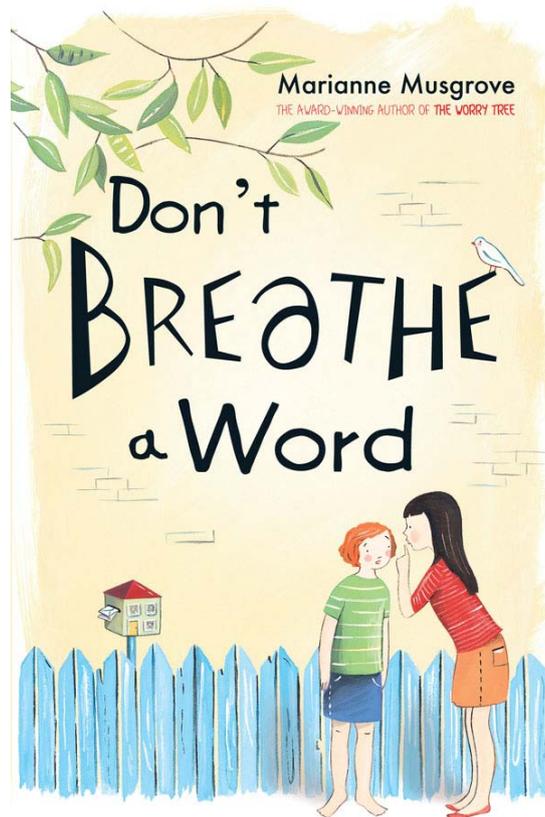


# DON'T BREATHE A WORD

MARIANNE MUSGROVE



## TEACHING SUPPORT KIT

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# DON'T BREATHE A WORD

## Teaching Support Kit

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### INTRODUCTION

*'I, Mackenzie Elizabeth Carew, do solemnly swear never to communicate anything about what happened tonight.'*

That's what I promised my sister Tahlia, and I've tried my best to keep that promise. It's hard, though. I'm sure Mrs B. suspects something, and Mahesh must think I'm weird. My best friend Annie is too busy hanging out with Regan and Tegan to notice. But someone will find out if we're not super-careful. It's lucky Tahlia has a plan . . .

**Award-winning author Marianne Musgrove brings her light touch to a story of family, growing up and keeping secrets that is nail-biting and heartwarming in equal measure.**

*Don't Breathe a Word* is suitable for readers aged 9 to 12.

### SYNOPSIS

*Don't Breathe a Word* is written in first-person, from the point of view of Mackenzie Carew (Kenzie). It is the school holidays, and Kenzie is about to go into the last term of primary school.

She is worried about her best friend, Annie, who is making friends with a different group of girls at school. However, that worry takes second place after Kenzie and her older sister Tahlia arrive home to discover that their grandfather – their sole carer after the death of their parents years ago – has had an accident and is lying in the hallway. He is rushed to hospital, where the social worker calls the girls' much older, adult half-sister, Lydia.

Lydia comes and stays for the night, but the girls and Grandpa insist that they can look after themselves, and Lydia reluctantly returns home. Mrs Banerjee from down the road says she will keep an eye on them. Kenzie is embarrassed to find that this means she will see Mrs Banerjee's son, Mahesh, a boy from school, more often. The two begin a tentative friendship – Kenzie shows Mahesh her 'stunts', such as swinging from the clothesline upside-down, and Mahesh shows Kenzie his drawing skills.

When Grandpa takes a turn for the worse – he is forgetful and he even wets the bed – the girls blame his accident and his medication. Later, when he goes missing in the middle of the night and the girls must search for him in the dark, they realise that something is seriously wrong. However, as Grandpa has been caring for them since they were small, and there is no-one else – Lydia certainly can't fit them in her tiny flat, and has never expressed much interest in them – they make a pact to keep Grandpa's illness secret because they don't want to be placed in foster care or separated.

As the holidays progress, the girls agree to a schedule so that one of them is watching Grandpa at all times. But Tahlia is not coping with the situation and uses her ballet recital rehearsals as an excuse to absent herself. Kenzie finds herself stuck in the house for hours at a time, taking care of Grandpa. She is afraid to go out in case someone finds out what is happening, or Grandpa does something silly, like take apart the TV while it's still plugged in.

She tries her best to keep the secret, but it is very difficult when Lydia arrives to take them to see a film. Grandpa gives all his money to a man collecting for charity, and later, he yells at a bank teller, claiming someone has stolen his money. Surely Mrs Banerjee will notice that something is not right? Kenzie tries to talk to Tahlia about taking some more responsibility for Grandpa, but Tahlia makes Kenzie feel guilty by reminding her that it was she, not Kenzie, who combed through the black, dirty pond looking for Grandpa, the night he disappeared. Tahlia stalls Kenzie by promising she'll come up with a plan once her recital is over.

