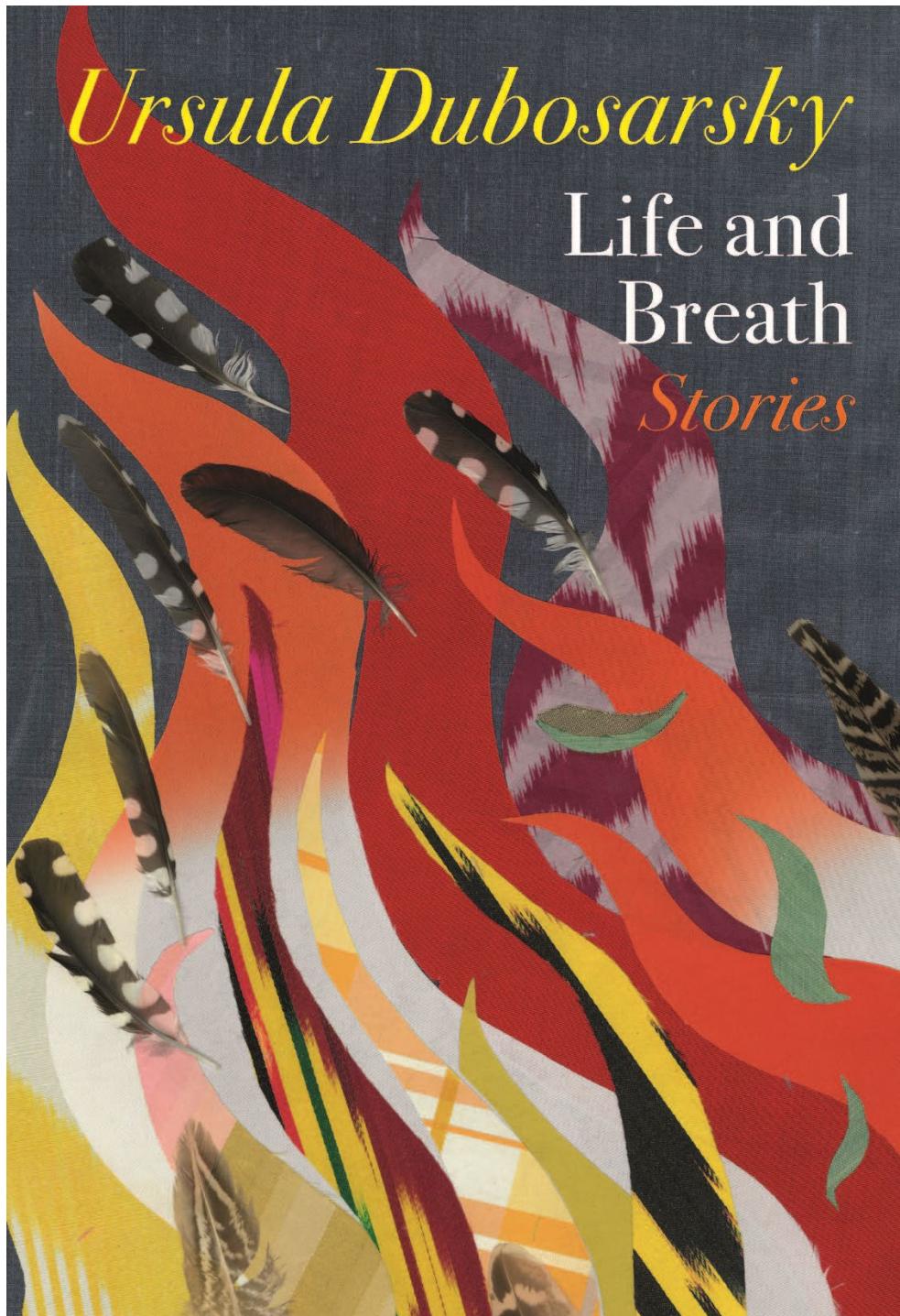


Teachers' Notes



Life and Breath

Stories

by Ursula Dubosarsky

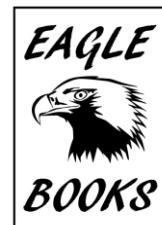
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About the book:

It was a sunny, light-aired day, and we walked quickly down the street strewn with gumnuts. I remember taking several deep breaths, as if to reassure myself that whatever had happened to my strong, smiling uncle, I was still alive and was going to keep on living, and that life and breath were very good things.

