

Silhouette

Teacher's Notes

Written by Thalia Kalkipsakis

Published by Hardie Grant Egmont, 2012

This is a fascinating insight into the ambition and sheer hard work required from young dancers and also a realistic portrayal of the temptations that every teenager will face at one time or another – alcohol, marijuana and party drugs.

Angela Crocombe *Readings Monthly*, July 2012

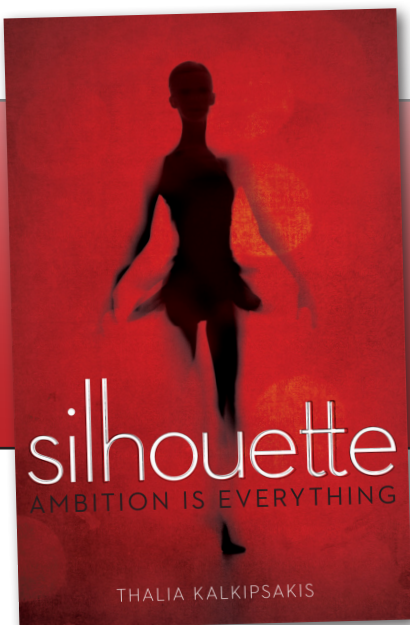
This story of Scarlett takes the reader inside the world of dance, and explores the dedication, passion and competitiveness required to dance at an elite level. It is Scarlett's last year at the National Academy of Performing Arts, and her driving ambition is to earn a place at the ballet school where her father was a principal dancer, before his death. For Scarlett it is as though the art form has chosen her, rather than the reverse; dance is a large part of her identity, and she is determined to establish a career as a successful dancer. But Scarlett is also an adolescent in year twelve, with all the complexities that this stage of life entails: friendship, love, seeking independence from family, and finding selfhood.

The reader follows Scarlett's journey as she makes regrettable mistakes, and learns to understand herself and the world with greater insight. Scarlett's life is complicated by the ghost of her father, whose career and life became severely troubled through injury. A certain mystery surrounds the circumstances of his death, thirteen years earlier. When a person from his past comes into Scarlett's life, her mother must finally reveal the truth, and come to terms with her past hurt.

Context: Dance

The opening chapter plunges the reader into the physical demands of dance. There are only six months to go before graduation, and Scarlet is already feeling the pressure. While the novel is not overloaded with details of the dance world, there is information to be gleaned.

- Pp12–14 – the gruelling practice required.
- P17 – the discipline required around food – students can trace what Scarlett eats throughout the book, and what she regards as being 'hungry'.
- Dancing *en pointe/demi-pointe; developpé*. Find out what these and other dance terms mean and what they demand of the dancer.
- The idea of 'marking out steps'.
- P249 the excitement of performance; the sense of capturing and carrying the audience.



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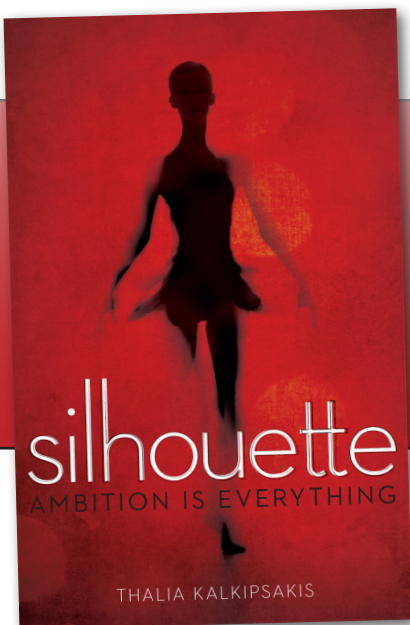
Mode of telling

- This book is written through Scarlett's first person perspective, and the other characters and events come to us through the filters of Scarlett's perceptions and emotions.
- Do we like Scarlett?
- Do we trust her version of events/comments about other characters in the novel? Invite readers to identify moments in the story when they think her perception is wrong or distorted.
- How can we get a more objective view of events?
- How reliable is she? For instance, on page 114 she gives her interpretation to Paige about why mother lied about her father's death. Do readers agree with the conclusion she has jumped to? Why does she react so badly to Paige's words of comfort?

