

TEACHING NOTES

The Amazing Spencer Gray

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About the Book

There was no stopping, Spencer knew that. You couldn't stop. You kept at it, and afterwards, after all the pain had gone and your body glowed with the effort of it, you realised what you'd done; how far you'd gone; how hard it had been, and how worth it. (p. 6)

Spencer Gray and his family are new to the rural coastal town of Skippers Cove. His dad, Doctor Rory Gray, is the local community GP, and together with Spencer's mum Suzie and little sister Pippa, the Grays are a tight unit of four. They eat together, laugh and groan together, and make important decisions together.

Spencer also has two good mates at school – Charlie and the mischievous but charismatic Leon. When Spencer's dad announces that he is now old enough to join him for a flight in the *Drifter* – a non-motorised fixed-wing glider – Spencer can't wait to tell Charlie and Leon the exciting news.

Flying in the *Drifter* is everything Spencer had hoped and more, and as they ride the thermals over the Stirling Ranges the feeling is unbelievable.

But then disaster strikes. The *Drifter* crashes in the mountains, leaving Spencer's dad badly injured and powerless. In this dire situation, Spencer is suddenly alone: decisions are his to make, and it is up to him to fetch help.

Spencer fights through his fears and his sense of helplessness. With courage and persistence, he finally overcomes them and finds his feet. As he remembers his cross-country training at school and concentrates on the challenge of the moment, Spencer becomes nothing short of amazing.

Suspenseful yet uplifting, *The Amazing Spencer Gray* is a story about resilience and agency – building one and realising the other – and a story to empower young people in their lives and within their communities.

About the Author

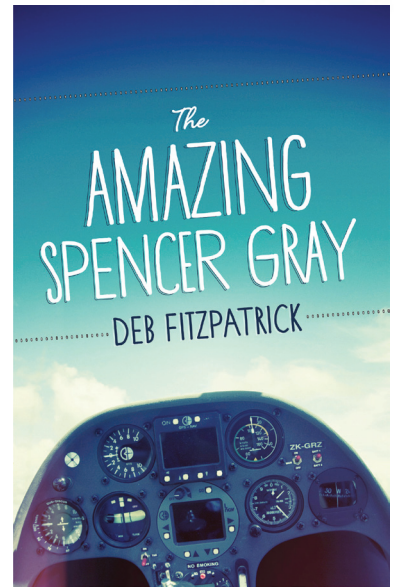
Deb Fitzpatrick lives and works in Fremantle. A freelance editor and writer, her two books for young adults – *90 packets of instant noodles* (2010) and *Have you seen Ally Queen?* (2011) – were both made Notable Books by the Children's Book Council of Australia. *The Amazing Spencer Gray* is her first book for younger readers.

Deb wrote *90 packets of instant noodles* while living in a shack in the cloud forest of Costa Rica, and *Have you seen Ally Queen?* while backpacking through South America. She wrote *The Amazing Spencer Gray* at a café in South Fremantle. Deb has a Master of Arts (Creative Writing) from UWA and teaches professional writing and editing at Curtin University.

Study Notes

Before Reading

1. The title of the novel, *The Amazing Spencer Gray*, could refer to a number of things. What might be amazing about Spencer Gray, a twelve-year-old boy living in the South-West of Western Australia?



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2. What do you think are the ten most important items to have in a survival situation? Work in pairs or small groups to compose a list that you all agree on. Share your list with the rest of the class. What are the most common items that are listed? Are there any that everyone believes are 'must haves'?
3. Who are some survivors that you know of? How did they survive in harsh, unforgiving conditions? Choose one person's story and conduct research into their experience. You might like to use the following table:

Survivor's name	
What adventure/achievement were they trying to accomplish?	
What obstacles did they encounter?	
How were they rescued?	
What were the key elements to their survival?	
What can we learn from their story?	

4. This novel focuses on a family who moves to the (fictitious) town of Skippers Cove, in the South-West of Western Australia. What is a 'sea change' or 'green change'? Why do you think more and more people are doing this?

