



THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

By S.A. Freud

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Teaching Notes
Prepared by Michael Connor

The Middle of Nowhere is an enjoyable novel for 10 to 14 year olds that blends strong storytelling, fun, likeable boy characters, with themes suitable for classroom discussions and activities. Sally Freud is a skilful storyteller. Humorous, and serious, *The Middle of Nowhere's* conclusion is moving, dramatic, and affirmative.

STORY: Shaun Weller's mother and step father move from the city to the country – for Shaun the pleasures of a new friend and having a horse to ride are curtailed by the disadvantages of being the 'new boy' and the victim of a gang of school bullies. The author skilfully combines these themes and balances the conflicts with a dramatic adventure in which Shaun, and his friend Henley, track down a helicopter which has crashed, rescue the pilot, and also the gang of bullies. Both Shaun and Henley are friendly characters with whom boys in this age group will strongly identify.

READING LEVEL – recommended for middle primary to lower secondary. *The Middle of Nowhere* has 34 short chapters, which make it an ideal class reader. Chapters can be quickly read, at home or in class, and offer many opportunities for lively discussion.

STORY THEMES: city versus country living, being the new kid at school, friendship, 'disabilities', bullying, the sport of orienteering. Bullying is a serious problem affecting many children in the 9 to 14 age group. Sally Freud deals with the topic sympathetically, and with a high level of good humour.

BEFORE READING: Discuss the book cover. What is the story going to be about? Where are the boys? One of the boys is deaf - can students pick which boy is deaf? Why might the book be called *The Middle of Nowhere*?

EXPLORING THE TEXT:
CHAPTERS 1 TO 4

Page 1: Why does Shaun say he has a 'spooky old deserted room'? Do you have an axe murderer under your bed?

- o Page 6: Why doesn't the school bus stop for Shaun?
- o Page 7: Why does Shaun hate being the new kid at school?
Roy Thompson, and his 'gang of giggling idiots' make school life miserable for Shaun. Why are they doing this?
- o Page 8: What is Shaun's reason for not telling his mother about the bullying? Should he tell her?
- o Page 9: Why does Shaun 'head out to my room for another night of worry'?
- o Page 14: Why does Shaun ride into Henley?
- o Pages 19 – 21: Henley likes bird-watching. Is he very good at it? Why?

CHAPTERS 5 TO 9

- o Page 30: Why does Henley says he likes Shaun's room?
- o Page 31: Why does Herbert shout at Henley?
- o Page 35: What happens when Shaun fights Ron? Is this the only way of dealing with a bully?
- o Page 40: What is orienteering?
- o Page 54: What is the matter with Henley's hearing-aid?
- o Page 59: Who are Gump, Freak, and Geak? Why doesn't Ron have a nickname?

CHAPTERS 10 TO 13

- o Page 69: Why isn't Herbert well?
- o Page 83: Is having a snake in the house a common occurrence in the country?
- o Pages 87 – 93: Ron's bullying is getting worse. How? Are the teacher's aware of what is happening? Could they help?

CHAPTERS 14 TO 17

- Page 94: Why is Shaun looking forward to going to school?
- Pages 98 and 99: Roger, Matthew and Max have nicknames. What are they?
- Page 100: Shaun's chocolate had interesting effects. What happened?
- Page 112: Is it true that students 'get sent home from school if it turns forty' is a myth?

CHAPTERS 18 TO 20

- Page 122: Why is Henley's leg shaking?
- Page 125: Are the teachers aware that Shaun and Henley are being bullied? If they were, could they do anything to help the boys?
- Page 128: Why does Howard ask if Henley's father is 'handicapped'?
- Pages 131 – 132: How did the fire start?
- Page 141: What is a controlled burn-off?

CHAPTERS 21 TO 22

- Page 148: What has happened to the compass? Should Henley 'dob' on Roy?
- Pages 150 – 155: The boys don't do well in the race. Why don't they win?

CHAPTERS 23 TO 26

- Page 161: What's wrong with Henley's hearing aid?
- Pages 163 – 164: What radio message is being picked up in Henley's hearing aid? What does Mayday mean?
- Page 175: Throughout *The Middle of Nowhere* the story has been told by Shaun. In Chapter 26 this changes, and the narration is by someone else. Who? Why has the point of view changed in this chapter?
- Page 182: When Shaun's mother tells Sergeant Thompson what has happened to the boys she is overheard by Ron. What does he do? Why is he acting this way?

CHAPTERS 27 TO 29

- Pages 186 – 187: In going into the bush to look for the crashed helicopter Shaun and Henley face a series of adventures and challenges together. What preparations did they make?
- Pages 190 – 193: What preparations did Roy's gang make?
- Page 194: How do Shaun and Henley spend the night?
- Pages 194 – 195: How do Ron and his gang spend the night?
- Page 202: Shaun hears a sound - 'sort of high-pitched and creepy. Like they were being murdered or something.' What has he heard? What has happened to the other boys?

CHAPTERS 30 TO 34

- Pages 212 – 216: How do Shaun and Henley help the pilot? How do they plan getting him down the mountain?
- Page 222: 'Please. Don't hurt us! Please. I beg of you!' Who says this? Who does he say it to? Why is he so afraid?
- Page 223: Why is Shaun pleased to see the other boys? How do they co-operate to get the pilot to safety?
- Page 226: Does Ron tell the truth about what has happened? Why does he tell the true story?
- Pages 228 – 229: At the end of the book is Shaun the new kid any longer? Is Henley's father pleased to see his son? What happens to Shaun's room? Is it spooky and deserted now?

AFTER READING THE BOOK

DISCUSSIONS

- Discuss proposals for 'Bully Free Zones' – Where would they be? How would they be organised? Can teachers help?
- Was Henley's deafness a disability?
- Which is a better place to live – city or country?
- Scary places to live!
- Would you rather have a horse or a dog?

ACTIVITIES

- Write articles for the school newspaper about the differences between town life and country life, or what it is like to be the 'new kid'.
- The school newspaper is devoting a special issue to bullying. Get students to prepare articles on 'Why Bullies Bully'.
- Prepare WANTED – DEAD OR ALIVE posters to stamp out bullying.
- Working in small groups students prepare a documentary on *The Middle of Nowhere* for a community radio or TV station. Using a cassette recorder or video camera one student acts as an interviewer and another as a character from the book. In character, students conduct interviews about Shaun's experiences at school, or the bush fire, or the race, or the helicopter crash and the rescuing of the pilot.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Sally Freud is a freelance television producer who lives in Melbourne. She was born in Malaysia. Her mother was an Irish actress and her father a British army officer. Sally has written two books for adults and *The Middle of Nowhere* is her first children's book