Events come to a head when, despite Kenzie's protests, Tahlia spends the night away from home because the ballet recital is on the other side of town. Come the following morning, the last day of the holidays, an exhausted Kenzie is desperate to finish her school history project before she goes back to school. Tahlia still isn't back, but surely Grandpa will be okay if Kenzie takes one short trip to the shops to buy glue while he's napping? After all, she'll only be gone a few minutes ...

## STRUCTURE

The novel begins with a prologue depicting the dramatic scene where Tahlia makes Kenzie promise not to tell anyone. This event provides the title for the book, *Don't Breathe a Word*, and invites readers to find out more. What happened that night? Why can't the girls tell anyone?

The novel then skips back in time two days, when the girls arrive home to find that Grandpa has had an accident. Time follows chronologically up until the point where the prologue begins, then continues to show the unfolding events from there on.

All the action in the novel takes place over two weeks – the spring school holidays.

## STYLE

Even though *Don't Breathe a Word* deals with some weighty themes such as caring for a family member with dementia, it always maintains a lightness and warmth because of its first-person narration. Seeing events and characters through Kenzie's eyes results in an innocent and sometimes quirky take on the things that happen.

Marianne lets readers feel as if they're in Kenzie's world through use of made-up words particular to the Carew family, such as Tahlia's 'mentactacles' (spectacular mentals). She combines a pared-back writing style with just enough specific detail for readers to feel at home. We can visualise Tahlia with her two different-coloured contact lenses, the much loved grotty velvet curtains that hang around Kenzie's bed, and the mulberry tree in the back yard that provides both entertainment and, when times get tough, food for the family.

## PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

Read the Prologue with students:

- What do they learn about the characters and the story just in these two pages?
- What do they think the secret is?
- Do they have a special object that means something to them, such as Kenzie's lucky doorknob?
- Do students know any rhymes like the one that Tahlia and Kenzie recite ('May my nose fall off and my hair turn blue, may I fall in a tub full of alpaca poo...' (p. 2)), or could they make up a different rhyme for keeping a secret?

## THEMES

- Family
- Secrets
- Coping with change
- Siblings
- Living with an elderly person
- Being a carer
- Dementia
- Phobias
- Friendship

## MOTIFS AND SYMBOLS

Many of the novel's motifs and symbols have been explored in the chapter opener illustrations, and these are described below.

## Water

We learn in Chapter 1 that Kenzie has a phobia and recurring nightmares concerning water. This motif is developed throughout the book: she doesn't want to run past the Thing (the water tank, p. 4) but she does so because it is the only way into the house to help Grandpa; she refuses to help Tahlia search for Grandpa in the dark, murky pond when he is missing (p. 36); later in the book she can't go near the public pool (pp.102–103); during the climax of the book, she has to conquer her water phobia and climb the Thing to get to the roof to rescue Grandpa (pp.124–125); and at the conclusion of the book she goes to the beach with her family (pp.130–134).

### Key quotes:

- 'Let's just say I didn't like water very much. Big amounts, anyway. A glass of water was okay. Or a dripping tap. What I couldn't cope with were ponds, pools or tanks full of the stuff.' (p. 4)
- 'But when I looked at the water, all I could think about was how it would close around my legs and pull me under. I was being lowered into a deep, dark well again.' (p. 36)
- 'It was a drawing of a girl at the bottom of a well. She had short, reddish hair and she was treading water. It was just like my dream only the picture was different in one very important way: there was a rope dangling from above, reaching all the way to the girl. Up top, Grandpa was sitting beneath a tree, holding Meredith in his arms. Next to him was a line of people holding onto the end of the rope: Tahlia, Lydia, Daniel, Mahesh, Mrs B., and even Basanti and Vijay. All of them were holding the rope with both hands, ready to pull that girl up out of the well. All she had to do was reach up, grab the rope and hold on tight.' (pp. 133–134)

### Questions:

- Why is the last chapter called 'The Girl in the Well'? Is the well a positive or a negative image? When does it change?

### Activity:

- See black-line master below – draw your own picture, with yourself at the bottom of a well. At the top, draw all the people who could be there to help you out of a problem.

## Lucky doorknob

Kenzie carries her lucky crystal doorknob with her everywhere. Her mother found it in a park and gave it to Kenzie, and it is one of the few memories Kenzie has of her mother.

