



Dirt Circus League

MAREE KIMBERLEY

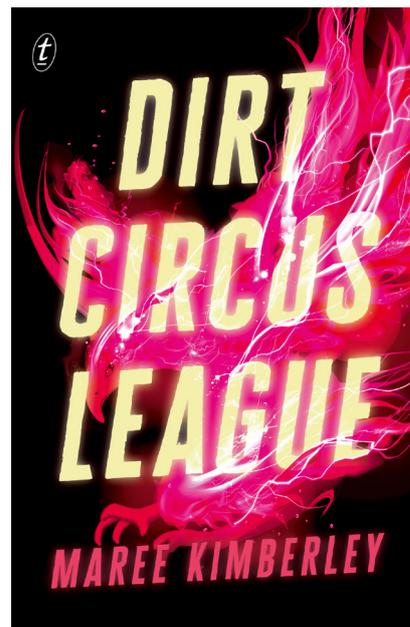
ISBN 9781922330253

RRP AU\$19.99

Fiction

RECOMMENDED READING AGE: 14+

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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

Asa moves to the remote town of Dirt Creek to escape the violent memories of her past. She's looking for somewhere to belong, but soon discovers that her dad would rather be at the pub than getting to know her. She finds hope and friendship in Karen, her dad's neighbour, whose lush vegetable garden and welcoming kitchen are in stark contrast to the dry solitude of Asa's dad's house.

After Asa has a run-in with a bag snatcher at the local Chinese restaurant, Karen warns her about the Dirt Circus League, a troupe of outcast teens whose legendary fights draw the locals. Karen takes Asa to a fight as a warning, but the visit has the opposite effect. The unrestrained violence of the fight and the wildness of the performers speak to something unresolved in Asa. When Quarter, the league's enigmatic leader, invites her to join them, she finds herself unable to refuse.

Asa turns her back on Karen's warnings and follows the league to their home in an abandoned resort deep in the rainforest. But the league's obsessive worship of Gaia goes way beyond environmentalism, and the

disturbing background presence of Surgeon convinces Asa that something is deeply wrong. *Dirt Circus League* is a dark, contemporary thriller that weaves together issues of climate change and our ethical responsibilities to the planet and to each other in a compelling, highly imaginative narrative.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maree Kimberley is a writer from Brisbane. Her work has been published in several anthologies, including *The Year's Best Australian Fantasy and Horror 2015* and *Defying Doomsday*. *Dirt Circus League*, her first novel for young adults, was inspired by the remote landscapes of Cape York and her fascination for neuroscience.

BEFORE READING

1. What do you know or think about cults? What kind of cults are there, and what do they have in common? Would you realise if you'd joined one? How? Why do you think people are drawn to cults and their leaders? What might they be looking for?
2. Using sensory descriptions (language and images that describe sounds, scents, sights, textures and tastes), write a short creative piece of non-fiction that captures the way you imagine the impact of climate change on the future of the planet.
3. Read [this](#) article on Aboriginal connection to country on the Common Ground website. Why is the relationship of Indigenous people to land and Country significant? How is this similar and different to your own relationship with place?

WHILE READING

1. What is your first impression of Surgeon? Does she come across as benevolent, intimidating, or



frightening in the prologue? What makes you think this?

- Asa describes the road leading into Dirt Creek as stretching out ahead 'like a ribbon of blood' (p. 3). Why do you think the author has chosen these words here? What might the word 'blood' tell you about the story?
- Asa describes her dad's garden as 'a big patch of dirt with a clothesline', as opposed to Karen's, which is 'thriving' (p. 5). How do these descriptions act as a metaphor for Asa's relationships with these characters? Find another example in the novel where a description of place acts a metaphor for the people who live there.
- Do you agree with Karen that the league isn't to be trusted? Why/why not?
- Asa tells Karen that 'just because I like fighting doesn't mean I'm violent.' (p. 26). Is this true? Why do you think she is so drawn to violence?
- Quarter justifies Surgeon's procedures by saying that 'what seems crazy at the time is often looked back on as ground-breaking.' (p. 59) Can you think of examples where this is true? What are the dangers of this mindset?
- Why are Klæe and the rest of the league so convinced that their death will honour Gaia? Where have their beliefs come from?
- Is Asa's decision to join the league 'brave', as Linny says (p. 105), or stupid, as Karen suggests?
- The league store their memories inside the Memory Temple – each member has a drawer in which they are able to store three precious things. Describe the three objects that represent your own most significant memories. How does the Memory Temple help Asa to deal with her grief about her own family?

