's note about picture sources.

- What is a primary source?
- What quality do primary sources lend to a work of fiction?
- Spend some time as a class gathering primary sources from Australia in 1942. A good place to start is the National Archives: <http://www.naa.gov.au/>

## THEMES

### War

The war is an ever-present threat in the novel. It feels paradoxically very distant (in 'You-rope'), and very near (with air raid practice, and a growing fear of Japanese invasion).

- In what ways does the war touch the everyday lives of the characters in the story?
- Investigate the role of Australia/Australians in WWII. Questions to investigate might be:
  - How many Australian soldiers fought in the war? How many came back? What were the social and economic consequences of this?
  - What could/did women contribute to the war effort?
  - What was rationing? How did it affect the everyday life of Australians?
  - What role did Indigenous Australians play in the war? Discuss what it may have meant to them to fight for a country that was governed by their invaders.
  - Find out about the bombing of Darwin, Broome and northern Australia. A good place to start is: <http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/japanese-bombing-of-darwin>
  - Find out about the submarine attack on Sydney harbour. A good place to start is: <http://www.navy.gov.au/history/feature-histories/japanese-midget-submarine-attack-sydney-harbour>
- Hilda's brother becomes a prisoner of war in Italy. What does this mean? How do you think this motivated the way she behaved in the story?

### Refugees

What is a refugee? Find out by looking at the following websites:

- The UNHCR website <http://www.unhcr.org/en-au/refugees.html>
- The Roads to Refuge website <http://www.roads-to-refuge.com.au/index.html>
- The Refugee Council website <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/>

The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre has an education program for schools. They say: "The role of the program is to foster understanding of the issues facing people seeking asylum and their right to seek safety in Australia. The presentations aim to engage and empower young people to advocate for the rights of people seeking asylum in Australia, which is key to creating social change." Find out about it here:

<https://www.asrc.org.au/home/our-services/how-we-help/community/schoolsprogram/>

### Discussion and activities:

- The headmaster says of Ellery: *"He has escaped the wickedness of Herr Adolf Hitler. Australia is a refuge, we are free from such evil here, God willing."* p. 21. What happens in modern Australia to people who come to seek refuge from wars?
- Ellery speaks no English, and is thrown into a busy Australian school. What do you think that experience was like for him? Write an extra chapter for the novel in which Ellery comes home from his first day at school and tells his father about what it was like.
- Have you ever been in a situation where everyone around you was speaking a language you couldn't understand? Or simply in a situation where you felt you couldn't make yourself understood? What was that like? How did it make you feel? Try to communicate that feeling in a poem or an artwork.
- Based on your knowledge of WWII, and the visions and dreams of the war that Columba has in the novel, what might have happened to Ellery had he not found refuge in Australia?
- Have a classroom discussion, or even a debate, about what obligation Australia had during WWII to take in refugees. Then expand the conversation to consider what our present day duty might be. There is potential to discuss the role that refugees and immigrants play in a diverse society.

### Friendship

Two key friendships dominate the narrative:

- Columba and Hilda
  - *I liked going to Hilda's house. It was so noisy, so full, of things, of people, food, clothes, and doors opening and closing.* p. 17.  
Columba is drawn to Hilda because she is different. Her life and her family are different.
  - *She knew I would come too. It was too hard to refuse to do what Hilda wanted.* p. 134.  
Hilda always takes the lead, and is the instigator of much of the action in the story.
- Columba and Ellery
  - *I found myself drawn to him, as though there was something inside him, like a secret treasure deep in a garden. I wanted to reach out and touch his cheek.* p. 25
  - Even though there is a clear gender divide in the playground, Columba approaches Ellery, and they form a kind of wordless bond (chapter VI)
  - *I knew Ellery was watching me. His eyes caught mine for a moment then quickly slid away back to the book on his lap. But that was enough.* p. 43

### Discuss:

- Columba's friendship with Ellery is born out of compassion. Discuss this idea.
- Ellery came into Columba's life suddenly, and left it just as suddenly. How do you think that made each of them feel? What lasting impact might each have had on the other?

