

RECOMMENDED FOR

Secondary students (ages 14+)

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KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- **Learning Areas:** English
- **General Capabilities:** Creative and critical thinking; Ethical understanding; Literacy

REASONS FOR STUDYING THIS BOOK

- Exploring 'the power of language and the poetry of football'
- Writing style: first person, present tense
- How place and setting create identity

THEMES

- Football (Aussie Rules)
- Grief
- Identity and belonging
- Friendship and relationships
- Family
- Gender

PREPARED BY

Nicole Hayes & Random House Australia

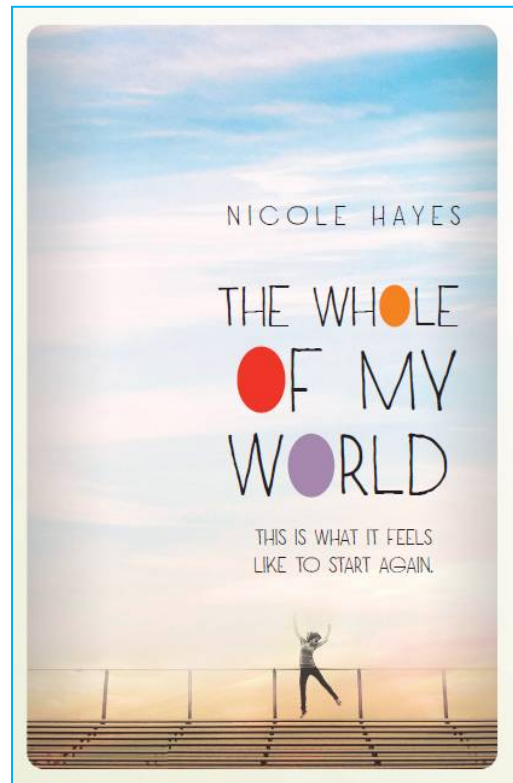
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The Whole of My World

Nicole Hayes

PLOT SUMMARY

Desperate to escape her grieving father and harbouring her own terrible secret, Shelley disappears into the intoxicating world of Aussie Rules football. Joining a motley crew of footy tragics – and, best of all, making friends with one of the star players – Shelley finds somewhere to belong. Finally she's winning.

So why don't her friends get it? Josh, who she's known all her life, but who she can barely look at anymore because of the memories of that fateful day. Tara, whose cold silences Shelley can't understand. Everyone thinks there's something more going on between Shelley and Mick. But there isn't – is there?

When the whole of your world is football, sometimes life gets lost between goals.

An unputdownable novel for anyone who's ever loved or lost, drawn a line between then and now, or kept a secret that wouldn't stay hidden . . .

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicole Hayes is a freelance writer, editor and teacher based in Melbourne. She has an MA in Creative Writing and teaches Creative Writing at the University of Melbourne and Phoenix Park Neighbourhood House.

The Whole of My World is Nicole's first book.

AUTHOR'S INSPIRATION

Nicole Hayes says:

For a long time I'd wanted to write about my teenage obsession – footy. Much like Shelley, and to the chagrin of my teammate and twin brother, I 'played' for the local footy club throughout my primary school years. Because of how girls were viewed back then, my involvement was limited to training with the team twice a week, and wandering wistfully along the boundary line every Sunday, hoping I might one day get a game.

At one point, when I was 11 or 12, some six years after I'd attached myself to the team, the coach approached the junior football administrators to request permission for me to officially play. That's what I was told anyway – I've never been quite sure about what happened and I was never given the opportunity to plead my case.

The tribunal decided that the ban on girls playing in competition would remain, largely due to the belief that footy wasn't 'safe' for girls to play. I remember my coach being really disappointed, then joking I should cut my hair and pretend to be a boy.

Although this ban was lifted a couple of years later for girls under 14, and more recently a revision of this rule has allowed girls up to 15 years of age to play on a case-by-case basis, it was too late for me. I had in the meantime switched to other sports – athletics, netball and softball – but was never fully satisfied in the same way until I found myself at Glenferrie Oval, the home of the Hawthorn Hawks, and I transformed my love for playing into a love for watching. A love that bordered on obsession. I often wonder if this would have happened had I been allowed to play all those years ago. At the time, it seemed perfectly reasonable, and I was hardly alone.

