



## **A Light on the Rocks**

**AUTHOR:** Helen Edwards

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**RECOMMENDED FOR:** Upper Primary & Lower Secondary

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### **SYNOPSIS**

In 1859, fourteen-year-old Daisy is travelling on the *SS Admella* from Adelaide to Melbourne, when the steamship is wrecked on a submerged reef near Cape Banks, in what became known as one of Australia's worst maritime disasters. A century later, siblings Max and Rosemary spend their summer holidays at Cape Jaffa Lighthouse, perched on a reef, five miles out to sea, where their father is head keeper. As they unravel the secrets of the past, an accident leaves their father and the assistant keeper injured, and Max and Rosemary are left to care for them while keeping the lighthouse burning.

Set across two timelines, connected by place, mystery, and magic, *A Light on the Rocks* is a haunting tale about survival, self-belief and the wild beauty of the sea. With a ghost horse, a singing whale, and real events woven through the narrative, this is a masterful maritime adventure that brings the almost-forgotten history of the *SS Admella* and the Cape Jaffa Lighthouse to life. Author Helen Edwards was awarded a mid-career fellowship with the South Australian State Library, supported by Writers' SA, along with a grant from the South Australian History Trust to research and write this beautifully crafted tale.





### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Helen Edwards is an award-winning author and speaker. She has a PhD in Psychology and a long background working in mental health. *Light on the Rocks* is her fifth middle-grade novel. Helen grew up surrounded by books. She ‘published’ her first book at age 6, for which she won the Children’s Book Week prize at her school. Ever since, she has wanted to be an author. Helen writes stories that reduce stereotypes, increase understanding of diversity, and feature Australian history and nature. She includes characters in her stories who are neurodivergent and/or who live with physical and mental health conditions, out in the world, having adventures. Helen has been shortlisted in and won a number of awards, including being a South Australian State

Finalist for Australian of the Year for her work in diabetes. She is passionate about inspiring action for our beautiful, fragile planet and nature features in all of her books. She find history fascinating and uncovers stories that may have been forgotten, or hidden, and brings them into the light. She lives in Adelaide with her lovely family, two cats and a very active rescue kelpie! When not reading, writing or watching good stories, you’ll find her walking in nature, going on road trips, discovering new story ideas, laughing a lot, and listening to music.

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## KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

### **Literacy**

- Responding to literature.
- Examining literature.
- Interpreting, analysing, evaluating texts.
- How language use is determined by different contexts.
- Building knowledge and understanding, and communicating emotions, opinions and ideas with others.

### **Critical and Creative Thinking**

- Listening to, reading, viewing, creating and presenting texts.
- Developing critical and creative thinking through interacting with others, creating and experimenting with literary texts, and discussing the aesthetic or social value of texts.
- Critically analysing the opinions, perspectives and unstated assumptions embedded in texts.
- Expressing personal responses and preferences, stating and justifying points of view, and responding to the views of others in discussing texts.
- Considering the author's innovations, planning, exploring and creating ideas for imaginative texts, in particular the combination of facts and fiction in one story.
- Using and adapting language to represent novel ideas, especially within historical contexts.

### **Personal and Social Capability**

- Development of understanding that language is central to personal and social identity and that this changes over time and within different societies and communities.
- Exploring diverse perspectives and how these shape different interpretations and responses to both text and ideas—for example through culture, gender and religious beliefs.
- Interacting with others in formal and informal settings to become effective communicators through analysis and discussion of the text.
- Articulating opinions and collaborating with others to analyse text and create your own stories and poetry.
- Through close reading and discussion of the text, students experience and evaluate different personal and social behaviours and perspectives, within different eras.
- They develop connection and empathy with the main characters in different contexts and through diverse experiences of both the characters, the author and their own perspectives as readers.



### **Ethical Understanding**

- Developing ethical understanding as students explore issues within real-world and fictional settings—in particular Daisy’s experiences of the way that survivors responded to each other over the eight days they were on the wreck, becoming almost numb to the deaths around them and even keeping a body aboard the wreck in case the situation became even more dire.
- The ways in which Maxwell comes to conclusions about needing to stand up for whales and other animals and to make changes in the world—taking care for our planet into his own hands.
- Identifying moral messages, ethical concepts, bias and stereotypes, and their representation within the text. Comparing, evaluating and discussing how these messages are created through language and the author’s choice of words and voice for all major characters.
- The author used real people and events from the shipwreck to craft the experiences of a fictional family. This allows students to discuss the ethics of fictionalising a real event, especially one so harrowing as the *SS Admella*.

### **CROSS-CURRICULUM PRIORITIES**

The English curriculum, Humanities and Social Sciences share a focus on analysing, interpreting and evaluating information and texts. These learning areas consider the ways in which perspectives and points of view shape texts and represent ideas. They help students to develop written, visual, digital and multimodal texts by selecting text structures and language features for a range of purposes and audiences.

### **In A Light on the Rocks these areas include:**

#### **HASS: HISTORY**

- Learning about the Cape Jaffa Lighthouse and its history—how it was built, operated and eventually shifted to land.
- How families lived at the lighthouse across time.
- How lighthouses worked and in particular, how a Wells Screw Pile lighthouse operated when set out to sea.
- Learning about the *SS Admella* and her history. Where and when the ship was built, her trips between Adelaide and Melbourne and exploration of the final journey and the real survivors’ experiences.
- Understanding and exploring life in both 1859 and in 1960 in South Australia and Victoria, including Adelaide and the regional areas of Kingston SE, Mount Gambier and Portland, Victoria.
- Initial exploration about how dysgraphia and dyslexia were managed in the 1960s (or not!), and how asthma was identified and managed.



