



# TEACHERS' RESOURCES

## RECOMMENDED FOR

Secondary  
(ages 14+; years 9+)

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## KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- **Learning areas:** English
- **General capabilities:** Language, Literature, Literacy, Critical and Creative Thinking, Personal and Social Capability

## REASONS FOR STUDYING THIS BOOK

- Discussions around grief, loss, relationships, family and love
- Discussions around personal ethics, justice systems and punishment
- Analysing how language and writing evoke mood, tone, tension and characterisation
- Encouraging creative and imaginative writing
- Discussions around difference, prejudice and self

## THEMES

- Crime and retribution
- Families
- Facing the truth
- Prejudice
- Loss and grief
- Nature vs nurture
- Symbolism

## PREPARED BY

Penguin Random House Australia and Robert Newton

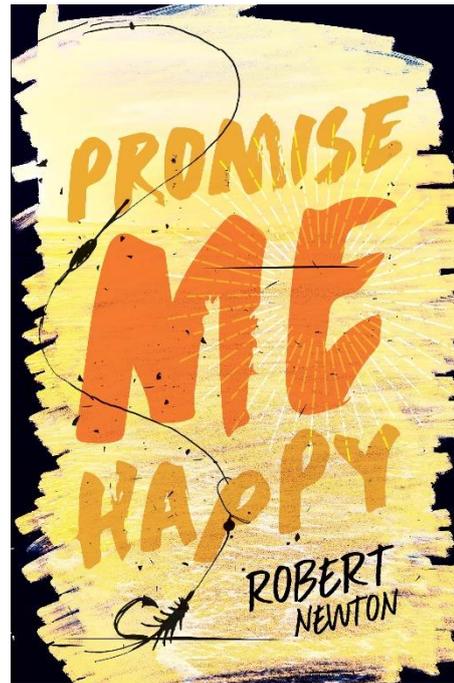
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## Promise Me Happy

Robert Newton

## PLOT SUMMARY

*I don't know if it's possible for people to change, not really. The way you're made up, the important stuff, I reckon you're born with that . . . when it matters, when it really matters, we are who we are.*

Nate's had it tough. An abusive father. His mother dead. He's done things he regrets.

But he's never met anyone like Gem. She's a tiny piece of wonderful and she'll change everything he knows about himself. Is this the beginning of happiness? Or is there more hardship around the corner?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Newton works as a firefighter with the Metropolitan Fire Brigade. His first novel, *My Name is Will Thompson*, was published in 2001. Since then he has written seven other novels for young people, including *Runner*, *The Black Dog Gang* (shortlisted for the NSW Premier's Literary Awards) and *When We Were Two* (winner of a Prime Minister's Literary Award for Young Adult Fiction). He lives on the Mornington Peninsula with his wife and three daughters.

## AUTHOR'S INSPIRATION

Robert says:

During my brief stint at uni, I worked part time as an orderly in a palliative care hospital. The hospital was divided into two sections and cared for patients with multiple sclerosis and patients with cancer.

I'll never forget my time there and the things I experienced. Amongst all the sadness and pain, in the middle of all the uncertainty and fear, there was also a lot of joy. There was hope and laughter too. It made me examine how I thought about life.

I've always been interested in people who are thought of as 'fringe dwellers' or 'outsiders'. I've always found them the most interesting people to write about. Perhaps that's got something to do with my own childhood. Growing up, my father was an army officer so every year we had to move to different postings interstate or overseas. As you can imagine, it was a very restless sort of life, an unsettled and uncertain way to live, and by the time I was twelve I'd been to eight different schools. During that time I never really felt as if I was a part of anything. I never felt as if I belonged.

So *Promise Me Happy* became a combination of those two things – that sense of being different, and my memories of joy in the face of sadness.

I'm not really sure, when we're talking about people, if 'different' is a word that has a place anymore. But if it means were not all the same, then I reckon that's a good thing. Being different is something to be celebrated, and despite what some people might think, it's everything that's right with the world.

The fractured characters in *Promise Me Happy* – off the rails Nate and Lonely Mick, stubborn Gem and wide-eyed Henry – are people you might meet every day without knowing the challenges they're facing. They live in a small country town, a place that harbours small ideas and intolerance, a place where masculinity is on the nose, where most of the young men don't know any better because they haven't been shown.

Initially the characters I threw together grated against each other and butted heads. They were wary and guarded and unsure. But then something quite unexpected happened and the story found its heart. *Promise Me Happy* is a love story, and a story about family and what can happen when you find your people. It's a story about knowing and not knowing. It's about beginnings and ends, and about the little things in life we take for granted.

One of the things I love about writing is being surprised. And *Promise Me Happy* was certainly full of surprises, full of right turns and left hooks. It ended up being a totally different story to what I had in mind when I started.

I hope you love these characters as much as I do.

## THEMES, DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

### Crime and retribution

When we first meet Nate, he is in a juvenile detention centre. There is constant social debate about whether prisons should be designed for punishment or rehabilitation. Do prisons help to correct behaviours or do they in fact place people in an environment that makes them worse?