My love for footy and my beloved Hawks never waned, though I did eventually outgrow my obsession. But I have remained interested in the

psychology of the footy fan, the passion and devotion they feel towards their team. The way, for some of us, a 'bunch of sweaty footballers' can become a reflection of ourselves. The true fan carries a team's loss like a personal affront; and a win like a badge of honour. The team's performance every game has the power to shape how we feel the entire week. Sometimes for much longer than that.

I wanted to explore this as a writer, but the deeper I got and the more I thought back to my own experiences, I realised things were different when the fan was a girl. Different in the eyes of the players, the clubs and the public. This confused me. Wasn't it possible to love a game – its beauty, its poetry – and admire the players and their skill without it being loaded with expectations and limitations that boys didn't seem to face? Was it always different for a girl? Is it still, even now?

As played out in the media too many times to recount, the answer seems to be yes – it is different, whether we like it or not. That was the point I knew I had to somehow capture in a story. I realised, as I played around with the idea of the obsessed footy fan, as Shelley Brown's story took shape and her world began to grow, that I wasn't writing a story about football, after all. That was just the background – the landscape.

The Whole of My World is much more than this. It's a story about a lot of things – life, loss, grief and family. Fundamentally, it is a story about belonging and how a girl can make her way in a world run by men.

WRITING STYLE

Nicole Hayes says:

On first person

The Whole of My World is written in first person, present tense. I love writing in first person because it directly connects the reader to the main character, providing an inside view on how she feels and what she thinks. It's also a really effective way to establish the main character's voice quickly and naturally, giving the reader a clear sense of her personality, ideally within the first page or two.

On the other hand, the challenge with first person is that we are seeing the created world exclusively through the eyes of one character, in this case Shelley Brown, and while we want to believe her and, really, *have* to believe her to some extent, the reader must always be open to the possibility that

this character is an unreliable narrator. The actions and decisions, language and portrayals of the other characters are projected through Shelley's gaze. We can't always be sure that her account of what's happening is the whole story. Or even the *right* story.

The other challenge when writing in first person is ensuring the reader doesn't confuse the narrator with the author of the book. This is particularly problematic when, as I have done here, the story draws on some autobiographical elements, as loose as these connections are. While there are various superficial similarities between myself as a teenager and Shelley, Shelley's world, the aspects of her life that shape her, and her choices are very different to mine. She has been shaped almost entirely by the family tragedy that – fortunately for me! – is a complete fiction. Similarly, the specific places and people around her are all constructs of my imagination. The 'true' elements of this story lie in the emotional journey Shelley takes – her desire to fit in, her feeling of disconnection from her peers, and her willingness to continue to believe the best of people, even when everything – and everyone – around her is telling her not to.

On present tense

I chose to write in the present tense because it lends the story an air of immediacy. The story unfolds for the reader as it unfolds for Shelley. No one is looking back on events after the fact, having knowledge of the outcome or the journey ahead. We are travelling through each moment right alongside Shelley, having no better idea of how it will turn out than she does.

On setting the book in the past

I decided to set Shelley's story in the 1980s, not just because that was when I was a teenager, but because it allowed me to give the story breathing space. Today's media can be obsessed with footballers' lives and the scandals off the field, and I wanted to explore some of those issues but all through the eyes of main character Shelley, who is an innocent in the ways of the world.

Questions and activities

1. What characteristics make up an unreliable narrator? Do you think Shelley is an unreliable narrator? Give examples from the text to support your answer.
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of first-person narration? How would this story have been different if it had been narrated in third-person, or past tense?
3. Choose a scene from *The Whole of My World* and rewrite it in the third person and/or in past tense. Once you have done this, compare the two versions and discuss their differences. Do you think the first-person narration is more effective? Is there anything you prefer about the third-person narration?
4. What clues (words, phrases or cultural references) can you find in the story that help to set it in 1980s? In what ways was society different then? How would the story have been different if it had been set today?