## LITERARY FEATURES

### Mood

Ursula Dubosarsky creates a mood of unease and foreboding that builds through the course of the novel. Discuss the ways she achieves this, and what this does for the reader. Some references are:

*I looked at the emu egg on the mantelpiece. It made me nervous. It always looked as though it was just about to roll off.* p. 39

*TWANG. Another string of Miss Marguerite's harp snapped in two.* p. 39

*Above our heads was a sign in bendy writing: **NO TURNING BACK.*** p. 136

And consider the effect on readers of the background presence of 'The Strangler'.

### Evocation of place

*Outside the world was dozing, the leaves in the trees were almost still. The waves lapped against the sea wall, and from far away, but not very far, came the sound of a lion roaring, and the lonely trumpeting of an elephant.* p. 1

*The classroom was very old, and chalk dust floated suspended in the air like a glittering mist.* p. 79

*How hot it was! ... The air was washed with the scent of flowers. The heat made the earth smell so strongly, as though it was being cooked like toffee on the stove, sweet and swirling.* p. 86

Ursula Dubosarsky's writing is intensely descriptive, and full of similes and metaphors. She recreates Columba's Australia by telling us about the sights, sounds, and sensations she experiences.

- Use the worksheet ([Blackline Master B](#)) to have a go at describing a place that is special to you.

## CHARACTERS

### Columba

*In spite of my name, I never felt much like a dove. If I could be an animal, I always imagined swimming like an eel or a platypus, down in the deep where it was black as night.* p. 10

*I didn't know things, but I noticed a lot.* p. 23

Columba is a curious character, and is always questioning the stories she is told about the world. She notices things.

- How does this make her a good narrator?

### Columba's father

*He wasn't a soldier like other people's fathers because he had a bad heart.* p. 10

*'I'm not changing this one,' he said, in a mock whisper. 'But don't tell anyone.'* p. 2

- Why do you think Columba's father chose not to change that one clock? How does this link him to Ellery?

### Hilda

*How did Hilda find things out? Hilda knew things. Some people seem to know everything there is to know, and Hilda was one of them.* p. 23

*Hilda was fast and strong and determined. p. 40*

*It was too hard to refuse to do what Hilda wanted. This was the worst thing but also perhaps the best thing about her. p. 134*

- What is Hilda's role in the narrative? What necessary qualities does she provide to the story?

## **Ellery**

*His eyes were a soft brown and they moved around constantly. He kept his body still, his arms by his side, although his fingers were fiddling. p. 20*

*I noticed how neat and clean he was, how white his shirt, how crisp his tie. How did he keep so clean? p. 23*

*When he smiled, his eyes were so merry. His back was so straight and his skin so smooth. p. 25*

*It was a tiny cone, perfect and still, but something was alive inside it, some mysterious piece of life that clung to the edges of things while the waves washed over it by day and night. p. 92.*

- How might this description of the periwinkle function as a metaphor?

## **Ellery's father**

*The most polite person I had ever met. p. 76*

When he first appears, his dialogue is written in Gothic script.

- Why is this? How does it change the way you read his words?  
(English, Yr 6, ACELA1518)

# **FURTHER DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITY SUGGESTIONS**

## **ACTIVITIES**

- Use the primary source evaluation worksheets (see [Blackline Master C](#) and [Blackline Master D](#)) to look at some of the snippets included at various points in the novel.  
(English Yr 6 ACELY1713)
- Work with your teacher to write a letter to a refugee – there are programs that organise for refugees in detention to receive letters. Try:
  - <https://www.getup.org.au/campaigns/refugees/letters-to-asylum-seekers/letters-to-asylum-seekers>
  - [http://www.erc.org.au/letters\\_to\\_asylum\\_seekers](http://www.erc.org.au/letters_to_asylum_seekers)
- Look at the web page that Ursula Dubosarsky has created to compliment her novel. There are video resources, background information, and other details to discover: <http://ursuladubosarsky.squarespace.com/the-blue-cat/>

## **DISCUSSION**

- Discuss the end of the novel. How did the ambiguity make you feel as a reader? Why might Ursula Dubosarsky have chosen to end the story with so many open questions?
- What do you think happened to Ellery? Give reasons for your answer.

