

Lifespan of Starlight

Teacher's Notes

Written by Thalia Kalkipsakis

Published by Hardie Grant Egmont, April 2015

SYNOPSIS

Scout is 'illegal' in a harsh futuristic world, where not being microchipped means no access to food or water. A combination of Scout's hacking skills and a half-share of her mother's meagre rations has allowed her to survive undetected by the authorities for fourteen years.

When Scout steals a microchip from a homeless dead woman she stumbles across in the park, her problems seem to be over. She applies for an elite high school and begins living a normal life.

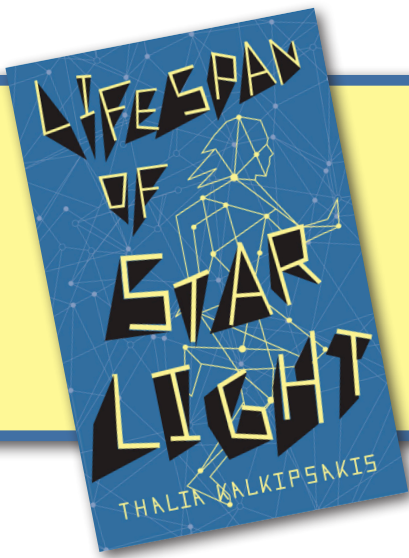
But after meeting Mason and Boc, two teenagers who have been following her stolen chip's movements for some time, she makes the startling discovery that time travel is possible, and the previous owner of Scout's chip could do it. Believing Scout to be that woman, they ask her to help them learn.

To her surprise, under her vague tutelage, Mason is soon able to jump forwards in time for a few seconds at a time, and Scout is encouraged to learn to jump herself, and discovers there is an intense pleasurable rush that comes with time skipping. As Mason and Scout start to practice jumping together, they grow closer, and a romance develops between them.

But then Mason and Boc discover that Scout's chip isn't implanted; that she's illegal. Eventually Scout is able to show Mason that she's still the same person that she was before, but Boc is harder to convince. Finally, after she jumps forwards six hours in one jump, longer than any of them have managed before, he is grudgingly impressed and lets her train with them and some other friends they've taught to jump.

As part of a training session, Boc climbs on to a high-speed railway track and jumps moments before a massive freight train can run him over. He returns several minutes later to the same spot, after the train has passed. Scout successfully jumps to avoid a train as well, but when one of the other trainees, Amon, tries, he returns at the wrong time and they watch, horrified, as he bleeds to death.

Wanted for questioning in connection with Amon's death, Mason evades the authorities long enough to plan a massive jump forwards – he plans to be gone ten years. Scout, thinking she's escaped scrutiny, decides not to go with him, as she doesn't want to leave her mother behind. But when the authorities discover the truth about her stolen chip and arrive to arrest her, Scout has no choice but to jump ten years into the unknown ...



Lifespan of Starlight Teacher's Notes

Written by Thalia Kalkipsakis

Published by Hardie Grant Egmont, April 2015

KEY THEMES

One of the central themes of Scouts world is the worth of both commodities and people. The greatly diminished resources of the dystopia she lives in have necessitated strict rationing of resources according to people's station, or their perceived contribution to society. Scout believes that there are alternative ways to divide the resources that would allow illegals to access rations as well, but this is an unpopular opinion with the authorities.

Another important aspect of the story is the power of relationships. When Scout gets 'lost' time travelling on one occasion, it is the thought of her mother that allows her to find her way back.

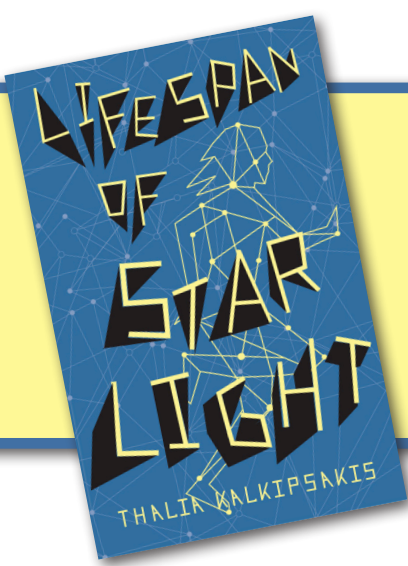
A third major theme in the story is technology. Scout's world is saturated with technology to a point where it's impossible even to access basic necessities without it.

WRITING STYLE

Thalia Kalkipsakis's writing is in equal parts engaging and philosophical. In action scenes, Kalkipsakis often uses staccato sentences to carry the action sharply along. But she also handles the deeper, more metaphysical aspects of the novel with more introspective and thoughtful prose.