PRE-READING QUESTIONS

1. What do you know about AFL or Aussie Rules football? Nicole says that football ended up being 'just the background – the landscape' for the book. Do you think it is important that the reader know about a subject in order to read about it, or can any subject make an interesting book if the story is well told?
2. Do women and girls have a place in male-dominated sports such as AFL? Why/why not?
3. What makes a story an Australian story?
4. What messages does the cover convey? What kind of emotional message does the front cover image send? Have you 'ever loved or lost, drawn a line between then and now, or kept a secret that wouldn't stay hidden'? What might it mean to draw a line between the past and present, and why would someone want to do that?

SETTING

The idea of 'place' and its relationship to a person's sense of identity is a central motif in *The Whole of My World*, with the title of the book even playing a role by emphasising the importance of Shelley's 'world'.

The novel begins with Shelley feeling lost and displaced, especially within places that were once familiar and safe.

After a family tragedy, Shelley's house no longer feels like home. But when she meets Tara, Shelley finds solace in the world of AFL fandom and finally feels as though she *belongs* somewhere. She soon attends every Thursday night training session of her

favourite team, and is finally reminded what happiness feels like.

Consider the following quotes about setting and Shelley's world:

'I stand there a long minute, wishing that the last couple of years hadn't happened. Wishing that the house could be warm with cooking smells and the sound of Mum humming along to West Side Story or The Sound of Music.' (p. 27)

'I'm surrounded by happiness and it's infectious. No thinking. No reasoning. Just passion and feeling . . . Today I am free. No guilt for who's missing, who should be here, what's been left behind. Apart from Fernlee Park, there isn't a single place I'd rather be right now . . . and I know that it's been forever since I've felt so completely alive. No longer half of something left behind – suddenly I feel whole.' (p. 98)

'This day used to feel like the centre of our world, the thing around which my family revolved, year after year for as long as I can remember – right up until it was ruined forever.' (p. 126)

'It feels a lot like I've moved into something more than a new friendship. I've moved into a whole new world. And although I'm a little terrified by all that can go wrong, I'm also unexpectedly excited about it, too, in almost exactly equal parts.' (p. 166)

'The players couldn't be more different from the world and people I know than if they were born on another planet.' (p. 175)

'Don't they feel it? All the excitement and tension? Sometimes I think I live in a different world to them, one that only Josh and Tara – and Mick – operate in. Except . . . these two worlds have collided and there's nothing I can do to wind it back.' (p. 252)

Questions and activities

1. Do you think 'place' informs everyone's sense of identity? If so, why? Give examples to support your answer.
2. Create a mindmap of all the places that are meaningful to you and that you think inform your sense of identity. Choose one and write a short story demonstrating that relationship.
3. *'When the whole of your world is football, sometimes life gets lost between goals.'* (cover blurb) Discuss.
4. What is it that makes up a person's 'world'? Is it just places, or is there more to it?

LANGUAGE

The power of words

A key theme in the book is the power that words can have to affect our emotions and our relationships with other people. Shelley feels that her every word must be considered; that there are words she cannot say since the accident; and that certain words can reverberate for months or even years.

Consider these quotes about the power of words in *The Whole of My World*:

'Words I've been avoiding for two years, and now they're out there and can't be taken back.' (p. 191)

'There are no words, anyway, that can fill the void between us.' (p. 197)

'I remember my words. I remember the look on Dad's face, on Mrs McGuire's, how Dad followed me when he should have stayed behind. How loud those words sounded in the months after, even though he never once repeated them to me. It's okay though. He doesn't need to; I hear them all the time – in his eyes, every time he looks at me. In my eyes, every time I look at myself.' (p. 213)

'The words sit in the room, loud and sharp in the quiet dark. They have a shape and form, a presence that towers over us both, given life by Tara.' (p. 248)

'My lips move to shape the words. I train my mind on saying it just right, the right order, the right tone, dreading the pity I'll see when I do, but knowing there's really no way out of this unless . . . I lie.' (p. 249)