- Take some time to study the poem at the end of the novel.
    - What feelings does it evoke?
    - What do you think it is about?
    - What is the effect of presenting it in the original German and then also in English?
    - What might this poem mean to Ellery if he read it? To Columba? To Hilda's mother?
- (English, Yr 6, ACELA1518)

## **FURTHER READING**

- *The Red Shoe*, by Ursula Dubosarsky
- *The Golden Day*, by Ursula Dubosarsky
- *The Diary of a Young Girl*, by Anne Frank
- *Spying on Miss Muller*, by Eve Bunting
- *Torn Thread* by Anne Isaacs
- *The Borrowed House* by Hilda van Stockum
- *Maus* by Art Spiegelman (graphic novel)
- *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne
- *Playing Beattie Bow* by Ruth Park
- *Pennies for Hitler* by Jackie French
- *The Little Refugee* (picture book) by Anh Do and Suzanne Do, illustrated by Bruce Whatley

## **ABOUT THE WRITERS**

### **URSULA DUBOSARSKY**

Ursula was born and grew up in Sydney in a family of writers, and wanted to be a writer from the age of six. She is now the author of over 50 books for children and young adults and her work is published all over the world. She has won several national literary awards, including the Victorian, Queensland and South Australian State Awards for literature, and has also won the NSW Premier's Literary Award a record five times, more than any other writer in the history of the awards. Internationally she has been nominated for both the Hans Christian Andersen award and the Astrid Lindgren prize. She has a PhD in English literature and currently lives in Sydney.

### **ESTHER SMITH**

Esther Smith has been a fully qualified secondary teacher for ten years but at present is a part-time blogger and freelancer, and a full-time mother. Her work for the Distance Education Centre of Victoria prepared her well for writing teachers' notes: the DECV teaches students with a staggering range of backgrounds and abilities, and all coursework is prepared in advance for dissemination via printed course books, and online. Esther likes to approach texts in a thorough and holistic fashion, looking not only at plot, character, and style, but also embedding them in their cultural context. Her aim is to encourage students to be critical and inquisitive. Children's and YA fiction has always been a special interest and was why she became an English teacher, and why she still reads children's and YA books for pleasure, as much as for professional reasons.

BLM A:  
KWL sheet

|                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| <b>K</b> - What I already know  |  |
| <b>W</b> - What I want to know: |  |
| <b>L</b> - What I learned:      |  |

**BLM B:**  
**Descriptive Writing Worksheet**

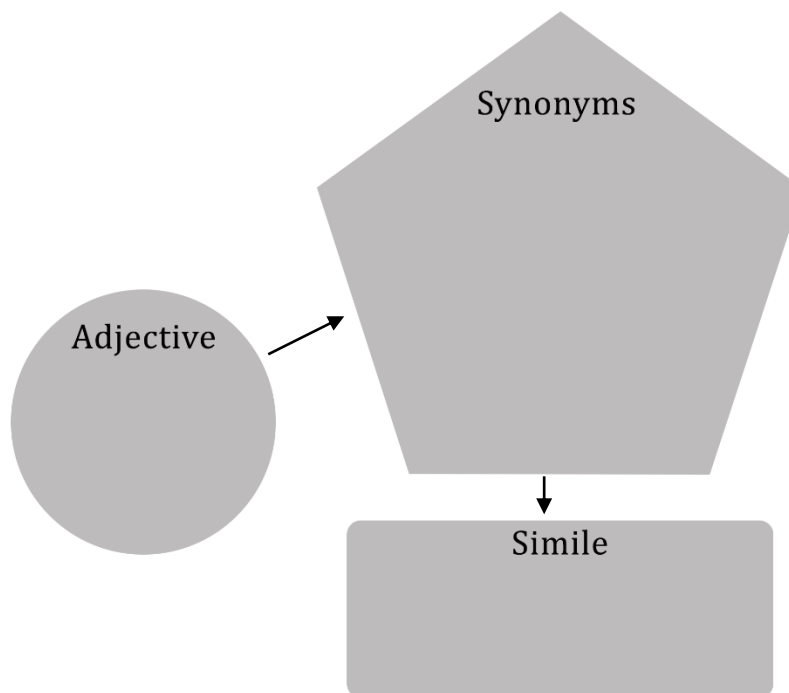
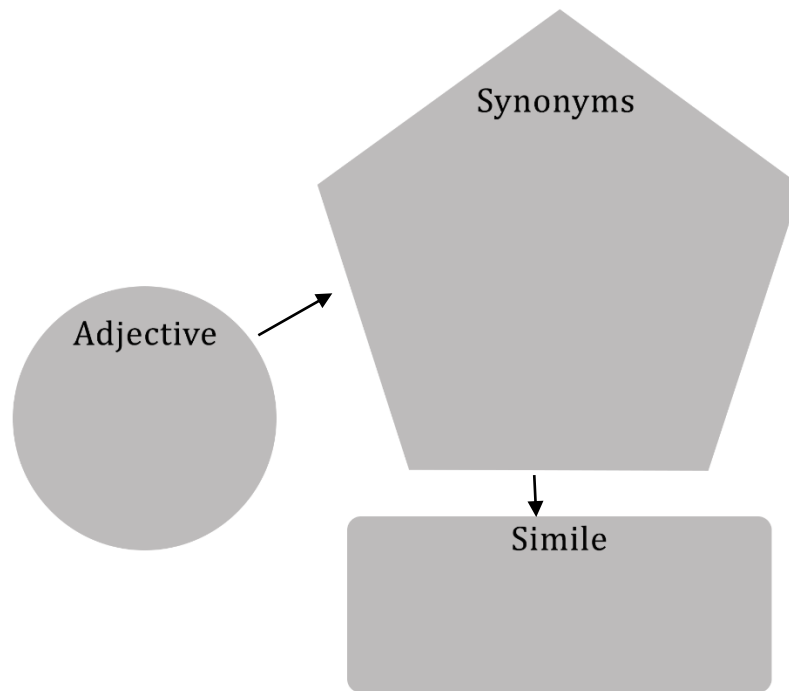
Have a go at some descriptive writing like Ursula Dubosarsky.