During Reading

5. Read the prologue to the novel. What do we learn about Spencer Gray through this passage? What qualities does he possess? Use evidence to support your answer.
6. The prologue does not actually specify the activity that Spencer is doing, yet it is clear that he is running and trying to endure the exhaustion he feels in doing so. Write descriptively about another activity that you enjoy, without naming it. Think about using similar techniques to the author in achieving this, for example
descriptive language sentence length inner thoughts repetition
7. In this novel there are a number of occasions where the Australian idiom is used. What is your understanding of the expressions below? Share with the class to come to a common understanding of what they mean. Add any others you come across in the book.

Expression	Meaning
Don't mention the war (p. 5)	
She's on deck with it (p. 11)	
He's a turkey (p. 20)	
You're a chip off the old block (p. 37)	
Chunder rides (p. 48)	
Bugger (p. 74)	
Bush-bash (p. 86)	

8. Jargon is the terminology used in particular environments or activities. In the novel, the jargon of skateboarding and gliding are used in particular. As you read, keep a list of these words and look up the meaning of any you are unsure of.

Skateboarding term	Meaning	Gliding term	Meaning
<i>e.g. Board/deck</i>		<i>e.g. fuselage</i>	

9. Read Chapters 1 and 2. What do the three boys *value* in life? What are their attitudes towards:

- a. family
- b. skateboarding
- c. library books
- d. friends

10. Leon grinned with irritation. 'I will kill you if you ever call me that again.' (p. 9)

Why do you think Leon doesn't like being called Leo? Are there nicknames your friends or family have for you? Why do you like or dislike them?

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- Chapter 4 introduces us to Spencer's mum, dad and sister, Pippa. Using the headings of Speech, Actions, Appearance, and Reactions of Others, record what we learn about each of these characters.
- In Chapter 7 the Gray family tell each other about their first individual day in Skippers Cove, using their family tradition of 'the talking stick'. Write descriptively about your first time doing something – perhaps your first day at a new school, the first time you tried a new sport or activity, or the first time you met a friend or family member.
- He paused. 'I wish you'd still come up with me, Suze. I miss our flights together.'*
Mum shook her head, but didn't meet his gaze. 'Not now. Not now we've got these two. Imagine if something were to –'
'More chance of us being killed in a car crash, you know that.'
She shook her head but quietly said, 'I know. I know.' (p. 24)

Why do you think Suzie won't go up in the glider with Rory anymore? What is she worried about? Given her concerns about the glider, what is the significance of Spencer being allowed to ride with Rory? Use evidence from this chapter, and others where relevant, to support your answers.

- Between the loud **chank chank** of plates, Spencer was sure he could hear her mumbling something about 'the bloody Drifter.'* (p. 30)
 What are the positive and negative aspects of the *Drifter*? How do each of the characters see the glider? Is there any aspect of it that they all agree on?
- Mum was silent all the way down after that, but her silence spoke her thoughts loud and clear.* (p. 31)
 What does the author mean by this? What is the name of the technique whereby non-human objects are given human qualities? Do you think it is an effective descriptive technique to use? Explain your answer.
- In Chapter 12, Spencer relates to us 'the Computer Rules' that his mum and dad enforce. Do you have similar rules in your household, either for computer use or something else such as the television? What are the rules your parents have made? Why do you think rules like this exist?
- 'We're going for hot chocolate and gingerbread men at Indie's,' Pips said happily.*
'Aww, I love it there!' (p. 61)
 Why is Suzie taking Pippa on an outing to the café?
- In Chapters 14 and 15 there are a number of references to the clouds, each with different meanings. What do the clouds in the examples below symbolise? Why do you think the author has made so many references to clouds?

