

The Dog Runner

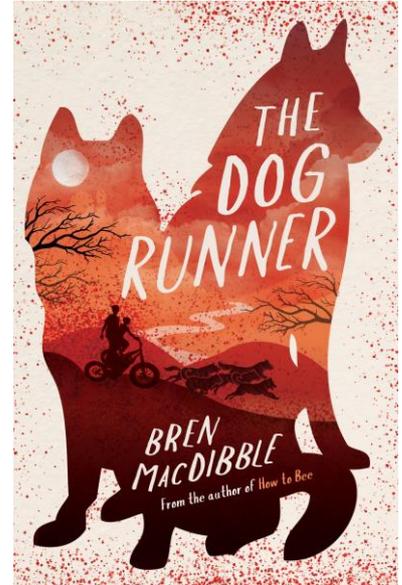
By Bren MacDibble

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Recommended for 10-14-year-olds



Summary

Ella and her half-brother Emery are alone in a city that's starving to death. If they are going to survive, they must get away, upcountry, to find Emery's mum, Chrissie. But how can two kids travel such big distances across a dry, barren, and dangerous landscape? Well, when you've got a few big doggos, the answer is you go mushing. When Emery is injured, Ella finds herself suddenly responsible for safely navigating the wheeled dog-sled through rough terrain, and even rougher encounters with desperate people.

Like Bren MacDibble's award-winning previous novel, *How to Bee*, this is a story set in a near-future Australia after an environmental catastrophe. A red fungus has swept over the land, destroying all grasses. Not just wild grass or lawns — all plants that are of the grass family: wheat, oats, rice, sugar cane and, of course, the pasture crops that domesticated animals graze on. Tinned food is getting harder to come by and law and order is breaking down.

Ella, Emery and their father are holed up with their malamute dogs in their city flat, waiting for their mother, an engineer, to be returned to them. She was taken away by the government to work on restoring electric power, but that was months ago and there has been no news, and no power. Eventually, Dad sets off to find her but when he doesn't return, and things start getting dangerous, Emery decides that he and Ella must leave without Dad and make their way to Chrissie's place in the country.

The family's shared sport is dog-sledding on wheels. Having bartered for a larger sled, camping equipment, a knife and two huskies belonging to a friend, Emery leads Ella through the dangerous night-time streets of the city to his survivalist stash. But even outside the city, it's dangerous on roads as gangs of thieves are roaming, stealing from country people and each other and not afraid to use violence and coercion. The young people's adventure has only just begun. They encounter desperation and violence as well as hospitality and kindness, and the health and loyalty of their dogs is vital. After Emery is wounded, young Ella must steer the sled, find food for the dogs and make decisions for all of them.

In the end, the family are safely re-united at Chrissie's and discover her father's legacy of a store of native grass seeds that can withstand the fire necessary to destroy the red fungus. Finally, one day a Seed Bank plane flies over, scattering fungus-resistant seeds which the CSIRO has developed.

Ella waves at the pilot and thinks: Me, waving and waving, wild and happy coz I thought everyone had given up, just decided to look out for themselves, but someone, somewhere made a seed bank to save the seeds just like Emery's grandad did, and they're finally replanting grass, even way out here. (p. 234)

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Use in the curriculum

The Dog Runner can be used in the English curriculum as an example of the speculative/dystopian genre and as a study of style. As with *How to Bee*, the author employs the unusual narrative device of the first person/present tense and the young narrator tells her story in a colloquial, conversational way: 'Coz', 'gonna' and 'gotta' spellings are used to portray her young voice and she employs typical idiomatic language: 'how come?', 'real proud'.

The Dog Runner will suit Primary classrooms studying plant biology, the environment and ecosystems and Indigenous landcare practices and knowledge.

Themes

- family, adventure, escape, survival, dog-sledding
- farming and biodiversity, food security, environmental catastrophe, social breakdown, vital role of grasses in many human diets, value of Indigenous landcare practices and knowledge

In the classroom

Pre-reading Activity

Begin your unit of work by compiling a list with your students of foods they ate for dinner the previous night. Now discuss how many items would remain on the list in a world where all grasses and grains disappeared.

[Hint: run a line through any mentions of pasta, rice, beef and chicken (because both eat grasses and grains), dairy (milk, cream, yoghurt, ice-cream), bread, wheat, pastry, sugar and corn, and see how many foods remain.]

If these foods disappeared permanently, what might we replace them with? Would there be enough food to feed everyone in Australia? Who might suffer more, people in the city or in the country? Do you think society might start to breakdown in cities? What form might that breakdown take?