The time travel conventions used in the story are explained clearly and with simple analogies to help the reader sort out the more convoluted aspects of any story about time travel.

Lifespan of Starlight is written in the first person, so we see everything through Scout's eyes. We are introduced to the unfairness of the world that she lives in by one of its most disadvantaged, and when Scout gains a chip, we are able to appreciate more acutely the contrast of her life before and after being chipped.



Lifespan of Starlight Teacher's Notes

Written by Thalia Kalkipsakis

Published by Hardie Grant Egmont, April 2015

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

The idea for this book came to me during a time when I'd decided to stop writing. I wasn't searching for ideas. What if the goal was not self-expression but enlightenment, or true empathy, or something similar – a skill or talent that took so long to develop that it only became apparent when human life expectancy reached a maximum age? How true to our mortal condition, I thought, if the first people to master this new skill were to die from old age just as they discovered it was possible.

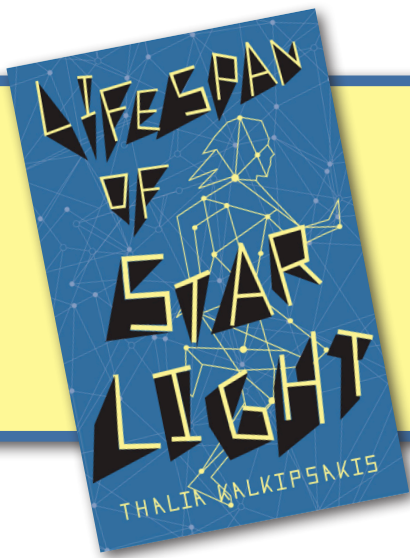
My spark of curiosity about all this told me that I had the seed of an idea, so I carried it into a world that I could write about – teenagers who discover a mysterious power lying dormant within us all. Initially I thought it would be computer gaming that led to the invention of a new brain process, but I think in terms of the skill itself, which I could use as a metaphor for human potential, it took me about three nanoseconds to decide what the mysterious skill would be. It had to be the ability to travel through time.

I am a time travel junkie from way back – put those two words in a book description and I'm pulling out my credit card or clicking 'hold' on our local library website in an instant. But even though I'd chosen to write about time travel, I knew that I also wanted it to be contained, limited – at least, as best as I was able – by the laws that govern us all: those of the natural world. Because as a time travel junkie, the moments when I'm most excited is when scientists tell me that it might be possible. Some way, somehow, I want it to be possible. I've also read enough science fiction and fantasy to know that it's at the boundaries where the most interesting stories lie: the weaknesses written into the superheroes – both physical and emotional – the Achilles heels, the glue that melts when Icarus flies too close to the sun.

The reason I wanted to write this note is because of the way the story helped me. Writing about human potential helped me find my own potential; at least, it helped me keep searching for it. It is a kind of arrogance to believe that you can achieve anything: until you've written that novel, or invented that gadget or come to truly know another human being, you don't know whether you're capable of it or not. We're floating close a point that's referenced so often these days – the idea that if you believe in yourself you can achieve anything. But I'm not trying to say that, I don't believe it's true. The truth I believe is even more exciting and mysterious: it's the idea that your unique potential already lies dormant within you; it exists whether you realise it or not. The laws of nature will continue whether we fully understand them, or not. To me, it's more about searching than believing. I don't know the extent of it but I promise you, there is more out there than we currently imagine: there is so much to be discovered 'floating just out of our reach, waiting for someone to give it a name'.

And here, at the end, we've reached the final point of this story: that imagination matters and as a result stories matter, because ideas are the start of so much.

They will become our future. - TK



Lifespan of Starlight Teacher's Notes

Written by Thalia Kalkipsakis

Published by Hardie Grant Egmont, April 2015

AUTHOR BACKGROUND

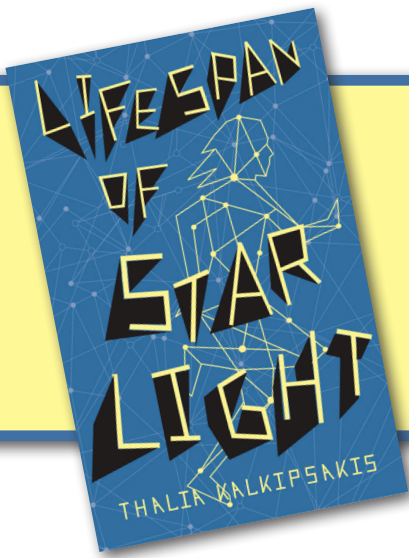
Thalia grew up on a farm on the outskirts of Melbourne with a mum who tried to save battery hens by on-selling them as backyard chickens. Her dad worked as an industrial chemist while also growing strawberries, carrots and Christmas trees on the farm. It was not unusual to find plant shoots in the freezer, or the hair dryer missing because it was needed to heat one of her dad's experiments. Thalia's childhood showed her the magic that can happen when science and nature combine with human creativity.