Quote	Connotations of clouds in this example
Dad adjusted his sunnies. Even though there were clouds about, the glare in the cockpit was harsh. (p. 42)	<i>In this example, the clouds have a literal meaning. However, they might also point us to negative experiences to come.</i>
'Sorry mate, I didn't want to upset you, but I just thought I should explain why a cloud passed over Reg back there.' (p. 43)	
It was a blue spring day with a cottonwool cloudbank in the distance. (p. 40)	
'Those clouds'll be beautiful from up high, Spence.' (p. 41)	

- Chapter 17 tells us of the glider crash. How have language, sentence structure, and inner thoughts been used to increase the tension in this chapter?
- Cool air and dirt – and light! – rushed across Spencer's face. It was still the afternoon, not night!* (p. 49)
 Why do you think Spencer was so pleased to see that it was still afternoon? What feelings and connections with the night do we make?
- Chapter 21 makes a dramatic shift from the previous chapters, where we have been following the frightening experience of Spencer and his dad, to the relative calm and worry-free afternoon Suzie and Pippa are having. Why do you think the author has done this?
 How does this chapter show the reader that time has passed since the Gray family moved to the town and that they are now feeling at home there?
- In Chapter 22 Spencer makes a list of things that are rushing through his mind, ending with *Suck leaves. Eat crickets. Cook spiders. Aaaaargh!!!!* (p. 57)
 How has the author used language devices to increase the tension in this passage? Does making the list help Spencer to feel better about his situation? How can you tell?



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23. *She would drive those kids wherever they needed to go til she got so old she could no longer get out of bed, rather than run the risk of them ... getting into trouble.* (p. 59)
What sort of trouble do you think Suzie is worried about? Do you think she is overly concerned about her children's wellbeing or is she justified? Give reasons for your answer.
24. *But the silence was long and cold. He heard a noise outside and turned around. It was raining. The sky was the colour of a gun.* (p. 61)
When the environment or objects are connected to the mood of a character it is known as a pathetic fallacy. In this case, Spencer's misery seems to be connected to the silence, rain and the colour of the sky.
How might a rainy day be seen when a character is happy? Sad? Confused? Angry? Hopeful? Write sentences that incorporate your ideas.
e.g. Happiness – The rain splashed off the pavement excitedly, with a musical pitter-patter that sounded almost like laughter.
25. *In twenty-five years he'd only had to do this once before. He hoped this time they were more successful.* (p. 70)
What is Reg alluding to? Write a newspaper article that reports on the situation Reg was thinking about, or on Spencer's crash landing.
26. Chapter 33 begins with Spencer's letter to anyone finding the glider while he is away. Would you have written anything else? Write your own letter, giving more information (using evidence from the text) about Rory's injuries and what you have done, and what your plans are.
27. When Spencer is standing on the high point, looking for a road or way down the mountain, *terrible thoughts* (p. 81) come to his mind. The author doesn't tell us what they were. What do you think Spencer could have been thinking about in that moment? Why does he force them out of his mind?
28. *Spring water. It had a picture of a beautiful mountain on the label.* (p. 90)
Why does Spencer grin thinly at this?
29. *Not for another hour did they find Spencer.* (p. 91)
What do you think that Suzie would have been thinking during this hour? What emotions would she have been feeling? Write a diary entry from Suzie's perspective that recounts what was happening and how she reacted during this time.

After Reading

30. Construct a plot graph which visually represents the exposition, rising action, climax, and resolution of the novel. Remember that in a novel, there might be a number of periods of rising action and climax, and your graph should demonstrate this.
You may wish to split into two different colours or lines once Spencer and Rory crash, to represent their storyline separately to Pippa and Suzie's experience.
Label your plot points with a brief summary of what is occurring at this moment in the story.
What did you mark as the point of highest tension?
31. Research the recommendations for survival in situations such as the one Spencer found himself in. Do you think that Spencer did the right things? What would you have done differently?
Choose a scenario – e.g. a boating accident, a car breakdown in a remote area, a plane crash – and construct a poster or brochure designed to educate people your age of what to do in such a situation.
32. After completing the novel, reread Chapter 13.
What events, thoughts or conversations take on greater meaning after learning what happened later that afternoon? Give details as to why they are more significant once you know what happened to Spencer and Rory.
33. The title of the novel is *The Amazing Spencer Gray*. In the final chapter he is referred to in this way by several people, including himself. In what ways was Spencer amazing? To whom is he amazing and how so?
34. Who do you think is an amazing person? It could be a friend, a family member, a sportsperson ... perhaps even you! Write a short story, biography, or other text which details what makes this person amazing.