English

Comprehension Questions Relating to the First Chapter

1. Why has Mr Alvie Moore nailed his front door shut?
2. What is the book that he gives Ella and why do you think her father forbids her from reading it?
3. What are the names of the three dogs living in Ella's apartment?
4. Describe in your own words what has happened in the city that kept Ella's mum from returning home?
5. How did Ella's parents meet and why does Emery think the story makes their dad look stupid?

Writing to Create Tension

Read the opening paragraph of the second chapter and discuss the mood that it creates. How do the first five short, sharp sentences help create this mood? Now note how the author doesn't tell us what the man running down the street is carrying. Rather than being explicit she leaves it to our already heightened imagination so that the scene seems even more sinister.



In the classroom...

Now turn to the fifth chapter, *A White Ribbon in the Moonlight* (p. 28), and look closely at how the author makes sure the reader only knows as much about the truck and what it is doing as Ella can understand. Do you think the scene is enhanced by not knowing everything or would it have been better to have explained exactly what was going on?

Characterisation

'I'm not a baby,' I say. I'm angry but not at Emery. I'm angry at me, for falling, for crying, for acting like a baby.'

'Shh,' Emery says like he understands, he hugs me quick and strong with skinny arms like Dad does and just makes me miss Dad more. (p. 36)

Compare the person Ella is at the beginning of the book with the person she becomes after she and Emery are forced to change roles. Choose three incidents from the book that you think best illustrate how well Ella learns to 'walk on her head' and become a leader.

Empathy

Turn to the last page of the chapter entitled *Which One of Us is on the Best Path* (p. 45) and try to put yourself in the shoes of the child whizzing past Ella and Emery in the fast, red car. Write a script in the child's voice to describe his thoughts and any conversation he might have with his parents about what he just saw.

Comprehension Questions Relating to the last Chapter:

1. What is the significance of the grains stored by Ba and Emery? In your answer make sure you explain why these grains will survive when others have died from the red fungus.
2. What does the acronym CSIRO stand for? Why might this organisation be responsible for a creating a Seed Bank?
3. What does Ella notice about the seeds raining down on her that makes her think this grass will successfully grow when others haven't?
4. In your own words explain what you think Ba meant when he told Emery, *'...people are like grass seeds, you can dig them in and feed them someplace, and maybe they'll grow quickly there for a while, but only the ones that really suit that place will thrive.'* (p. 233)

Genre study

Compare *How to Bee* with *The Dog Runner*. List the similarities and differences between the novels in terms of

- the nature and extent of the environmental catastrophe in each novel
- the writing style of each novel

Read the following article about the emergence of a new literary genre called Cli-Fi.

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/climate-consensus-97-per-cent/2017/oct/18/clifi-a-new-way-to-talk-about-climate-change>

Ask the school librarian to supply a box of Cli-Fi novels for children and young adults for a reading circle or group work.

- Describe the characteristics of Cli-Fi.
- Brainstorm films and TV shows that might also fall into this genre.

Essays

1. *Dad says when chaos hits, there's always a few people that go around trying to make things worse. People that think they're better off in chaos. But most try to make things better, and there're quiet, too busy fixing things to be noisy. The quiet many, Dad says. And when you hear the noise, don't forget about the quiet many.* (page 16).

Although Ella and Emery witness people doing terrible things to survive throughout the novel, *The Dog Runner* is ultimately a very positive novel featuring a happy ending. Discuss.

2. In your opinion is *The Dog Runner* a good example of Cli-Fi? Give specific events from the book to support your argument.

Cover design

After finishing the novel, invite students to design their own cover for *The Dog Runner*. Remind them to carefully consider the image they would like to use, as well as the colours that would be appropriate and the best font for the title. After completion, encourage students to write a short paragraph explaining their choices.

Biological and environmental sciences, Geography, Humanities and Social Sciences

Acknowledgements

In the 'Acknowledgements' section, the author says, 'I read these books as I wrote *The Dog Runner* and highly recommend them:

- *Dark Emu* by Bruce Pascoe
- *The Biggest Estate on Earth* by Bill Gammage'

Teachers should at least acquaint themselves with the themes of these two important Australian books which have strongly influenced popular and academic understandings of pre-colonial, and continuing, Aboriginal landcare practices.

Just as 'Welcome to Country' is an important ritual in modern Australia, so too is the acknowledgement of past, present and future guardians of knowledge and culture and the acknowledgement that respect for the land underpins Indigenous culture. In this context, the 'Acknowledgements' section of *The Dog Runner* is an important section of the book and should be studied in class.