Stages in the Plot

The narrative has various strands that interweave around Scarlett and her father, and the reader needs to play close attention to the carefully constructed plot. Some are indicated below but readers will find other significant moments that will prompt discussion and questions.

- P23 Scarlett and Paige audition for the Moss Young music video
- Pp26–27 Paige is too tall; Scarlett gets to the next round
- P29 Scarlett gets through to the final eight, and then (p33) the final four.
- P37 The consequences for her position at the Academy and her graduation performance.
- P47 She is given permission by the Academy only if she maintains her grades in both dance and academic subjects – and (p48) her best behaviour. Consider that this could be read as **foreshadowing** by the author, and invite readers to make predictions about where the plot might be taking them.
- P59 Scarlett introduces herself to Natasha and makes her ambitions clear.
- P61 The filming begins and Scarlett becomes more infatuated with Moss.
- P65 Scarlett goes to the after party.
- P72 She keeps up with school work but is drawn more powerfully to her now 'other life'.
- P94 Scarlett's mother tells her the truth about her father's death.
- P74 Her mother reacts to Scarlett talking about Natasha.
- P77 Auditions for the graduation performance begin; (p84) Scarlett gets the lead, and Paige is understudy.
- P99 Scarlett goes to the Dixie Bar and dances on stage.
- P103 Her first experience of sex. Discuss reactions to this. Is she being manipulated or is she in control of the situation? Does she realise Moss has no feelings for her? Does it matter? Scarlett is concerned about not seeming inexperienced. Why?



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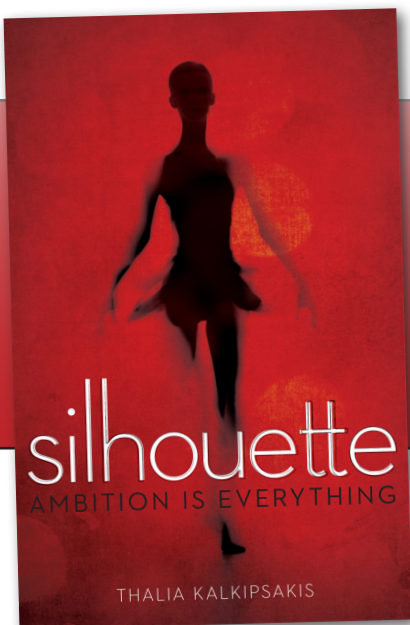
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Stages in the Plot

- P105 Scarlett tells Moss something very important to her – about her father's death. Why does she do this? How does he react?
- P106 Scarlett feels on 'the other side of something'. What is she talking about?
- P118 Scarlett goes to Moss's place. This is an important scene as Moss challenges her to make choices that seem to go against who she is. When she says the joint is 'against [her] religion' (p119), she is talking about the 'religion' of dance. (p121) Bruno tries to shield her ('leave the kid alone'). Why does she decide to smoke, in the end? What happens to the power dynamic between Moss and Scarlett in this scene?
- P123 Some part of her recognises what is happening: 'feeling as if I'm part of the ritual'. Does she feel that she and Moss are equals?
- P124 'Everything's fine', she says to herself. Do we believe this?
- P128 Scarlett can't stop herself eating her mother's casserole. Is Scarlett just hungry for food, or is there another emptiness in her life she's trying to fill?
- P130 She receives pay for the video and invites her gang to the Dixie Bar but Paige turns it down. Grant says he'll come, but at the bar, he reminds her of 'Diets, discipline and dedication' (p133).
- P138 Grant and Scarlett witness Kitty snorting cocaine. Again Bruno intervenes when Moss offers it to Scarlett. She takes an ecstasy tablet instead, and feels 'the sharp edges of my life have been removed'.
- P149 Scarlett refuses the cocaine and establishes a line she won't cross, although she spends the night with Moss.
- P152 How is she managing her two lives? Is it beginning to fall apart? What is going to happen? Invite readers to make predictions.
- P154 She is so self-absorbed she hasn't noticed that Tadpole and Paige are not together. Even when Paige tells her she cannot see that she is being used by Moss. Why, do you think? What are her motivations? (p158)
- Pp180–182 Scarlett finds out what really happened when her father died.
- P183 Scarlett realises how Natasha's revelation has affected her mother. Is this perhaps the beginning of change in her?
- P184 Scarlett seems to have her life back on track. Even though she realises she is some sort of trophy for Moss, she still comes running when he calls.
- P202 At last Scarlett recognises how duped she has been. Is it all too late?
- P208 One of her fellow students has accused her taking drugs, and she loses the lead part in the graduation performance.
- P211 She rushes to accuse Grant. Has she learned anything?