AFTER READING

CHARACTERS

- What challenges do you think non-Indigenous writers might face when they write Indigenous characters? How does Kimberley navigate these challenges? Is she successful?
- 'Quarter was naked except for some kind of animal pelt that hung low on his hips and a black bandanna around his shaved head. In the harsh light his muscles looked sculpted from ancient stone.' (p. 20) This description uses words that are wild, detached. What do they suggest about Quarter's behaviour? Do you trust him?
- What do you think Asa is looking for? Why does she feel so torn between her loyalty to Karen, and her compulsion to follow Quarter?

STYLE AND STRUCTURE

- Works of speculative fiction are also sometimes called 'what-if' books because they speculate or ask 'what-if' questions about the world and society, and then imagine the results in a story. What kind of 'what-if' questions do you think the author of this book asked? How does she answer them in the novel? What other examples of speculative fiction can you think of (in books or films)?
- Read the prologue of the novel. What is different about the prologue from the rest of the narrative (consider POV, who is telling the story, when it takes place)? Why do you think the author felt that it was important for you to read this scene before starting the rest of the story? Make a list of questions that the prologue raises, and then make a note of how they are answered in the story.
- With the exception of the prologue, *Dirt Circus League* is written using first person point of view (POV). What makes first person POV well-suited to this story in particular?

THEMES

Connection to country

- Karen tells Asa 'if you want adventure out bush I can take you out with my mob. They got proper connection to the land, not like these pretenders.' (p. 38) In your own words, describe the difference between the two.
- Asa is ashamed when she realises her ignorance about Karen's connection to country. (p. 124) How does she demonstrate a growth in her knowledge towards the end of the book? How does this willingness to learn make her different from the other members of the league? Reflect on what we lose when we refuse to learn from others.
- 'The world the leaguers have created up there has no connection with this land, no matter how much they go on about Mother Earth.' (p. 274) What does Karen mean by this? Is she right?

Belonging

- 'The only way to discover the truth about the league's beliefs was to live with them.' (p. 88) Why does Asa think that she might find a home with the league? Should she be expected to change herself to fit in?
- What does Asa learn about family and belonging from her friendship with Karen and her time living with the Myskrats?
- 'In that moment I felt stuck between two homes although I belonged to neither of them. In Dirt Creek or Dirt Circus League my status was outsider.' (p. 126) What does it mean to truly belong somewhere?

Science and ethics

- Klæe describes Quarter's grafts as 'unthinkable', saying that 'he has made a claim that his needs



are greater than those of our Mother Earth.' (pp. 73–74) Do you agree that Quarter has acted against the ethics of the league? What are the differences between the ethics of the league and the ethics of broader society?

2. The Meat House is based on a real prototype, which Kimberley describes on her [blog](#). Read her post 'Welcome to the Meat House'. What ethical questions might arise with bio-architecture? Surgeon represents some of the worst outcomes of scientific experimentation and innovation, but what is the best that can come of it? What role does fiction play in exploring the ethics of innovation?
3. 'They were a group who practised self-sufficiency. No unnecessary consumption. Respect for the environment. The no babies rule was a bit extreme but not unheard of, plenty of people were making that decision.' (p. 77) Are these reasonable rules to live by? Are they still reasonable if they have the potential to cause harm to others?

RESPONDING

1. Choose one of the 'what-if' questions you came up with earlier. Write your own short piece of fiction that speculates an answer to the question—you can use the characters from the novel, or create your own from scratch.
2. The descriptions of place in the novel evoke strong emotional responses. Spend some time outside, taking note of your surroundings. What kind of day is it? What temperature is it? What colours do you notice? Sounds? Use these notes to write a creative piece that attempts to evoke a specific emotion in the reader.
3. Towards the end of the novel, Matts asks Asa 'why did you come here?' (p. 263) Using Asa's voice and POV, write a creative response to this question. Draw on your knowledge of her motivations throughout the book.
4. By the end of the book, Quarter has changed. 'The animal and human entwined within him pulsed in the beating of his heart, the blood rushing through his veins, the cells of his warm human flesh. But he was hawk-sharpness, crow-menace, snake-slyness and crocodile-cold, too. All the animal parts grafted onto and into him, they were him, and they could never be unpicked.' (p. 270) Is Quarter animal, human, or something else altogether? Write an essay that supports your response, using examples from the novel.