Activity

Allow a bare patch of land to go wild, and note the progression of plant species that move in. Grasses may eventually outcompete the weeds without any intervention, provided the soil is fed from the breaking down of plants above and roots under the soil. Importantly, no nitrogen-based fertiliser should be added to the soil.

Importance of grasslands

Investigate the grasslands of the world, including those that have been transformed into 'bread baskets'. Note that natural grasslands are not monocultures: many grasses and other plants co-exist to create healthy grassland.



The carbon and water cycles

This brief series of infographics on this topic is a good introduction and can be downloaded for classroom display: <https://www.mercola.com/infographics/grasslands-facts.htm>

In Australia, it is especially important to note the role of healthy grasslands in promoting healthy soil for water penetration and retention. With no grass or groundcover, erosion and run-off occur, weeds flourish and floods cause further destruction, rather than nourishment of the soil.

Grazing and the introduction of European grass species

The grazing of European animals on grasslands, and the concomitant introduction of European grass species, is often described as one of the causes of environmental degradation in Australia. But there is no going back. Our care of our land must now incorporate science and practices from other parts of the world with traditional Indigenous landcare.

This is exactly what happens at the end of *The Dog Runner*: Ba's native grass seeds are being locally distributed as well as the CSIRO Seed Bank seeds.

The author visited a property belonging to a member of Stipa Native Grasses Association <http://www.stipa.com.au/>. Stipa farmers believe that European and native grasses can coexist, if managed well. These farmers also believe that there is no return to the past. The European grasses are here to stay and are adapting to the dry Australian conditions. They also provide good cover and mulch for native grasses to re-establish and live alongside.

Farmers often ignore the grass that is returning to the land, in favour of ploughing and adding new seed. But the grass that is returning to the land has a head start on any new seed; once the costs of ploughing and seeding are added, it is uneconomical to sow new seed, and it never results in further profits down the track. Allowing the grass to re-establish naturally is cheaper and ultimately easier.

Stipa members believe land left to regenerate naturally will always return to grass if grazed gently. Grass benefits from being grazed once established: not only are the growing tips taken off, the roots slough off and add carbon to the soil. Young grass that is constantly grazed has no chance to add back to the soil. Grass is sweeter when it is longer and animals like it more. Stipa members see *over*-grazing as the problem, not well-managed grazing.

Regeneration of grasslands

Burning off

From the final chapters of the book, students should be able to work out what Emery's grandfather, Ba, was doing when he accidentally burned some houses down.

- What did Ba learn from his experiment with fire?

Because of the European grasses that now mix with our local grasses, and die off in summer, often (especially in the south) there is sometimes too much heat in the fires the Aboriginal Peoples would traditionally use in small scale burn offs to regenerate their deep-rooted grasses. This results in fires that are too hot and in the death of the roots of these grasses, so that they cannot regenerate.

When Aboriginal Peoples managed the lands using fire and incorporating the carbon, there was a lot less carbon in their light and loamy soils. Their practises were correct and important in that environment, but we have changed the environment with colonisation. So, some traditional practices have had to change and accommodate new species. In some areas, it is now thought that dormant grasses will feed the soil, when dormant, and provide the ground cover to keep the soil healthy. Burning off in these areas is not necessary; allowing die-off and grass to become leaf litter and ground cover is a healthier practice for the soil.

The role of fungi in soil health

'Along with bacteria, fungi are important as decomposers in the soil food web. They convert hard-to-digest organic material into forms that other organisms can use. Fungal hyphae physically bind soil particles together, creating stable aggregates that help increase water infiltration and soil water holding capacity.'

<https://extension.illinois.edu/soil/SoilBiology/fungi.htm>

Adding super phosphates to grass starves the fungi in the soil, leading to a short-term gain for the plant but ultimately degrading the soil.

A healthy grassland will have lots of leaf litter and active soil just below that. Unhealthy grassland will have thistles and weeds and bare patches of ground.

Fungi

Fungi are important to the plot of *The Dog Runner*. Firstly, the bad fungus that kills the grass and, secondly, the good fungi that are the mushrooms that feed the family and the fungi in the soil that feed the grass.

Mycorrhiza is a symbiotic relationship between a fungus and a host plant. Some fungi grow on plant roots and form a symbiotic relationship with the plants. They send out long runners/tendrils to bring nutrients back to the plant roots, so while feeding *on* the plant, they are also *feeding* the plant. These networks of underground tendrils also hold the soil together.

However, there are also fungi which are detrimental to plant growth, such as the red fungus that destroys the grasses in *The Dog Runner*.