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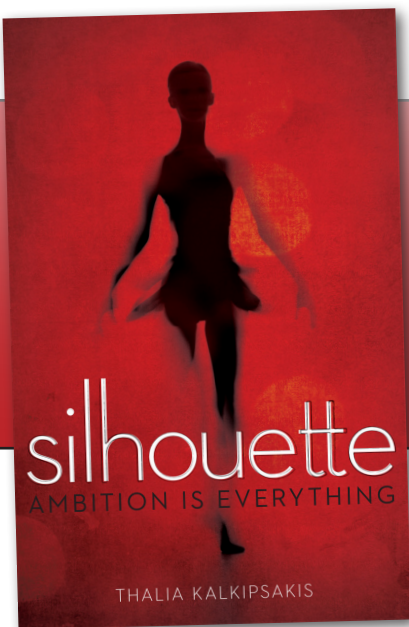
Stages in the Plot

- P213 Scarlett runs away from the Academy, but has a moment of insight when some young girls show her a photo herself: (p215) with 'so much make-up. Wild hair'. Is she at last confronted with an image of herself that she realises is not her?
- P217 Scarlett gets her head shaved.
- P221 Mother and daughter have the conversation they've needed to have. Scarlett's experiences have let her understand her mother's feelings of betrayal.
- P230 She watches the performance and wants Paige to 'crash and burn'. Why does she feel like this?
- P232 She feels 'ordinary'. Why is that so bad for Scarlett? Discuss the idea of feeling the need to be beyond 'ordinary'. Is it what drives high achievers in any field – the need to stand out?
- P246 Her friends support her to dance against the rules. What does this teach Scarlett?
- P256 She forms an idea: 'A path I could call my own'.

Characters:

Scarlett:

- This story is told from Scarlett's perspective and is clearly a *bildungsroman*, that is, a novel about the moral and psychological growth of the main character. It usually involves struggles and hardships before the character develops growth or understanding. This can be a useful frame for thinking and talking about what happens in the novel. How much is Scarlett responsible for what occurs? What external factors are operating to influence her? What are the difficulties she must face? What does she learn by the end?
- Seventeen, red-haired, confident and determined, she finds it difficult to fit completely into the rigid structures of the Academy. Wants to be selected for her father's old ballet school, the National Ballet Company but her mother is against it. Does she feel she has to achieve this for the sake of her father?
- What are the readers' feelings towards her? Is she completely self-centered, incapable of seeing from another's point of view?
- Her life is disciplined – consider the physical work she does, her study, her eating habits. What does this tell us about her?
- P19 Conscious of her sexuality and its power. Is this *foreshadowing* too?
- P20 'Landed a victory' – what does this tell us about Scarlett's relationship with her mother? Why is she so adversarial?



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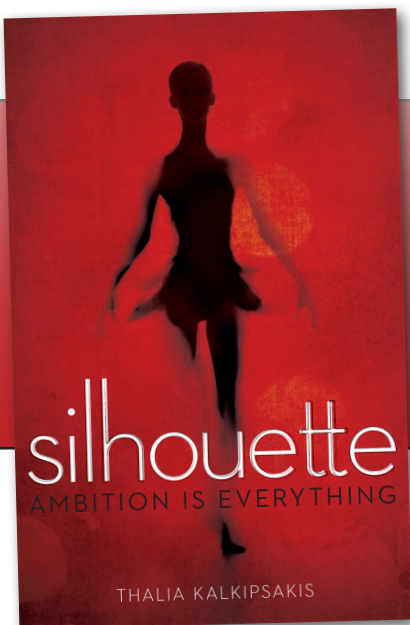
Characters:

Scarlett (continue):