Think of a place that is meaningful to you, and come up with an adjective to describe it. Then come up with a few synonyms for that word to expand its meaning. Finally, come up with a simile or a metaphor that expresses that quality in a very descriptive way. For example:

**Sydney was:** hot

**That means it was:** sticky, sweaty, steaming, parched, scorching.

**Simile:** *It was as though the earth was being cooked like toffee on the stove, sweet and swirling.*



**BLM C:  
Document Analysis Worksheet**

**1. TYPE OF DOCUMENT (Check one):**

- |                                     |                                        |                                               |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Newspaper  | <input type="checkbox"/> Map           | <input type="checkbox"/> Advertisement        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Letter     | <input type="checkbox"/> Telegram      | <input type="checkbox"/> Parliamentary record |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Patent     | <input type="checkbox"/> Press release | <input type="checkbox"/> Census report        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Memorandum | <input type="checkbox"/> Report        | <input type="checkbox"/> Other                |

**2. UNIQUE PHYSICAL QUALITIES OF THE DOCUMENT (Check one or more):**

- |                                                 |                                    |
|-------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Interesting letterhead | <input type="checkbox"/> Notations |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Handwritten            | <input type="checkbox"/> Stamp     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Typed                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Watermark |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Seals                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Other     |

**3. DATE(S) OF DOCUMENT:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**4. AUTHOR/CREATOR OF THE DOCUMENT:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**5. FOR WHOM WAS THE DOCUMENT WRITTEN?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**6. DOCUMENT INFORMATION**

**A.** List three important things communicated by the document:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**B.** Why do you think this document was written?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**C.** What evidence in the document helps you know why it was written?  
Quote from the document.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

(cont. over page)

**BLM C:**  
**Document Analysis Worksheet**

**D.** List two things the document tells you about life in Australia at the time it was written:

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**E.** What questions are left unanswered by the document?

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**7. RELEVANCE TO THE NOVEL**

**A.** Why did the author include this document in her novel? What did it add to the novel?

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**B.** Did you enjoy finding 'real' documents in the middle of a fictional story? Why/Why not?

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**BLM D:**  
**Photograph Analysis Worksheet**

**Step 1. Observation**

- a. Study the photograph for 2 minutes. Form an overall impression of the photograph and then examine individual items.
- b. Use the chart below to list people, objects, and activities in the photograph.

| People | Objects | Activities |
|--------|---------|------------|
|        |         |            |

**Step 2. Inference**

Based on what you have observed above, list three things you might infer from this photograph.

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**Step 3. Questions**

- a. What questions does this photograph raise in your mind?

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- b. Where could you find answers to them?

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