Mushrooms

Students can grow their own mushrooms in class from a kit, readily available from the Internet or from a large hardware store or nursery.

Emery's family grow Shiitake mushrooms. Shiitake, unlike other mushrooms, need to be watered when not grown in their native damp forests. In the novel, the damp underground caves with their own water supply are perfect for the job!

In the 19th century, white button mushrooms were brought into Australia from Europe for cultivation. They were canned, which suited conditions at the time. However, Australian tastes have been changing since the 1970s and the 21st century proliferation of TV cooking shows has made the population open to more 'exotic' species, such as Shiitake, Oyster, Shimagi, King Brown and Enoki mushrooms.

Porcini mushrooms and truffles are mycorrhizal, which explains their expense: they need a healthy relationship with a forest to survive and multiply and can be hard to find. Gourmet chefs prefer wild mushrooms, but it is possible to grow Porcini mushrooms artificially.

Biosecurity and quarantine

Investigate Australia's biosecurity and quarantine regimes, both state and commonwealth.

Social breakdown

Social breakdown is often accompanied by economic and political breakdown.

- List examples of social breakdown in the novel.
- Find examples of measures that the authorities have taken to prevent or contain social breakdown. Discuss them in the context of Dad's opinion that checkpoints have been set up 'to keep us in' (p. 26).



In the classroom...

- What evidence is there of social cooperation in the novel?
- What evidence is there of economic and political breakdown in the novel?
- What evidence is there of some economic and political organisation being protected and maintained by the authorities?

The loss of 'law and order' led first to looting and then to violence being used by groups to defend themselves or steal from others.

- Discuss the morality of the use of violence in extreme circumstances. Are there alternatives?

Further resources

Agriculture

YouTube video [The story of agriculture and the green economy](#) by Farming First

Australian Governments Grains Research and Development Corporation educational resources: <https://grdc.com.au/resources-and-publications/all-publications/educational>

Soil science

Soil Science Australia 'Soils in Schools' programs

<https://www.soilscienceaustralia.com.au/about/soils-in-schools/>

Report on Landcare soil health project:

<https://landcareaustralia.org.au/project/diversity-is-the-key-to-soil-health/>

CSIRO

CSIRO Sustainable Futures Education Program:

<https://www.csiro.au/en/Education/Programs/Sustainable-Futures>

Excursions and guest speakers

Local Aboriginal Corporations or other local Indigenous organisations are often involved in collecting and passing on traditional landcare practices. There may be Indigenous rangers in your local area. Students could see or hear about their activities and learn about the local traditional flora and fauna and the traditional seasons in their part of Australia.

There may be a local community group undertaking environmental projects in your area. Support is available from Landcare Australia <https://landcareaustralia.org.au/> in the form of case studies or reports in the Junior Landcare e-newsletter showing what some schools are doing. They also provide teacher and curriculum resources and a Junior Landcare YouTube channel <https://landcareaustralia.org.au/junior-landcare/junior-landcare-resources/>.

Stipa Native Grasses Association <http://www.stipa.com.au/> may be able to put you in contact with a member property in your area. A visit to such a property is encouraged.

The Australian Mushroom Growers Association <https://mushrooms.net.au/> may be able to put you in touch with a local mushroom grower who welcomes visitors.

Bren MacDibble

Bren MacDibble was raised on farms all over New Zealand, so is an expert about being a kid on the land. After 20 years in Melbourne, Bren recently sold everything, and now lives and works in a bus travelling around Australia. In 2018, *How to Bee*—her first novel for younger readers—won the Children's Book Council Book of the Year Award for Younger Readers, the New South Wales Premier's Literary Award Patricia Wrightson Prize for Children's Literature, and the New Zealand Book Awards Wright Family Foundation Esther Glen Award for Junior Fiction. Bren also writes for young adults under the name Cally Black.

www.macdibble.com



About writing *The Dog Runner*, Bren says:

'I gave up all grain products for six months and realised how much of our everyday food is reliant on basically grains and grasses. Apart from the obvious—wheat, corn, and rice—meat and dairy also relies on grasses. I had heard of a black grass fungus that mutated every so often and got out of control resulting in places like Uganda having to burn all their crops for that year, and I wanted to explore what might happen if that really got out of control. If all of Australia's grasslands and crops vanished rapidly, what would the world look like? In the process, I learned so much about the way the Aboriginal Peoples farmed Australia originally, how their work was discounted, despite being more sustainable and using better adapted crops than our own English handed-down methods and seeds, and about grassland regeneration and the importance of microbiomes in the soil.'