- P31 She suggests a new dance step. Why does she do this? Naïve? Instinct? Not aware of power plays at stake?
- P117 She begins to create herself in the image that Moss 'expects' her to be, and page 118 becomes even more hostile towards her mother, accusing her mother of not understanding her father – which of course she can't know.
- P173 Jack tells her she must play the game if she wants to succeed.
- P176 Asks herself 'Pushing to my limit or running away.' Is this the beginning of some self awareness?
- P182 We witness a shift – to caring about her mother.
- P216 She has her head shaved. What does this symbolise for her? (P218) The hair lies on the floor 'like a blood stain'.
- P219 Realises that she can't leave her mother.
- P228 'It's just the real, raw me that's left. And for some reason, it terrifies me.' Who is the real Scarlett and who has she been?
- P239 Is it the one who is 'just enjoying the sensation of dancing'?

What others say about her:

- P40 Paige says of Scarlett 'we all know you're going to make it'. What does this reveal about Scarlett?
- P59 Natasha says she is a 'bit too arrogant' like her father.
- P203 Bruno says: 'You're not an idiot, you're just seventeen'. Is this a fair assessment, or is she an idiot for not listening to her friends?
- P236 Izzy says 'You're the one who's meant to make it...and you threw it away.'
- P243 Izzy says 'I wanted you to be perfect. And it turns out...you're just like the rest of us'. Discuss.
- Create a character map of Scarlett:
 - Describe her in five words at the beginning of the story.
 - Describe her in five words after Chapter 10.
 - Describe her in five words at the end of the novel.
 - Create an image of her at each stage – draw/paint/find images etc.



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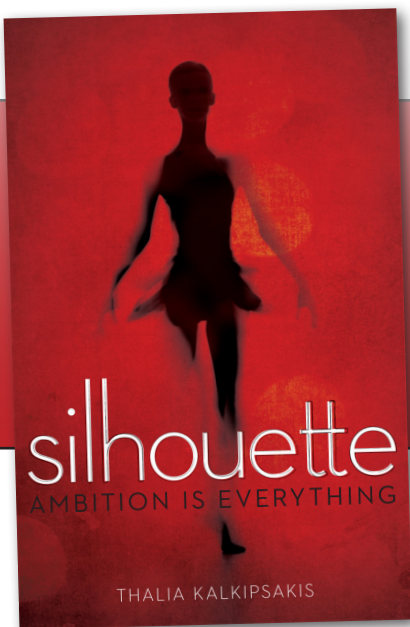
Paige

- Scarlett's friend, but also fierce competitor for positions within and after the Academy. As the story progresses, their friendship becomes strained.
- P9 Scarlett describes Paige as 'neat'. What does that suggest about her?
- P38 What is Paige's reaction when Scarlett tells her she has the part in the video.
- P40 Worried that she will always be too tall.
- P51 Paige leaves quickly – cooling of friendship?
- P98 She and Tadpole are an item, which moves her further away from Scarlett.
- P154 Paige takes Scarlett's dance advice badly. Why is Paige losing her patience with Scarlett?
- P212 Paige reveals what it was like to watch Scarlett throw everything away. Scarlett sees Paige as acting out of jealousy. Is that fair? Do you understand why Paige did what she did? Did she report Scarlett's drug use to benefit herself, or to help Scarlett? Or was it both?
- P235 She says 'I just wanted my chance'. Is that enough excuse? What would you have done?
- P241 Her plan to make amends. The survival of friendship. Why does the friendship survive?

The group of fellow students, Izzy, Tadpole, Anton, Grant, who are always concerned about and support Scarlett, even if she is too self-absorbed to see it.

Celeste/Mother

- She teaches piano privately to students.
- Do you understand why she told Scarlet a lie about her father's death? Was it to protect Scarlet or herself?
- Pp14–15. From this first encounter between mother and daughter it is clear they are in conflict.
- Do we get any view of her mother other than Scarlett's? Does Scarlett ever think what her father's death has meant to her mother?
- P43 She wants Scarlett to have a back up plan for university but Scarlett sees this as contemplating failure. Can you see this from both points of view?
- P95 She says to Scarlett: 'He was my husband, not just another dancer'. Scarlett cannot understand this, and is angry that she has been lied to.
- She gives Scarlett a lot of freedom. Do you think she cares about her daughter? Is she tired of the battles perhaps?