'I watch my words settle on her, keeping my gaze as steady as a surgeon's knife. She flinches, as though she's been struck.' (p. 256)

"I'm sorry, Mick," I say, wishing there were other words, an alternative to 'sorry' that actually means something.' (p. 308)

'They tried to divert us, to turn us around, until Dad said the words that changed our lives forever.' (p. 313)

'We both watch this ritual in silence, the words piling up in the dark night between us.' (p. 324)

"I'm sorry." It's a small voice for a big man. The words, though, are useless. We're all sorry. It doesn't change a thing.' (p. 327)

Questions and activities

1. What are the words Shelley can't say?
2. What are the words that haunt Shelley, which she said on the day of the accident?

3. Does Shelley place more importance on words than on actions or events? Discuss.
4. Consider the inconsistencies between some of the quotes above – Shelley sees great power in words at some moments, such as when they have ‘a presence that towers over us both’; but at other times ‘the words . . . are useless’. Are both viewpoints right? Does Shelley sometimes expect too much from words and from what people say, perhaps in the same way that she expects too much of football in how it can shape and improve her life?

An Australian story

Nicole Hayes also uses words particular to the Australian vernacular to make *The Whole of My World* a distinctly Australian story – for example, words such as ‘sandgroper’ (p. 20), ‘barbie’ (p. 21) and ‘snag’ (p. 56).

Questions and activities

1. Can you identify other words or terms that Nicole Hayes employs to create an Australian context? While this may personalise the story for an Australian audience, do you think it could have an alienating effect on non-Australian readers?
2. Write a poem using words that signify to the reader that it is set in Australia, or a particular city, town or area within Australia.

LITERARY ALLUSIONS

My Brilliant Career: ‘My hand hovers over My Brilliant Career, tempted to retrieve it. To draw strength from Sybylla Melvyn’s indomitable spirit, her refusal to give up on her dream, even in the face of that bleak and dusty landscape.’ (p. 126)

The Great Gatsby: ‘“The elephant in the room”, Mum would have called it. It makes me think about the scene from *The Great Gatsby* – in the Buchanans’ parlour with the open French doors and the billowing white curtains, and Jordan and Daisy’s dresses blowing up like balloons. Like white elephants. I think I’m mixing up my metaphors – are the elephants in the room white elephants or is that something else? But the image of those enormous balloon-like women, all light and airy and ghost-like, reminds me of the space Dad and I have put between us, a space loaded with silence and the unspoken.’ (p. 131)

A Difficult Young Man: ‘True to form, Ginnie chooses Martin Boyd, and the question is a tricky one – to explore the idea of “geographical schizophrenia” in *A Difficult Young Man*.’ (p. 253)

Questions and activities

1. Read *My Brilliant Career* to find out why the character of Sybylla Melvyn is so inspirational to Shelley.
2. What fictional characters do you draw inspiration from?
3. Read *The Great Gatsby* and see what themes are common to both *The Great Gatsby* and *The Whole of My World* – for instance, consider each book’s treatment of themes such as society and class, remembrance of the past, gender, secrets and lies, and forgiveness.
4. *A Difficult Young Man* by Martin Boyd is described as ‘an elegant, witty and compelling family tale about the contradictions of growing up’ (<http://textclassics.com.au/the-books/project/a-difficult-young-man/>). Does that equally describe *The Whole of My World*? Read *A Difficult Young Man* to see if it draws the same conclusions about the importance of family as Nicole Hayes does in *The Whole of My World*.

SECRETS AND LIES

Shelley is keeping the terrible secret about what she said on the day of the tragic accident. At the same time, the author must also structure the book in such a way as to keep secrets from the reader until the right time to reveal them.

Shelley’s secrets sometimes result in her evading the truth, and sometimes in outright lies.