- Initial exploration of women's roles in the 1850's in Australia, which can lead into discussion about women who chose to live their lives outside of societal expectations.
- Developing a sense of wonder, curiosity and respect about places, people, cultures and systems throughout the world, past and present, and an interest in and enjoyment of the study of these phenomena. Maxwell has a particular interest in nature and the world around him and this provides a stepping off point for these discussions.
- Gerald Durrell is mentioned as an idol of Maxwell's, and this would be a great project for students to research him and his work and how it might apply today.
- Understanding and appreciation of historical developments, geographic phenomena, civic values and economic factors that shape society, influence sustainability and create a sense of belonging—there is a big focus on how a place holds the stories of the people and the animals who have travelled through and lived within it over time.
- Capacity to use disciplinary skills, including disciplinary-appropriate questioning, researching using reliable sources, analysing, evaluating and communicating.

### **THEMES**

- Grief and loss
- Courage and self-belief
- Mental Health and Chronic Illness
- Neurodiversity
- Growth, change and identity
- Our relationship with Nature
- Conservation
- Magical realism and fantasy writing and how to weave this with a historical story
- Ocean health

### **USE IN THE CLASSROOM**

- As an example of middle-grade magical fiction
- As a basis for writing exercises on characterisation and diversity
- As a basis for writing exercises related to the use of magical elements in stories and how to weave these into a real story
- To explore the use and power of metaphor in describing emotions
- To explore Nature in fiction, in particular the conservation of whales and how whaling evolved over time
- To understand allegory in writing
- To discuss mental health issues affecting young people and developing resilience
- To discuss the impact of grief and loss and the importance of seeking support
- To consider the ethics of right and wrong
- How to ask for help and understanding who a support for you can be when you have problems, including bullying



## DISCUSSION POINTS AND ACTIVITIES

1. Before reading the novel, have a look at the cover and identify the following:
  - The title of the book
  - The author
  - The publisher
  - The blurb.
2. Based on the cover and the blurb, what do you think this story is about? Compare your ideas with other people in the class. What do you think the main themes are?
3. Do you know what is going to happen? When you have read the book, go back and see if you were right and if there was anything you didn't predict, or anything that surprised you.
4. Read the first six chapters of the book and write down some of the things you think might happen. Later, check back to see if you predicted anything and discuss what the key aspects of the story were that led you to these predictions. If you were surprised, how do you think the author managed to do that?
5. Creating a complication for a character in reaching their goal, or solving their problem, is an important aspect of tension in a story. How do you think the author did this in both Maxwell and Daisy's situations? How do you think their problems are similar? How are they different?
6. How did the author bring a real story—that of the shipwreck—into this one, with fictional characters? What made this work or not work in your opinion?
7. Did you like the way the two timelines, 100 years apart, flowed together? What aspects of the overall story connected these two timelines?
8. Moriarty the whale has a significant role. He has three verses between the chapters. Did you like one in particular and why?
9. Write a poem of your own, from Moriarty's perspective. Choose one point of the story and create a verse that connects to what is happening at that moment for either Daisy, Maxwell, or both.
10. Where do you think the highest point of tension is in the story? This is often called the climax and commonly falls somewhere in the middle of the book.
11. What are the things that make this the climax in *A Light on the Rocks*? Can you identify three other parts of the story where there is high tension?
12. What made you want to keep turning the pages? Did you find the chapter endings helped? Write an alternative ending to one of the chapters, so that readers would want to keep turning the page.
13. Maxwell and Daisy are the two main, or point of view characters. Note down all of the words you can think of to describe one of them or both. You can draw them if you would like. Consider how they look, their voices and personality, how they think, act and feel. Then discuss this as a class and see if there were some common words or ideas. Compare differences or similarities.



14. There are also a number of important secondary characters in the book, including Daisy's sister Marigold, her parents, and Jimmy in Daisy's world. And Rosemary, Maxwell's sister, his parents and Cameron the assistant light keeper in his world. Complete the same exercise as above, for one or two of the secondary characters.
15. There are three very important characters who are not people. Who are they? Can you describe the personality and feelings of one of those characters and what role they play?
16. Two major themes in this book are bravery and believing in yourself, and the importance of noticing the world around you and holding onto hope. Write a poem about something that makes you feel brave.
17. At the end of every story there is a resolution. In both Daisy and Maxwell's case, there are some important scenes in the closing chapters, especially when Daisy is saved from the shipwreck and when Maxwell manages to keep the light turning all night. Write down and then discuss how both Daisy and Maxwell managed to keep holding on, in very different circumstances.
18. Design a different cover for the book that incorporates something from the story that you really enjoyed. If you would like to, also create a new title and see if you can write a tagline for the book that will encourage people to want to read it.
19. Choose your favourite character from the book and draw a picture of how you imagine them to look.
20. Write a letter from this character to another character. Make sure you use some of the language or expressions that they use, so that you are staying true to their character and the era in which they live.
21. In this story the author used third person past tense narrative. Why do you think the author did that? How do you think the story might have changed if they had used first person perspectives, given there are two voices?
22. Break into small groups and choose a theme from the book. Choose some examples from the text that show how this theme is explored.
23. Retell the scene where Maxwell is trying to deal with his dad's and Cameron's injuries and keep the light turning from one of the other character's perspective—eg Rosemary or their dad. How does this change the story and the narrative flow? Does it add or take anything away from the story?
24. In small groups, select a chapter of the book and turn this into a play. Act this out in front of the class. Analyse what you did and how you created action from a written story.