### Key quotes:

- 'The doorknob was made of glass. It had heaps of facets that made it look like a big diamond. I called it lucky because the day I found it, I'd been walking in the park with Mum. It was one of the few memories I had of her.' (pp. 1–2)
- 'I took my lucky doorknob out of my pocket, gave it a quick kiss and ran for it, keeping my eyes on the ground.' (p. 4)
- 'I felt in my pocket for my lucky doorknob and made a wish that we wouldn't be spotted.' (p. 30)
- ' "I took a sacred vow." I pointed at my lucky doorknob. "On that. Once you've sworn on the lucky doorknob, you can never go back on your word." ' (p. 90)
- 'I reached in my pocket for my lucky doorknob. It wasn't there. I must have left it at home. I felt my luck drain away.' (p. 106)
- 'My lucky doorknob pressed into my hip, reminding me I could do this.' (p. 125)

### Questions:

- Why does Kenzie wish on her lucky doorknob?
- Why do the girls swear on the lucky doorknob?

### The mulberry tree

The mulberry tree is a common sight in backyards around Australia, so it symbolises the normality of life in suburbia. It also takes on other roles in *Don't Breathe a Word* – Kenzie and Mahesh hide from the adults in it; Kenzie and her family eat the mulberries when they can't afford to buy food, even when the mulberries are unripe; and Kenzie uses the mulberries to make muffins, which turn out disappointingly to be 'flatfins'.

### The mailbox

#### Key quotes:

- 'As we pulled into our driveway, Lydia frowned, and I couldn't help seeing the place as she saw it – dirty windows, an unswept path, feral hedges. Even the letterbox looked the worse for wear. Grandpa had made it in the shape of our house – a yellow square with a pointy red roof. He'd painted each of us peeking out of the windows – Tahlia, him and me, with huge grins on our faces. But now the paint was seriously peeling away. A brush of the hand and our faces would be no more than paint flakes and the mini-house would no longer be our home but a plain old box. I reminded myself a real home couldn't be broken up like that but I still felt weird.' (p. 24)
- 'Weren't you supposed to make sacrifices for your family? I thought about the letterbox Grandpa had painted. About the peeling faces, ready to fall away, leaving the little house empty. I had to do whatever I could to hold this family together.' (p. 112)

### Questions:

- What does the mailbox mean to Kenzie?
- Who would be painted on the mailbox after the end of the story?

### Money

Money is a constant source of worry for Kenzie. Grandpa is a spendthrift so they don't have any savings. Her anxiety increases when he loses his wallet, then finds it, only to give away all his money to a man collecting for charity. Later, he tries to withdraw his money from the bank, blaming the bank when the account is empty.

Kenzie and Tahlia count up small change and work out what they can afford. Kenzie even considers selling her special coins, which were a present from her father, but Tahlia won't let her.

#### Key quotes:

- 'Not that it was any of her business, but every fortnight, on payday, Grandpa took us to a posh restaurant like, for example, the RSL. Then he'd take us out shopping for treats. Tahlia usually bought costume material or credit for her mobile. I bought things I needed for my stunts (rope, gaffer tape, knee pads). Grandpa usually picked up a gadget or two at the hardware store . . . As the week wore on, we moved on to cheaper foods – baked beans on toast, packet soups, frozen schnitzel heated up in the microwave . . . Grandpa got paid every other week too. The government gave him money for looking after us. That got spent pretty quickly, as well. Tahlia and I had learnt to ask Grandpa for our pocket money on payday. Otherwise, we might not get it.' (pp. 20–21)

- 'On Saturday afternoon, I made Tahlia sit down so we could review the money situation. I had \$3.35. She had \$1.55. Grandpa hadn't seen his wallet in over a week. He said someone had stolen it. More likely, he'd put it somewhere weird, like in the freezer or the first aid kit.' (pp. 59–60)
- 'Spending Dad's coins was a big step, but I wanted to do well at school and we also needed food. Dad would understand. Even so, I felt sad as I took them out of my box of special things. (p. 118)

### **Broken appliances**

Grandpa is always taking electrical things apart to fix them – and he used to be able to, because he was an electrician. But now he takes things apart for no reason, such as the family's microwave. He also thinks there might be a radiation leak, so he invents a gadget to find such leaks. The broken appliances are symbolic of Grandpa's deteriorating mental state.

## **WHAT IS DEMENTIA?**

Kenzie learns at the end of the book that her grandfather has dementia, an illness that causes a progressive decline in functioning. This is what has been causing his strange behaviour and forgetfulness. There are different types of dementia, and common symptoms include loss of memory, confusion, changes in behaviour and being unable to perform everyday tasks.

More information about dementia can be found online. Here is an extract from the website for the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing:

'Dementia is an umbrella term that refers to symptoms caused by changes in the functioning of the brain. These can include alterations in memory, personality and behaviour. A person with dementia may find it hard to do previously familiar tasks, such as writing, reading, showering and using numbers.