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Characters:

Father/Ashton

- Although he has died over a decade earlier, he is strong presence in the book. Both Scarlett and her mother have created versions of him, different versions that divide them. What do their versions tell us about them?
- How often do we do this – create versions of people – our family, friends – who may not be what we think they are? What does who we create tell us about ourselves?

Moss Young

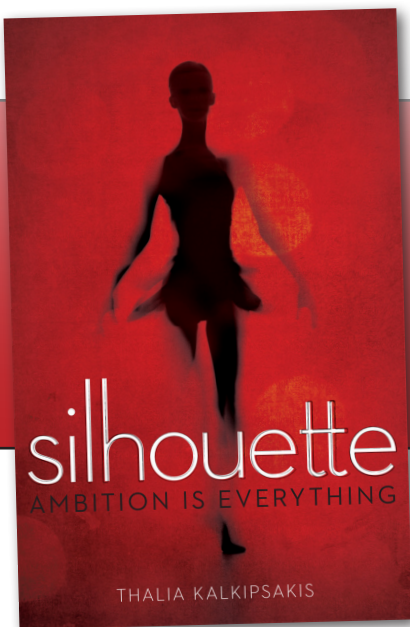
- P30 It is clear he is in charge even of the choreographer. What are readers' first impressions?
- He is about twenty-two or three, and Scarlett is clearly under his spell from the moment of the audition.
- P106 Talk about his short speech on pages 105–6. Does he think he is better than 'people living down there'? Why would he think this?
- P135 Grant says to Scarlett about Moss: 'People like that, they get a warped sense of reality. They don't lead normal lives.' Is he right?
- Is he obsessed with image?
- P144 Moss wants Scarlett for selfish reasons rather than from any feeling for her. Why is she deluding herself? She comes whenever he calls. Does he enjoy his power over her?
- P187 Tries to convince Scarlett he can act like a 'boyfriend'. Can he?

Natasha

- Was a principal dancer with the NBC who danced with Scarlett's father and clearly knows more about his death than she is willing to divulge, initially.
- P180 Understands Scarlett and that she would be better fitted to a modern, collaborative company rather than the NBC.
- Generous, seems to genuinely care for Scarlett and her talent. Why does she do this for Scarlett?
- Eventually, Scarlett sees that her future lies with Natasha. Is this in some sense also laying-to-rest of the ghost of Scarlett's father – a sort of coming full circle?

Bruno

- The drummer from the band who realises Scarlett is in over her head and likely to be exploited and protects her at various times. What motivates him



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Responses:

- Much of the narrative is carried in dialogue, and there are opportunities for **Reader's Theatre** to explore how the conversations are revealing, and for students to interpret character, such as on pages 52 to 55. Students could take turns to be Scarlett and her mother, and then discuss whether their position on who is right changes with the change in character. Another example is on pages 73 to 75.
- These exchanges could be rewritten in the first person from the point of view of Scarlett's mother and give her inner thoughts, or in the third person from an omniscient point of view.
- Drama: Interview Scarlett about her relationship Moss and her dancing future for a newspaper/magazine/TV program.
- Interview Paige about why she reported Scarlett's drug use. Stay in character throughout, keeping in mind how each character is portrayed in the novel.
- **Debate:** Honesty is the best policy.
 - Divide teams into Affirmative and Negative.
 - Use the novel as the primary source document.
- **Discuss:** Sometimes friends have to make difficult choices, like Paige did with Scarlett. How else could she have helped her?
- P223 Pushing yourself. Having only one identity. Do we all have multiple selves that we display for different people and in varied circumstances?
- P226: 'If you put in all that you have, you risk losing that much too./' 'If you don't put everything in, someone else will'. Have students discuss which they agree with and why.
- P252 Jack says: 'No matter how bad it seems, you can always find help'. Is this a good principle to live by?

Further Reading and Viewing

Mao's Last Dancer by Li Cunxin. Book and film.

Gone with the Wind – her namesake and nickname – O'Hara, as Grant calls her. Names are chosen carefully by authors, so do you see direct connections here?

The classic *Ballet Shoes* by Noel Streatfield (1936) and the film (2007) starring Emma Watson of Harry Potter fame.