‘There’s a reason we all keep secrets. Sometimes it’s safer that way.’ (p. 149)

‘The lie comes easily – disturbingly easily. I wonder where it was hiding that it could emerge so perfectly formed.’ (p. 169)

‘But is that the truth? And if it is, why would they want everyone to know? People say things that aren’t true all the time, so maybe that’s what this is. We live lies, keep secrets, hide the truth. I’m living proof of that.’ (p. 207)

‘That’s the thing about secrets and lies – they might start off small and manageable but they grow bigger and heavier, no matter what you do. Even if you don’t add to them, even if it’s just a single decision to remain silent or to try to forget, time makes it worse anyway, so

before you realise what's happening, it's so big and unspeakable that it's no longer in your control. You're not shaping it anymore – it's shaping you. Me. It's shaping me. I'm a lie. A great big, enormous lie. My whole life. Dad's whole life. It's not even a choice anymore. It's just who we are.' (p. 211)

Questions and activities

1. What clues did you find as you were reading that led you to believe that Shelley wasn't telling the whole truth, and that there was more to the accident than she was revealing to us?
2. Was it a shock to you when you learned about who else died in the accident?
3. Did the revelation come at the right time, or did you think the author should have told readers earlier, or later?
4. Do Shelley's lies and secrets improve her life, or make it worse?

THE POETRY OF FOOTBALL

In *The Whole of My World*, Nicole Hayes brilliantly evokes the passion and emotion of what it is like to be a sports fan, and what she calls 'the poetry of football' (p. 376).

'Something good and strong is building up around me and it's here, right now. Today. I have a friend beside me who's feeling every ounce of the same excitement, the same joy, pure and simple. There's a whole crowd around me who are as delighted – as completed – by the experience as I am. And there's Mick out on the ground, sharing it with me. I'm surrounded by happiness and it's infectious. No thinking. No reasoning. Just passion and feeling, like how I imagine falling in love would be. I had no idea it would turn out like this. I don't have to measure my words or analyse the game, highlight the errors of our opponent, assess what needs to be done next. I don't have to list the Gorillas' best players or identify Glenthorn's weakest. Not yet – not until I'm home with Dad. Today I am free. No guilt for who's missing, who should be here, what's been left behind. Apart from Fernlee Park, there isn't a single place I'd rather be right now. My face aches from smiling in the wind and my voice rasps from all the screaming, and I know that it's been forever since I've felt so completely alive. No longer half of something left behind – suddenly I feel whole.' (p. 98)

'One more day of school and then I'll know. If it's all been worth it.' (p. 276)

Questions and activities

1. Write a poem about how it feels to watch or play your favourite sport. Use descriptive and emotive language so that those who read your poem can feel your passion and what it's like to live in that moment.
2. Examine the chapters about the grand final and the events that follow it. Note how the language changes from positive to negative, enthusiastic to despondent. What techniques does the author use to evoke this changing sense of mood?
3. Is there a danger in an obsession with sport becoming unhealthy? Consider how much Shelley invests in the grand final and whether it will all be 'worth it' – what does it mean to her to win? What does it mean to lose?
4. Would Shelley be as obsessed with football if she hadn't experienced the tragic loss of members of her family?
5. Choose from the following topics, and split into teams to debate them:
 - (1) There is poetry in football
 - (2) Australians are obsessed with sport

GENDER AND IDENTITY

Shelley loved playing football as a child, but when she turned thirteen she was banned from playing. This has contributed to her feeling ambivalent about becoming a teenager, and betrayed by the changes in her body:

'I feel betrayed by my body. The lean muscles are looser, weaker. My chest has rounded out, full and obvious, despite my efforts to hide it. Hide them. It feels as though all the things that made me strong have become unrecognisable and soft. Of no use to me anymore.' (pp. 3–4)

Sexism and gender bias are further explored in *The Whole of My World* through Shelley's sense of place in the male-dominated world of AFL – for instance:

'We hover near the entrance to the trainers' room, watching men wander in and out . . . Some of them slip into the trainers' room, disappearing into the cloud of barbecue smoke, standing shoulder to shoulder with trainers and spectators – all of them men.' (pp. 55–56)

' . . . as the games kick in, it's obvious that only the boys actually participate. There are a handful of girls among the littlies, but no older girls playing at all.' (p. 108)