'It is estimated that around 200,000 people in Australia have dementia. As Australia's population ages, more people will be affected by dementia.

'Dementia is not a natural part of ageing and there are many difference types of diseases and conditions that cause dementia like symptoms.'

(<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/Dementia-1>)

### **Being a carer**

Caring for someone elderly or someone with dementia can be a full-time job, as Kenzie discovers.

#### **Key quotes:**

- 'It was like he'd become our child and we were the parents.' (p. 57)
- 'I cleaned up Grandpa by myself. It was just one of many problems I had to handle alone. The money thing was another. I realised that I, Mackenzie Elizabeth, the superior Carew sister, was going to have to solve it.' (p. 80)
- ' "N'uh," I said, shaking my finger. "You don't get to be mad with me this time. You weren't here. You don't know. I stay home all day and I lie awake half the night and I do the washing and the cooking and I worry about the food and the money and you do nothing." ' (p. 109)

- 'Forgetfulness wasn't such a bad thing. That was what I told myself every time I found the iron in the fridge or Grandpa's drill in the pantry. Just because he put things back in the wrong place didn't mean he was crazy. And just because he called me Meredith sometimes didn't mean he didn't know who I was at other times. He'd only tried to escape once since he nearly electrocuted himself. And I'd got him back inside without too much trouble. That meant he was getting better. Tahlia was obviously feeling guilty about her upcoming sleep-over because she tried to be home more often.' (pp. 97-98)
- 'The truth was, no fully grown adult wanted their granddaughter to think they were a little child in need of a babysitter. I decided to follow him from a distance. Sort of to protect his dignity.' (p. 100)

*Questions:*

- There are many children in Australia who help care for someone in their family. The person in need of care isn't always a grandparent either. Sometimes, they're the child's mum or dad or their brother or sister. What are some of the issues you might face (positive and negative) if you had to help someone at home with a disability or illness?
- What kind of support would you need?
- How would you go about getting it?
- If you had a friend looking after a relative, how could you support them?

**Getting help**

A key message of the story is that it is not good to keep secrets, or to try to do everything yourself. Help and support is always available; you just have to ask. There are various avenues of support for people with dementia and those who care for them, such as support helplines, a local doctor or council, websites, resource centres and respite centres. Further information can be found at:

- <http://www.healthinsite.gov.au/topics/Dementia>
- [www.carersaustralia.com.au](http://www.carersaustralia.com.au)
- [www.alzheimers.org.au](http://www.alzheimers.org.au)



## Illustrations in *Don't Breathe a Word*

What does each illustration mean? In the table below, write down the reasons why you think a particular illustration was used for each chapter. The first few chapters are given as examples. (Some of the answers will be obvious, but some of them are up to **you** to find a reason. Be creative!)

Chapter	What is the illustration?	Why was that illustration used?
1	<i>Lucky doorknob</i>	<i>The girls make a vow while they hold the doorknob.</i>
2	<i>Mailbox</i>	<i>We are introduced to the family in this chapter, and the mailbox has a picture of the family who live in this house.</i>
3	<i>Coins</i>	<i>Lydia gives Kenzie money to buy a snack.</i>
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# Illustrations in *Don't Breathe a Word*

(Page 2)



Chapter	What is the illustration?	Why was that illustration used?
13		
14		
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## CLIMBING THE ROPE

Read the last chapter of the book. Mahesh draws a picture of Kenzie down a water well (something she has nightmares about), but this time he has drawn all of her family and friends at the top, ready to hold the rope to help pull Kenzie out.

Draw a picture of a well below, with **you** at the bottom, then draw at the top all the people who might be able to help you get out. It could be your friends, your parents, brothers and sisters, family, teacher, neighbours, or other people you know. The more the better!



# MY MEMORIES



Kenzie only remembers a few things about her parents, but what she remembers are good memories. Sometimes she has an object to help her remember.

Write down three of **your** favourite memories. They could be about a favourite time or place, or a person. What do you use to help you remember? It could be a favourite toy, or outfit, or a present you received, or a photo.

Three of Kenzie's memories are given as examples.

1. *I remember the day my mum found my lucky doorknob. We were walking in the park. It was lying in the grass. Mum said I was lucky to find it, so from that day on, it became my lucky doorknob.*

2. *When I want to remember what Mum and Dad were like, I get out my secret stash of message books. They always make me feel better. They contain phone messages taken down by Mum and Dad. The notes weren't addressed to me, but when I read them, it feels like my parents are talking to me.*

3. *Inside my box of special things I keep some coins. Every birthday, Dad had bought me a proof set. The coins were set in cardboard and covered in plastic. Seeing them made me happy and sad all at once.*

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