In 2012, Thalia released her first standalone young adult novel, *Silhouette*, which follows a talented and determined young dancer as she navigates her way into the adult world of commercial dance. These days, Thalia lives in regional Victoria with her husband, their two children and two black cats.

<http://www.thaliakalkipsakis.com/>

MARKETING & PROMOTION

Will be reviewed widely and available where all good books are sold.



Lifespan of Starlight Teacher's Notes

Written by Thalia Kalkipsakis

Published by Hardie Grant Egmont, April 2015

STUDY NOTES

1. Writing activity: Illegals

Different characters in *Lifespan of Starlight* feel differently about the rights of 'illegals'. Imagine you live in Scout's world, and write half a page describing how you would feel, and what you might do, if you discovered someone you knew was illegal. Would you turn in the person? Why/why not? What would influence your decision?

2. Class discussions: Technology

Technology plays a huge role in Scout's world, just as it does in our own. As a class, discuss the following questions:

- a) Technology looms large in the novel, but it plays a larger role in our lives today than we might imagine. Think about some of the ways that technology helps us today. Can you think of anything you do in your life that is completely untouched by technology?
- b) Do you think the technologies of the future described in Scout's world are likely to come about? Why/why not? Think about compulsory microchipping, self-driving cars, gesture-based computing, for example.
- c) What are some of the issues involved in a society that is entirely microchipped? Some of these are discussed in the novel, such as the moral implications of having a certain proportion of the population not microchipped, as well as the potential for hacking/tampering and glitches in the technology. What are some others you can think of?
- d) Are there any technological advancements you were surprised *not* to see in Scout's world? What are you expecting the future to look like in this regard?

3. Small group discussions

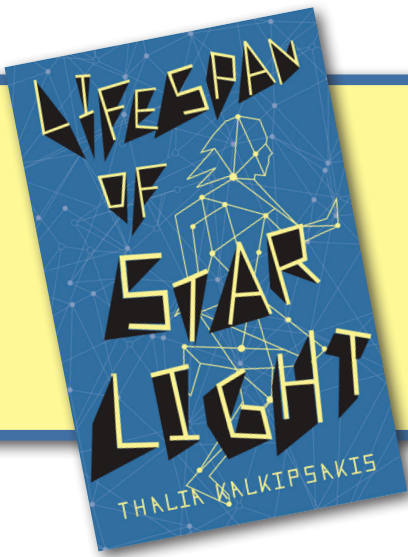
Break into small groups and pick one of the following topics to discuss.

a) Relationships

When Scout gets lost in time, it's the thought of her mother that brings her back. Think about what this says about her relationship with her mother. If you found yourself lost in time, as Scout is, which relationship/s would bring you back? What is it about these relationships that makes them special?

b) Time travel

If you could only travel in time in one direction, would you prefer to go forwards or backwards? What are the potential issues associated with each? If time travel was something everyone could do, how do you think this would affect the world?



Lifespan of Starlight

Teacher's Notes

Written by Thalia Kalkipsakis

Published by Hardie Grant Egmont, April 2015

c) Identity

People in Scout's world are identified by their chips, which are able to be tracked and monitored. How do you think this would affect people's identities? Think about the small choices people make hundreds of times a day: what to eat, what to wear, which way to walk to work. If they knew those choices were being monitored and recorded, how do you think that would affect them? Would people become more or less concerned about their identity?

d) Human rights

Human rights in Scout's world have taken a back seat to 'citizen's rights'. In other words, unless you agree to be chipped and monitored, you have no rights, not even to basic necessities like water. Do you believe that there could ever be justification for a limitation of rights in this way? Why/why not?

e) Intro quote

At the beginning of the novel, Kalkipsakis quotes Søren Kierkegaard, saying: 'Life can only be understood backwards; but it has to be lived forwards.' Do you agree that life can only be understood backwards? How would the availability of time travel change this?

4. Bonus activity: Intertextual references

Time travel has long been a rich subject for authors to explore. Research some other time travel texts and look at the different ways that people have explored the genre. What is allowed/not allowed in their time travel 'rules'? What reasons could they have for using these particular conventions? What sort of dilemmas do time travel books often explore, and/or what problems can time travel solve for characters?

Some titles to start with:

The Time Machine, H.G. Wells

A Wrinkle in Time, Madeleine L'Engle

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, J.K. Rowling

When You Reach Me, Rebecca Stead