Discoveries from the past, hopes for the future – and the decisions we make on a knife edge that clarify our own sense of self.

These elements inform Ursula Dubosarsky's multi-award-winning novels and are in sharp, bright evidence in these eleven beautifully crafted short stories, by turns poignant, funny, reflective and joyful – nearly always mercurial – collected together for the first time.

The most graceful, most original writer for young people in Australia—probably the world (Sonya Hartnett).

About the author

Ursula Dubosarsky is one of Australia's most beloved and acclaimed authors. She has written more than sixty books - picture books, non-fiction, play scripts, early readers, and novels for adolescents. Her books have been published widely throughout the English-speaking world and translated into fifteen languages.

Ursula was the Australian Children's Laureate from 2020-2021. She has won nine state literary awards in Australia, the Children's Book Council Book of the Year Award, and has been nominated internationally for both the Astrid Lindgren (multiple times) and Hans Christian Andersen awards. Adelaide's Windmill Theatre's production, *Plop!*, based on

Ursula's picture book *The Terrible Plop* (illustrated by Andrew Joyner), toured Australia as well as New York, New Jersey and Pittsburgh in the United States. Her picture book *The March of the Ants* (illustrated by Tohby Riddle) provided a thematic thread for the State Library of New South Wales' major exhibition, 'Imagine... the Wonder of Picture Books'. And her reimagining of Oscar Wilde's *The Selfish Giant* has been performed, to great acclaim, as *The Giant's Garden* at the 2025 Adelaide Arts Festival.

Ursula's previous titles with Christmas Press are *Two Tales of Twins from Ancient Greece and Rome* (illustrated by David Allan, 2014) and *The Boy Who could Fly And Other Magical Plays for Children* (illustrated by Amy Golbach, 2019)



Something from the author:

To be honest, I think I'm more a natural short story writer than a novelist. Perhaps my mind is one that thinks like a short story, in sort of emotional moments. I have loved short stories since I was a child and I read a lot of them. The intensity draws me – you can't sit back and relax when you read (or write) a short story – every word counts, you have to pay attention – like reading (or writing) a poem. They are like little sudden blazes in the darkness – they warm you up and frighten you at the same time.

But it's an uncanny feeling, to look back over your writing life over a period of nearly 40 years. All these stories were written at very different times, for me, for publishing, for Australia and for the world. And yet, I can recognise through them all a continuous thread of

something unmistakably me that's been in my writing since childhood. I can hardly define what that something is – the writing "me", I suppose it must be. Gathering the stories together has been like collating photographs together in an album, with all the mystery of your past, present and even future selves between the covers.

Something from the editor (Jon Appleton of Roffo Court Press)

Once Ursula sent me the thirteen short stories, I had to decide how to order them in the book. In order of first publication? From shortest to longest? In alphabetical order by title? The ones set in the past first, then the contemporary-set stories?

Then I began to wonder if they dictated their own order. It occurred to me that some of the stories felt like testimonies to events or people (or animals or toys) who had existed in the past. But telling the story is a kind of act of reanimation. I thought of bones being unearthed from the ground – and the way touching a long-buried artefact allows a person to forge a visceral connection in the here and now. So that section became 'Old Bones'.

Other stories felt instantly immediate, happening in real time as the reader turned the pages.

They culminated in moments that were turning points – where a character realised they could make a choice that was irrevocable and would inform the rest of their lives. In Ursula's hands those moments felt liberating and exhilarating, like a sudden rush of blood to the head. So we have 'Young Blood' as the second section.

But you might read the stories and see other elements, other moments which inform a completely different – and just as valid – structure.

Classroom discussion and research activities:

1. Many of the characters have unusual names. Are any of them familiar to you or your family? Can you track down their origins and meanings?
2. There are different types of stories in the collection: for example, a ghost or horror story (*The Golden Gate*), a folktale (*The Little Green Leaf*) a funny story (*The Birthday Party*). How many other types of stories can you identify?
3. In the story titled 'Teddy', the narrator tells us about an old toy that has seen better days but is still loved even when the person has grown up. Ask the adults in your family if they still have toys left over from childhood and why they kept them? And do *you* have anything like that left over from when you were very young?
4. *Percival*, the last story in the collection, is based on the medieval Arthurian story of *Perceval*, but changed to modern times. In the old story, it is when Perceval sees knights in full armour on horseback in the forest that he decides on his future path, despite what happened to his father and brothers, who all died in battle. Why do you think the author chose racing-car drivers instead of, say, soldiers, when she wrote her modern version?

