

# The Anatomy of Wings

by Karen Foxlee

---



## About the Book

Ten-year-old Jennifer Day lives in a small mining town full of secrets. Trying to make sense of the sudden death of her teenage sister, Beth, she looks to the adult world around her for answers.

As she recounts the final months of Beth's life, Jennifer sifts through the lies and the truth, but what she finds are mysteries, miracles, and more questions. Was Beth's death an accident? Why couldn't Jennifer --- or anyone else --- save her?

Through Jennifer's eyes, we see one girl's failure to cross the threshold into adulthood as her family slowly falls apart.

***The Anatomy of Wings* has received the following awards:**

Queensland Premier's Literary Award --- Emerging Queensland Author Manuscript Award 2006

Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book, Southeast Asia and South Pacific 2008

Dobbie Encouragement Award 2008

## Discussion Guide

### ASPECTS TO CONSIDER

#### Writing Style

1. The story is told through the eyes of the narrator, ten-year-old Jennifer Day. What is the impact of telling the story through a child's eyes? What might this enable the writer to do that wouldn't be able to be achieved through an adult

voice? (Consider other novels that use this technique e.g. *To Kill a Mockingbird*.)

2. Why did the author choose to tell this story in the first person? How would it change if it were written in the third person, through an external narrator?

3. Consider the ways a child may view things that will be different from an adult's interpretation. For example, Jennifer describes Mrs O'Malley as someone who trades facts with her. Jennifer's mother clearly sees her as a neighbourhood gossip. Why would they have such different views of her?

4. The story is told in a flashback style so that the reader is forced to unravel the story slowly. We know from the start that Beth has died, but we don't know how until the very end. Why might the writer have chosen to tell the story in this way? What impact did this have on the reader?

5. There are three possible points in the novel in which Beth's death could have occurred. How does this technique add to the tension in the novel?

6. The novel contains many examples of foreshadowing (where an event gives clues to something that occurs later). Make a list of any examples you can find.

7. One of the hardest things about personal crises is that while you suffer, life continues to go on around you as normal. Consider the juxtaposition of the school scenes with the arrival of Mr Day to tell the girls about Beth's death (p265-268). How does the writer manage to create mood in this piece? Why is this such an effective piece of writing?

8. In spite of the confronting subject matter, the novel remains quite humorous in its tone. How has this been achieved?

## **Characters**

1. Jennifer is a very practical child who likes to collect facts. Why is this an important character trait for her? How might it affect her reaction to Beth's death? Her telling of the story?

2. How does the flashback narrative technique reflect the character of Jennifer Day?

3. Why do Jennifer and Angela start 'The Book of Clues'?

4. Consider Jennifer's comment 'It was only a little piece of knowledge but it felt as shiny and solid as a new twenty-cent piece in my hand, to know I could find the thing that was wrong' (p122). Why is it so important to Jennifer to solve the mystery and put wrongs right?

5. Make a list of the different ways each of the characters reacts to Beth's death. Is there a 'correct' way to deal with grief and loss?

6. How does Jennifer feel about everyone's reaction to Beth's death? Consider her comments: 'It was becoming commonplace in our house. The shutting of eyes, the turning of heads, the swallowing of unsaid words.' (p208) and 'We needed Beth's name to be shouted not whispered' (p 162). Why does Jennifer need Beth's death to be spoken about?

7. Why is Danielle's back brace always referred to so formally as the 'Milwaukee back brace'?
8. Make a character map of each of the Day sisters, including any facts that we learn about each of the girls, their behaviours, attitudes etc. What are the girls like? Does the fact that we meet each of the girls after the crisis and through the eyes of the youngest sister influence the way we read each character? Explain.
9. The novel is full of damaged characters: Kylie is not quite normal, Danielle wears a brace, Nanna has a stroke, Miranda Bell has an horrific home life, each of the neighbours is a misfit in some way etc. Make a list of each of the characters in the novel and give a brief outline of their story.
10. Why might the author have chosen to make each character slightly flawed? Was this just to add interest or does this perhaps tell us something about life?
11. In many ways, Beth's death is a catharsis and enables a healing process to take place in the community. What positive changes come about after Beth's death?
12. In what ways does Beth's behaviour change in the months leading up to her death?
13. How do Beth's parents and those around her deal with her changing behaviour?
14. Jennifer remains incredibly loyal to her oldest sister. Why do you think this is the case?
15. What do you think causes Beth's behaviour? To what extent is she responsible and to what extent are social pressures, expectations, reputations etc to blame?
16. Before she died, Beth was preparing to go to secretarial school and to make a fresh start. If Beth hadn't died, do you think her life would have improved? What evidence is there to support this?
17. Jennifer tells us that 'Danielle deliberately catches the bus home so she could have tough girls call her a cripple and then write sad poems about it later'. Do you think that this is a true and fair assessment? What does it tell us about their relationship?
18. Mrs Day worries constantly about things that might kill her children 'running with scissors, boiling water etc. What is the irony in this? 19. Why do you think Jennifer has lost her singing voice?
20. Why does Jennifer's mother refuse to have contact with Nanna?

## **Symbolism**

1. Mrs Day places a box marked 'Darling' on the top shelf of the linen press. Each of the items has special significance in Beth's story. Consider contents of the box and make a list of what aspect of Beth, or incident in her life, each one relates to.
2. Jennifer has an obsession with birds. Make a list of the references to birds throughout the novel.

3. What is the significance of Jennifer's Icarus wings blowing off the wall on the day of the accident?
4. What symbolism is often assigned to birds and wings?
5. Why does Jennifer get her singing voice back?

### Activities

1. The story is told through the eyes of Jennifer Day. Select a key scene from the novel and re-write this event through the eyes of another character.
2. Write a dialogue that could have taken place between Mrs Day, Aunt Cheryl and Mrs Irwin boasting about their daughters before Beth changes.
3. Write a dialogue that may have taken place between Mr and Mrs Day at the height of Beth's problems. (Consider carefully their different attitudes and characters.)
4. Write a dialogue between Mrs Day and Aunt Cheryl at the height of Beth's problems.
5. Write a dialogue between Miranda Bell and Beth Day in which each girl discusses her feelings, fears and situation.
6. Write a note that Mr Day may have left for his family when he walked out on them, explaining how he felt and why.
7. Jennifer and Danielle never talk about Beth together. Write a dialogue that may have taken place between them: (a) when Beth's behaviour was at its most extreme (b) after her death
8. Write one or a series of diary entries in the character of Beth, after key events in the story.
9. Choose one of the neighbours and, as that character, tell your story, explaining what happened and how that made you feel. Write the eulogy that may have been delivered at Beth's funeral. (Remember that this would be in the voice of an adult rather than a child.)

### Author Bio

Karen Foxlee was born in Mount Isa, Queensland, in 1971. She has worked most of her adult life as a registered nurse. She has a Bachelor of Arts with a major in creative writing and lives in Gympie. In 2006, Karen was awarded the Queensland Premier's Literary Award for Best Emerging Author, an award that resulted in the publication of **The Anatomy of Wings**. The novel has since been picked up by an American publisher. Karen is working on her next book.

### Critical Praise

"Foxlee captures the small ways that humans reveal themselves, the mysterious intensity of female adolescence, and the

surreal quiet of a grieving house, which slowly and with astonishing resilience fills again with sound and music."

---

## **The Anatomy of Wings**

by Karen Foxlee

**Publication Date:** February 10, 2009

**Genres:** Fiction

**Hardcover:** 368 pages

**Publisher:** Knopf Books for Young Readers

**ISBN-10:** 0375856439

**ISBN-13:** 9780375856433