



Wedlock by Denis Wright

About the author:

Wellington, New Zealand, based author Denis Wright's first novel, *Violence 101*, was published in 2007 and won Best First Book in the 2005 NZ Post Children's Book Awards. He then published the thriller *Nanotech* in 2015. Wright recently retired from teaching English and Journalism and says he writes for teenagers because 'when you have been teaching teens for as long as I have their voices come very naturally'. Wright hasn't forgotten the moment when Hamish Graham began whispering in his ear and became the odious racist and violent narrator of *Violence 101*.

Synopsis of Novel:

'Wedlock' centres on the life of fifteen-year-old Central Wellington schoolgirl, Lucy Sorrenson. Lucy leads a complicated life and thinks she is the only responsible adult in her household. She not only looks after her wayward, ex-rock star father, but also her Parkinson's afflicted ex-heavyweight boxing champion grandfather - and she carries the extra burden of bearing a strong resemblance to her five years dead mother, the beautiful and much admired lead singer in her father's band, *The Satellites*. We quickly immerse ourselves in Lucy's over committed life, but, alarmingly, we become aware that a shadowy group is also following her life very closely. The climax of the first part of the novel is Lucy's outrageously brazen drugging and kidnapping during a performance of her school play, *Macbeth*, where she is playing the role of one of the witches.

Lucy awakens to find her self in the clutches of *The Judea Revivalists*, a religious cult led by the charismatic and dangerous 'Isaiah', who believes himself to be a reincarnation of the Old Testament prophet of the same name. The middle portions of the novel deal with Lucy's anger, fear and escape focus, but then a gradual acceptance of these unusual but committed people, who seem to genuinely believe her to be their Master's chosen Maiden, and that after she and Isaiah wed she will bear him a son who will become the new Saviour. The novel is written so that, like Lucy, we too gradually see another side to both Isaiah and his followers and we understand her inner turmoil as her escape plans fade. We empathise also with her emotional attachment to a young man in the group, but all the while the deep danger she is in throbs loud and clear just below the surface.

The novel's climax is her dramatic rescue and the fiery literal and metaphoric destruction of the all but one of the cult members. The novel's denouement and epilogue deal with Lucy and her family bravely trying to reassemble the shattered pieces of her life. We feel hopeful that she will recover from



her ordeal, although her emotional scars will take a lot longer to heal than her physical ones.

Relevant themes / issues:

The psychology of the Stockholm syndrome; understanding the complexity and vulnerability of the mid-teen years; family and friendship loyalties and relationships; the joys and pains of first love; the resilience of the human spirit; the search for meaning in our lives; care of the elderly.

Please note - the viability of Christianity as a lifestyle is definitely not meant to be one of the issues of the novel. Nor does the novel intend to promote a stance on the pros or cons of religious belief.

Writing style:

The novel is written in first person narrative, through eyes of the main character, Lucy and is in the present tense. It follows a straight chronological progression through a series of linear chapters and an epilogue. The novel uses a lot of dialogue to progress the story and, being in the first person, there is also a lot of interior monologue.

Year level suitability and application:

The novel is a good fit for year 11 Level 1 NCEA students – the lead character is in this year group as well and discusses her academic worries a number of times – but it would also work well with bright year 10 students and also with year 12 students more interested in exploring the serious psychological issues the novel raises. This novel works well as a text for the level 1 Written Text external exam questions and is applicable to all seven of the questions from the 2017 paper, but is particularly relevant to questions four, five, six and seven.

Curriculum links

1. Health: Healthy / unhealthy relationships, Sexual clichés / stereotyping, bullying, abuse, alcohol use.
2. Social Studies: Junior level – leadership of groups, social interaction Senior level – identity and culture.
3. Geography: Interaction with physical environment.
4. Psychology: Understanding human motivation.
5. Learning opportunities

Before reading – setting the scene:

1. Students compile a list of verbal and visual content clues based on the front and back cover of the

novel. Students then make plot, character and theme predictions.

2. Student discussion on how the use of colour, images, layout, contrast, font type etc are used to position and manipulate readers.
3. Student discussion on any prior knowledge of cult life or similar isolationist / personality based lifestyle groups – make this a pros and cons discussion.
4. Student discussion on the complexity of their own mid-teen lives compared the lives of their parents and grandparents at a similar age.

During reading – understanding the content:

Chapter questions – Use a combination of written and oral answers.

Chapter one:

1. Who did you assume to be making the raucous noise in the house? Why?
2. List the physical and personality similarities Lucy has to her deceased mother.
3. List five useful pieces of plot information we find out from Lucy's bedtime rituals.

Chapter two:

1. Why might some of the students at Lucy's school think she is 'up herself'?
2. What is your opinion of Troy's and Lucy's handling of the porn picture incident?
3. In what ways is the author playing with character clichés in this chapter?

Chapter three:

1. What are your early impressions of Rosie? Back up with an appropriate quote.
2. Describe Lucy's treatment of Hannah and Hannah's clever way of dealing with the situation.
3. Give two reasons why Lucy is reluctant to wear the blue dress.

Chapter four:

1. Why does Rosie refer to herself as an invisible girl?
2. What is the purpose of the long sentence on P.48 'Everyone is so ... on to the deck'?
3. Do you think Bronson's level of homophobia actually exists today?