### Discussion questions

1. What are juvenile detention centres designed to do?
2. Consider Nate's attitude towards Marcus, the counsellor. Why is he so hostile towards him? Is it possible for someone like Marcus to really understand Nate?
3. Marcus tells Nate, 'You're seventeen. You're well known to police and you've got an eighteen-month term already under your belt' (p3). Nate is being released on parole, but will he ever really be free of his crime?
4. 'When the screws lock the cell doors, when they shut down the lights and they trip off down the corridor, a ghostly black creeps into the cells and swallows everything up. You get to thinking then, about all sorts of stuff. There's nothing else to do.' (p5). How might this thinking time be a negative?
5. What does life in Croxley appear to be like?
6. Why do the inmates give the guards and each other nicknames?
7. Make a list of the prison language that wouldn't be used outside (eg 'screws'). What does this suggest about life in prison vs life in the real world?



8. What evidence is there in his conversation with Marcus that Nate isn't a bad person?
9. How does he show himself to be very intelligent?
10. What relationship does Nate have with his father?
11. When Nate is released he says '*It was easy, being green.*' (p10). What does he mean by that? In what way would detention be easy?
12. How does Nate feel when he is released from Croxley (p12)? What might this imply about the reasons people reoffend? What challenges would Nate have in fitting back into society after eighteen months?
13. Is juvenile detention the answer to crimes such as the one Nate committed? What might be some alternatives?
11. Why does Nate challenge Mick about how well he knows Katie (pp38–39)? Why is it important to Nate that he knows her best?
12. Nate questions why Mick never came to rescue him and Katie. Read Mick's explanation (p150–151). Do you think he could have done more?
13. Gem tells Nate that her family is messy, to which he replies 'whose isn't?' (pg1). Do you agree with this statement? In what ways are families different from any other relationships we have?
14. What are the benefits of having family around us?
15. What are the disadvantages of being part of a family?
16. How might the actions and behaviours of other family members affect us?
17. Nate goes to stay with Mick because he is family, even though they barely know each other. Was this the right decision?
18. Mick tells Nate, '*It might not have been my idea, Nate. But I'm starting to think that getting custody of you might just be the best thing I've ever done*' (p121). In what ways do Nate and Mick come to help and change each other?

**Activity:**

- Write a letter to the editor arguing for or against juvenile detention centres.

**Families**

Our families are arguably the greatest influence on our character and experiences, yet they can be an unusual relationship in that we can't choose our family in the way we can choose our friends.

**Discussion questions**

1. What relationship did Nate have with his mother? Find evidence in the novel to determine what sort of person she is.
2. What relationship did he have with his father? Find evidence in the novel to determine what sort of person he is.
3. Uncle Mick and Nate's mother were obviously close. What created the distance between them?
4. Why might Katie (Nate's Mum) not have talked much about her life in Oyster Bay (p22–23)?
5. How did Uncle Mick feel about Nate's father?
6. Why might his criticism have pushed her away from Mick rather than from Nate's father?
7. If families don't approve of someone's chosen partner, do you think they should say something or not?
8. Why does Nate's mum never leave his dad?
9. Why does she name Uncle Mick as Nate's guardian?
10. How do Mick and Nate initially feel about being thrown together (p15)?

**Facing the truth**

In life it can be very difficult to face facts and acknowledge the truth about people or situations. Many of us have secrets in our families, or issues that are never discussed. While this may be designed to protect us, in some ways it can be very harmful.

**Discussion questions**

1. Why does Mick want Nate to know specific details about the man Nate bashed?
2. Given this straightforward approach, why is it surprising that he still sets the table for Malaya?
3. Why does Mick not tell Nate about Gem, even when they start to become close?
4. How does this secrecy lead Nate to the wrong conclusion about Mick?
5. What is surprising about Henry's blunt honesty? How does Nate react to it? In what way does it make him different from most people (p46–47)?
6. How do other teens treat Henry and Gem? Why do they treat them like this?
7. Why did Nate's mum lie to people about how she got her bruises (p91–92)? Why do people struggle to talk about domestic violence? How might her life have been different if she had told someone the truth?



8. Why does Gem like to sit in other peoples' houses when she delivers their groceries (pg3–94)? What other ways do we like to imagine our lives differently? How has social media increased this behaviour?
9. Gem says, '*Things aren't always fair, Nate . . . It's called life. It doesn't always make sense*' (pg6). Why do we expect life to be more ordered and straightforward than it is? Do you think people should be made more aware of how messy life can be?
10. Read the poem 'Telling Lies To the Young is Wrong' by Yevgeny Yevtushenko. Do you agree or disagree with the sentiments expressed?

Telling Lies to the young is wrong.  
 Proving to them that lies are true is wrong.  
 Telling them that God's in his heaven  
 And all's well with the world is wrong.  
 The young know what you mean. The young  
 are people.  
 Tell them the difficulties can't be counted  
 and let them see not only what will be  
 but see with clarity these present times.  
 Say obstacles exist they must encounter,  
 Sorrow happens, hardship happens.  
 The hell with it. Who never knew  
 the price of happiness will not be happy.  
 Forgive no error you recognise,  
 it will repeat itself, increase,  
 and afterwards our pupils  
 will not forgive in us what we forgave.

