

State of Grace

by Hilary Badger

Teachers' Notes

Summary

Ever since she was created, Wren has lived in an idyllic garden with her friends. Wren's deity Dot has ensured the trees are laden with fruit and the water in the lagoon is crystal clear. Nothing and no-one exists beyond the garden, but that's okay – Wren and her friends have everything they could possibly need right there, in Dot's paradise.

Their only responsibilities are picking fruit from the newfruit grove and having as much fun as possible. They can swim in the lagoon, jump from the rocks into the sparkling water and hang out with the others. Hooking up with each other is encouraged in the Books of Dot.

Wren knows she should be happy, and mostly she is, but she's started having predotly thoughts – visions that don't make sense, filled with words and people that she shouldn't know, but who somehow feel familiar. She tries to stifle the strange visions, but Blaze – a mysterious and beautiful creation – seems to know what is going on in Wren's head, and tells her that he is seeing things too.

Wren tries to cling to her beliefs. She's desperate to feel Dot's love, and be just like everyone else. But that becomes harder than ever when a new creation arrives in the garden. Has the young boy, Dennis, arrived to test Wren's love for Dot? He claims to be from *outside*. It shouldn't be possible, yet the boy is very real and brings with him words and ideas that make Wren's brain hurt.

When she, Blaze and Dennis escape the garden, Wren discovers a horrific secret from her past. Gradually Wren and Blaze piece together the truth: they're part of a clinical trial of an ominous new drug called Grace.

Now Wren must decide whether to return to the comforting delusion of faith or fight for the right to face the very ugly truth.

The way out isn't easy to find, but what they find on the outside will shatter their illusion of paradise once and for all.

About the Author

Hilary Badger is one of the key authors of the *Zac Power* series for children, written under the pseudonym H.I.Larry. She has also written the *Space Scout* series, and a biography of Australian cyclist Cadel Evans, called *Giving His Best*. *State of Grace* is her first novel for young adults.

Themes

Faith/Belief

Wren and the other creations have faith or belief in their creator, who named Dot. This faith influences their behaviour, their decisions, their attitudes and even the way they dress.

- In what ways does having faith make the creations happy?
- Why does Wren feel that Dot is testing her faith?
- How does this make Wren feel?
- How does the appearance of Dennis challenge Wren's faith in Dot?
- How does Gil use faith to manipulate the other characters?

Happiness

Ideas of happiness and unhappiness (or prehappy) are explored in the book. Wren thinks she is happy, but when that is challenged by her memories she feels a 'wild, pure, raw prehappiness' surge up (p60).

- Why are the creations always happy?
- Why are Wren and Blake increasingly unhappy?
- Is it necessary to have a balance between happiness and unhappiness?
- How does the Shepherd Corporation rely on unhappiness?
- How does Wren's unhappiness influence her decision about whether or not to take the stronger version of Grace?

Memory

Wren and all of the other creation's memories are wiped clean.

- What memories break to the surface for Wren? And for Blaze?
- Why don't the other creations experience the same thing?

- How do Blaze and Wren know that their memories are real?
- How does Wren use her memory to hold onto Julius (p300)?
- Why do you think people might want to use Grace to escape their past? What's the danger in this?

Ethics

There are ethics involved with any drug trial, particularly those involving humans.

- What ethical issues can you think of that would be involved with trialing a drug like Grace?
- Is Lainie Shepherd's behaviour unethical?
- When Gil attacks Fern he is still under the influence of the drug. Discuss the ethics of his behavior, and whether or not he must take responsibility for his actions.
- How are ethics different from law? How are they different from morals? What is the difference between personal and professional ethics? (Give an example from the book for each.)

Bible

There are some similarities between the Books of Dot and the Bible, which leads the reader to draw conclusions based on their own knowledge of the Bible – in particular, the story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden.

- What similarities can you see between the Books of Dot and the Bible?
- What are the differences?
- How does the author replace words with 'dot' to give the impression of an almighty creator?
- What are newfruit?

Secondary themes

- Paradise
- Love
- Acceptance
- Power

Primary Characters

Find examples in the text for each of the adjectives used to describe the following characters. In addition to the description in the text, add your own thoughts about what has caused this feeling/emotion/physicality.

Wren

- Brave
- Scarred (physically)
- Unhappy
- Afraid

Blaze

- Embarrassed
- Determined
- Trustworthy
- Loyal

Gil

- Power-hungry
- Sly
- Liar
- Dominating
- Cruel

Dennis

- Innocent
- Frightened
- Brave
- Clever

Comprehension Questions

- What are the Books of Dot?
- Why do you think Wren and the other creations use 'pre' to describe negative states? (e.g. prenatal, prehappy, predotly)
- How is Gil's behaviour unsettling? How does it escalate throughout the story?
- Why does everyone want to be chosen by Dot?
- What makes Wren feel that she is being tested? How does this make her react to Dennis?
- Why does Blaze believe that he and Wren are the same? Why doesn't Wren want to believe it?
- Why does Dennis break in, and what is Club Naturelle?
- When is Fern disloyal to Wren?
- Who is Fancy Vivid Blue? How do we discover her identity?
- Who is Viva?
- Why doesn't Blaze ever hook up? Does he have feelings for Wren?
- What does Blaze say to Wren that makes her decide to finally leave?
- How do they escape?
- What is Grace?
- What is the next step of testing?
- Who is Julius, and how does Wren let him down?
- In what way does the memory of Julius impact her decisions?
- Who would Grace appeal to?
- What is the Circle, and what are they fighting against?
- What secret is Brook hiding?
- Does the book have a happy ending?

Extension Activities

1. Divide into two groups and run a debate on one of the following topics.
 - a. Lainie Shepherd is acting for the good of humanity.
 - b. Grace will change difficult lives for the better.
 - c. Wren and Blaze gave consent, so everything that happened to them was okay.
2. Using the following website, look into the standard process for human testing and ethical practice. <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/health-ethics/human-research-ethics>

In groups, present oral presentations on the following

- a. The ways that the DOT (Delusion Onset Therapy) trial was unethical.
- b. The ways that DOT trial broke the law.

Consider who should have intervened, who should have been consulted and the procedures that should have been followed.

2. At the end of the book Wren tells us that she wishes she could talk to her mother. Imagine that you are Wren or Blaze and choose a character that you would most like to speak to. Write a letter, as Wren or Blaze, explaining everything that has happened and how you feel. Imagine what they wish they'd done differently. Imagine what they wish they'd been able to say.

Comparison Novels

The following fiction titles may provide some opportunities for comparison studies. Suggested thematic comparisons are provided in brackets.

- *Pandora Jones: Admission* by Barry Jonsberg, Allen & Unwin, 2014 (dystopia, control, ethics)
- *Grace*, Morris Gleitzman, Penguin Books, 2009 (belief, faith)
- *Searching for Sky*, Jillian Cantor, Bloomsbury, 2014 (memory, ethics, love)

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