Chapter five:

1. Discuss the shared responsibility for Lucy getting so drunk at the party.
2. What disturbing information do we find out about Lucy's grandfather?
3. When Lucy and Troy kiss why is it described as 'a shy little first kiss'?

Chapter six:

1. In what ways is the author himself perhaps guilty of character stereotyping?
2. Discuss any unusual events you are aware of in a play you have been in.
3. In what ways might the witches' script be a premonition of events to come?

Chapter seven:

1. Do some quick research on the uses of chloroform.
2. What are some similarities and differences between Constance and Charity.
3. Why does Charity warn Lucy to be calm and dignified when she meets with Isaiah?

Chapter eight:

1. Discuss the symbolism of the two dresses Lucy has worn so far.
2. What can you pick up so far to suggest that Brother Courage is a very dangerous character?
3. In what ways is Isaiah presented as having a reasonable side?

Chapter nine

1. Do some quick orientation research on Makara Village and surrounding environment.
2. What might be legally dubious about this farmhouse?

Chapter ten

1. How do the storm conditions both hinder and aid Lucy?
2. Comment on the comparison between the intensity of the storm and her father's band.

Chapter eleven

1. Why does old Jack refer to the old persons' home as a 'death home'?
2. Why is Jack so accepting of Lucy's story?

Chapter twelve

1. What is clever and tactical about Isaiah's explanation for Lucy's escape experience?

Chapter thirteen

1. What do you think of Isaiah's admissions to failings of character?
2. Why can't Lucy be bothered to protest at the end of this chapter?

Chapter fourteen

1. What does Isaiah mean when he says 'I am giving you true life'?
2. What do you think of the 'deal' Isaiah makes with Lucy?

Chapter fifteen

1. Summarise what Brother Stoic says his new family have given him.
2. What explanation does Lucy have for his acceptance of his new life?

Chapter sixteen

1. What is the 'crazy logic' that Lucy refers to?
2. How would you rate her escape chances at this stage?

Chapter seventeen

1. What are the two versions of what happened in the attic?
2. Why does Lucy go through an episode of self-loathing?

Chapter eighteen

1. What physical and emotional changes are you noticing in Lucy?
2. Why do you think Isaiah is keen for her to have responsibility for animals?
3. What prevented Lucy from escaping when she clearly had an opportunity?

Chapter nineteen

1. What is the importance of this small chapter?

Chapter twenty

1. Why do you think the family have adopted this old-fashioned / formal speech manner?
2. What was it that Constance was searching for and in what ways has she found it?

Chapter twenty-one

1. Do you think that Charity is the only one to have noticed the bond between Lucy and Stoic?
2. Comment on Isaiah's statement 'the power is entirely in your hands, Lucinda'.

Chapter twenty-two

1. Describe Lucy's inner turmoil.

Chapter twenty-three

1. List her disappointments inside the house
2. What does she find so unfair in Stoic's objections to her impending marriage?

Chapter twenty-four

1. Is there evidence that Isaiah has been aware of Stoic's feelings and has been using him?
2. What are your thoughts about Lucy's decision to go to Isaiah's room that night?

Chapter twenty-five

1. What does Lucy mean by calling her night wear 'this lacey cliché'?
2. Discuss links with an earlier preparation for bed part of the story.
3. Are you surprised by Constance's actions? Why / why not?

Chapter twenty-six

1. List the ways that Constance manipulates Isaiah in this chapter.

Chapter twenty-seven

1. What is Isaiah's logic for making Lucy and Stoic face the flames alive?
2. 'The pity of it.' What Shakespeare tragedy is this from and are there similarities?
3. Comment on Isaiah's decision to end his own life.

Epilogue

1. What is the phenomenon known as The Stockholm Syndrome?
2. What are the similarities between Lucy's and Patty Hearst's experiences?
3. Comment on Lucy's long-term recovery journey.

Post reading activities: Theme analysis, role play, research

Theme analysis:

Activity one: Group work activity

Select two of the themes / issues listed earlier in these notes and get students to write what the author may be commenting on and how he may be positioning them think about these issues. When considering the 'how' aspect students will need to closely consider character presentation and also how the writing style (first person /present tense) aids that reader positioning.

Activity two: Individual work – NCEA level 1 Written text essay questions.

Attempt one of these questions from the 2017 level 1 Written Text external exam

1. Describe at least one challenge faced by a character in the written text. Explain how this challenge helped you understand the character.
2. Describe at least one idea that changed your perspective or point of view in the written text. Explain how this idea changed your perspective.
3. Describe a key moment in the written text that surprised or shocked you. Explain how this moment was important to the text as a whole.
4. Describe a character that you disliked or admired in the written text. Explain how your feeling towards this character helped you understand the text as a whole.

Role play activities:

1. In groups select a short scene or episode from the novel. Present it to the class using a combination of existing dialogue and your own added dialogue.
2. Monologue – adopt the role of one of the characters and speaking in character explain your relationship with another character.
3. Monologue - Speaking as Lucy as she is turning seventeen, reflect on events of a year ago.

Beyond the text activities:

1. Research the Patty Hearst incident and two other international examples of The Stockholm Syndrome.
2. Research and present finding to the class on a widely publicised cult or isolationist group incident, e.g. Charles Manson's 'family' or the Branch Davidians.
3. Design a poster or make a short film promoting responsible alcohol use for teens.

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