11. Why does Gem encourage Nate to confront his father? How does this action help him to put his past behind him?
12. Nate is furious when he realises people have kept Gem's illness a secret from him (p163). He says, '*If I'd known Gem was sick I would have heard her words differently. I would have listened to them differently and they would have meant different things*' (p164). What does he mean by this? In what ways can this same argument be used by Gem as a reason for keeping her secret?
13. How does knowing about Gem's illness change the way Nate treats her (p169)?

### Prejudice

We have a tendency to judge people and situations before finding out all of the facts. Some of these prejudices are based on our previous experiences,

others on rumours and assumptions. These prejudices can affect the way we view people or interpret their behaviours, making it difficult for us to get to know the real person.

### Discussion questions

1. In what way has Mick judged Nate before he even meets him?
2. How would his opinion affect the way Nate is accepted in Oyster Bay?
3. Why do the other teens bully Henry?
4. Why do they spread rumours about Gem? Why does she not tell them the truth about her illness?
5. Why is Gem surprised when Nate says he intends to get his boat license (p67)?
6. What does Nate assume about the bruises on Gem's arms? How do his own experiences affect the way he interprets things?
7. How do other people's attitudes and gossip hurt us (p86-87)? In what ways are Gem and Nate's experiences similar?
8. Why might the other teens spread rumours that Gem is a 'slut'? Is there any evidence to support the rumours about her? Given her illness, how might it have affected Gem's behaviour?
9. What assumptions does Gem make about the people in the photographs in houses she delivers to? Is she right to assume that this girl has it 'easy' (p94)? What do displayed photographs (in houses, on social media etc) suggest about people's lives? Why do we only present our best selves to the world? Are we all the same person behind closed doors as we are when we're on display? What does this suggest about the way we should view other people's lives (especially those we envy)?

### Loss and grief

Death, loss and grief are inevitable in life, yet they continue to be 'taboo' subjects that are rarely talked about. As a result, when we experience them, we often have very little idea of how to react.

### Discussion questions

1. Many of the characters are dealing with some form of loss and grief, yet they all respond in different ways. Make a table that explains what loss/losses each character is grieving and how they react to that grief.
2. Is there a 'right' way to respond to grief?
3. Why does Gem want them all to be happy when they are around her (p173)?



4. How does her attitude help her? How does it help the others to cope with her death?
5. What is involved in a Viking funeral? Why would Gem like this sort of send off (p185)?
6. 'It took a dying girl in a tartan skirt to show me how to live' (p201). What does Nate mean by this? How did Gem show him how to live?
7. Henry asks Nate what he would do if he could only live for a day (p255). What is interesting about his answer? What would you do?
8. How is Nate's reaction to Gem's death different from his reaction to his mother's (p266–267)? What caused this difference?
6. What does this suggest about the influence our environment and experiences have in shaping our characters?
7. Nate gets involved in a fight with Marty and Stevie (p212). Does this prove that violence is innate to him? What pushes him to this point?
8. Despite seeming to have anger-management issues, and always dreaming of taking revenge on his father, when Nate finally confronts him he stays calm and just walks away (p252). What does this suggest about his true nature?

### Nature vs nurture

Scientists debate whether our personality and behaviour are genetically determined (nature), or caused by our environment and experiences.

#### Discussion questions

1. What elements of his old, city life influenced Nate in a negative way?
2. Why does he initially struggle with the pace of life in Oyster Bay?
3. How does this environment help to change him?
4. How does Nate feel when he realises he doesn't 'feel like a stranger any more' (p161)?
5. Nate worries that he is just like his father. How do the people and environment in Oyster Bay help to draw out the softer side of Nate?

### SYMBOLISM

There are a number of symbols and motifs that run through the novel, connecting the key ideas.

#### Discussion questions

1. The motif of water runs throughout the novel. What can water represent?
2. What is the boat that Mick and Henry are building? What does it represent for them?
3. Why does the author choose for Nate to read *The Old Man and the Sea*? What are the common links in the two stories?
4. Nate tells Gem that she is like a movie (p69). Make a list of the movie references throughout the novel. Why does Gem tell Nate that 'pause' is better than 'stop' (p70)?
5. What references to freedom are there throughout the novel?



## ORDER FORM

| TITLE                          | AUTHOR        | ISBN          | SCHOOL YEAR | RRP     | QTY | TOTAL |
|--------------------------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|---------|-----|-------|
| Promise Me Happy               | Robert Newton | 9780143796442 | 9+          | \$17.99 |     |       |
| Mr Romanov's Garden in the Sky | Robert Newton | 9780143309307 | 7+          | \$17.99 |     |       |
| When We Were Two               | Robert Newton | 9780143566830 | 7+          | \$17.99 |     |       |
| Runner                         | Robert Newton | 9780143302070 | 7+          | \$19.99 |     |       |
| The Black Dog Gang             | Robert Newton | 9780143302148 | 7+          | \$17.99 |     |       |
| My Name is Will Thompson       | Robert Newton | 9780143303343 | 4+          | \$17.99 |     |       |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                   |               |               |             |         |     |       |

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