Questions and activities

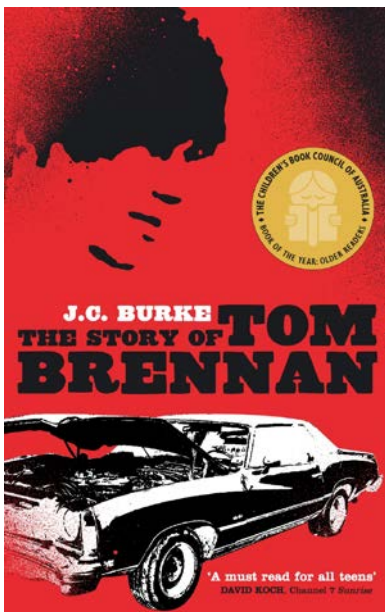
1. What has changed for women and girls in sport since the 1980s, when this book is set? Have things improved for women and girls, or are there continuing inequalities? Consider aspects such as sponsorship, pay and TV coverage of women's versus men's sports.
2. Choose from the following debate topics:
(1) Watching sport is as good as playing it
(2) Girls shouldn't be allowed to play AFL

THE HISTORY OF WOMEN AND GIRLS IN AFL

Here is some more information on the history of women and girls in AFL:

- The first women's footy teams date back to early 1900s.
- The Victoria Women's Football League was established in 1981. Some girls were allowed to play in this contest, but it mostly targeted women.
- It wasn't until 2000 that the game really took off amongst women, with a 450% increase in participation by women in previous years.
- An under 17s Youth Girls Competition was established in 2004. This followed from the legal action taken against the AFL by three schoolgirls who were banned from playing in junior leagues, with fears of expensive insurance liability in case of injury and 'medical reason' being cited by Football Victoria i.e. the physical differences between the bodies of boys and girls. The court found in favour of the girls in February 2004.
- Natasha Puatjimi, a 13-year-old from the Tiwi Islands, made history in 2007 by becoming the first girl to win a junior league Best & Fairest (for the Yarraville league).
- In 2008, after being refused an age exemption to play another year with the boys in the under 14s (as there was no under 15s team), 14-year-old Evelyn Rannstrom was granted an injunction from VCAT against the Dandenong Ranges Junior Football League and the AFL allowed Evelyn to play for the rest of the season.
- In 2013, for the first time ever, an all-women footy match curtain-raiser will be played before an official AFL home and away game in Round 14.

FURTHER READING



The Story of Tom Brennan by J.C. Burke

Why this story? Grief and sport intermingle in this award-winning novel – another novel about what it's like to start over.

A powerful story of love and loss, secrets and revelations – and making sense of a past that once seemed perfect.

For Tom Brennan, life is about rugby, mates and family – until a night of celebration changes his life forever. Tom's world explodes as his brother Daniel is sent to jail and the Brennans are forced to leave the small town Tom's lived in his whole life. Tom is a survivor, but he needs a ticket out of the past just as much as Daniel. He will find it in many forms . . .

Teachers' resources available.



Steal My Sunshine by Emily Gale

Why this story? Like *The Whole of My World*, *Steal My Sunshine* revolves around Melbourne, family and secrets.

During a Melbourne heatwave, Hannah's family life begins to distort beyond her deepest fears.

Hannah seeks out her wild best friend, Chloe, and her eccentric grandmother, Essie, who look like they know how life really works.

But Hannah's loyalty to both is tested, first by her attraction to Chloe's older brother, and then by Essie's devastating secret that sheds new light on how the family has lost its way.

Even if Hannah doesn't know what to believe, she'd better start believing in herself.

Teachers' resources available.



Will by Maria Boyd

Why this story? Will deals with his grief in a very different way to Shelley – by acting out.

Will is in trouble and everyone's worried. They reckon it's because of what happened six months ago. He doesn't know what they're on about.

The latest incident lands him in Deputy Waddlehead's office. His school career is over. That is, until his 'concerned' English teacher fixes it so he gets a punishment ten thousand times worse than expulsion – helping out with the school musical.

This is where the real trouble starts. It's a completely different world, and Will is determined not to get sucked in.

Teachers' resources available.