5. One of the stories is called 'Sarsaparilla', which is an old-fashioned soft drink. Do you know what that tastes like? What other food is mentioned in the book? What does the food eaten tell you about the characters' lives?

6. What are your favourite stories, and characters? Why?

Classroom creative activities

1. Susie Jenkin-Pearce made the cover using a collage of different coloured and patterned fabric and paper, and leaves and feathers. Have a go at creating your own cover using things in the classroom and playground.

2. Jerry, the horse in the story of the same name, is very old but in Martha's dream, he turns into a strong, wild winged horse, like Pegasus in the Greek myth. Write a short story about what Jerry's life might have been like when he was young.

3. 'The Night Parrot' includes lyrics from 'Carol of the Birds', an old Australian Christmas song. Do you know it? If not, look it up. And then choose a story and create a poem or a song about something or someone that strikes you in it. For example, you could write about Jerry the horse, or Teddy, or the toy soldiers in Little Wars.

4. In *The Birthday Party*, Claudie and her friends think up unusual games for the mermaid-themed party for Claudie's little sister, Griselda. Can you create any more games they might play?

5. Can you identify different kinds of technology in the story, belonging to different eras? Create an illustrated timeline for them.

Some activities ideas from Ursula Dubosarsky:

1. *The Little Green Leaf* is a fable, which is a simple story that often has a one sentence "lesson" or moral at the end. What do you think could be the moral of the story of *The Little Green Leaf*? There might be many different answers. This story would also make a dramatic short play – students could be the trunk, the branches and all the leaves in all the different colours, including little and green! There is also a great role for students to make sound effects of the storm.

2. *Famous Guinea Pigs in History* is written in the style of a history book – but about guinea pigs! You could call it a parody or a satire. Think of another kingdom of animals (cats, spiders, birds – anything you like). Who were the kings and queens and princes and princesses? What big events could have happened there? Write a story as though it was a real history book.

3. In *Like a Long-Legged Fly*, there are two important train journeys. Sometimes in stories a journey is a time of change or transformation. Imagine a character getting on a train, plane, boat, bus or tram. Your character might meet someone, or overhear something or see something out the window. When they get off, as a result of that experience, they have changed. The change could be inside the character's head – or the character might really

change into someone - or even something else. Perhaps you could dramatise the journey as a play.

4. *The Golden Gate* focuses on a war memorial. War memorials take many different forms – there might be a statue of a soldier or a nurse or just a simple block or obelisk. Engrave on it will be the name and date of a war or wars and a list of names of people who died. Can you find a war memorial in your town or suburb? Choose one name from the list and write a short story imagining the life of that person, their family, how old they might have been, how they felt about going away to war. Were they excited? Or were they afraid. You could write it in the first person, which might help you understand more how they felt. Try to found out what you can about the war the person died in.

5. The title of the story, *The Poisoned Apple*, will remind you of a fairy tale – I’m sure you know which one! Sometimes fairy tales seem to enter our real life, especially when we are children. Have you ever thought you saw a troll under a bridge? Or met a cat that seemed as though it was talking to you? Or been to a party and lost one of your shoes? Write a story that takes something from a fairy tale but as though it happened in REAL life. If you are stuck, find a book of fairy tales to give you an idea. (You will have TOO many ideas, believe me!!)

6. *Little Wars* is a story about toy soldiers. Toys are wonderful in stories because they can mean many different things and carry strong emotions. (This is also a theme of “Poor Teddy”.) What have been the toys in your life that you have liked playing with the most or that you were most attached to? Imagine your favourite toy goes missing. At first you think you’ve put it somewhere, you’ve lost it, or a dog has taken it, something like that. Then you find out someone you trust has stolen it from you. How do you find out? Why did they take it? Do you get it back?

7. In *Alone like a Stone*, the important event is the birth of a baby. When someone is born, people can feel strange and wild, because we are at the gates of life and death. Write a story about a birth but this time make it the birth of an animal. It could be a pet at home, it could be a farm animal, it could be an animal in the jungle or forest or bush. Write your story from the point of view of the older brother or sister animal of the baby being born. They will have many feelings as they wait impatiently – excitement, fear, jealousy, danger, joy, wonder. Perhaps your story will end with a surprise – there could be more than one new baby!

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