

A coastal township full of secrets
A woman with a past
A child with questions
A man too afraid to love.
This winter, one wish will change
everything

SUSIE PORTER
PHILLIP QUAST
WENDY HUGHES
ROBERT MAMMONE
VICTORIA THAINE
KHAN CHITTENDEN

THE CATERPILLAR Wish

SANDRA SCIBERRAS



A **STUDYGUIDE** BY MARGUERITE O'HARA

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introduction ➤ *The Caterpillar Wish* is a film about growing up, families and secrets. It is set in Robe, a picturesque small coastal town in South Australia. 17-year old Emily lives with her mother and is determined to discover the identity of her father. As she pursues her quest, family tensions and buried truths are revealed and Emily finds herself at the heart of these secrets as she searches for a sense of belonging and connection. The film runs for 94 minutes and has an M rating. It contains some strong language.

Filmmakers

The Caterpillar Wish is the first feature film to be funded by IndiVision Project Lab, an Australian Film Commission initiative that provided selected filmmakers with finance and critical advice from established filmmakers to fine tune scripts and produce low-budget Australian films. It was shot in twenty four days in July 2005. The film was written and directed by Sandra Sciberas and produced by Kate Whitbread.

Awards and Nominations

Susie Porter won the 2006 Australian Film Institute Award for *Best Supporting Actress* for her performance as Susan.

Burkhard Dallwitz, who composed the musical score, was a finalist in two categories of the 2006 Australian Guild of Screen Composers Awards for *Best Feature Film Score* and *Best Sound-track Album*.

Robert Webb won the 2006 Film Critics Circle of Australia award for *Best Production Design*.

Cast

Susan Woodbridge, mother of Emily and a barmaid in the town's hotel – Susie Porter

Emily Woodbridge, 17 year old student and daughter of Susan – Victoria Thaine

Beth Roberts, married to Carl, local policeman, and mother to Joel and Ewan – Wendy Hughes

Carl Roberts, married to Beth – Philip Quast

Joel, son of Carl and Beth Roberts and Emily's boyfriend – Khan Chitenden

Stephen Knight, brother of Beth Roberts and owner of local boatshed – Robert Mammone

Mrs. Woodbridge, Emily's maternal grandmother – Elspeth Ballantyne

Mr. Woodbridge, Emily's grandfather – Bruce Myles

Father Caleb, the local priest – Nicholas Bell

Ewan Roberts, Joel's younger brother – Will Traeger

Curriculum Relevance

The Caterpillar Wish is suitable for secondary students from years 9-12 studying the following subjects:

English, Health and Personal Development, Media Studies and SOSE (HSIE)

The activities in this guide are based on an interdisciplinary and integrated curriculum approach to exploring the key themes explored in the film. Studying the film will allow students to explore the filmmaker's approach to a number of themes. These include:

- Identity
- Families
- Living in a small community

For all students, there is a section – Student Activity 4 – that encourages consideration of how the film explores these themes through its production values.



STUDENT ACTIVITY 1

Before watching the film, respond to the following questions, either individually or in your class group.

- How important is it to know the identity of both your birth parents?
- What part should grandparents play in their grandchildren's lives?
- What does family mean to you?
- What do you think are the good and bad things about living in a small town?
- What particular difficulties do single parents face in bringing up children without extended family support?
- Do you believe parents who have their children when they are young are more likely to be friends as well as parents to their children?

- At what age should children be told the truth about their family background?
- Why do we take photos of people?

STUDENT ACTIVITY 2

After watching the film

Some narrative elements are only lightly touched on in this film as the central story of Emily's quest to discover the identity of her father is played out, so it is important to be clear about who is connected in the story and how. To check your understanding of these relationships, provide answers to the following questions.*

*Answers are provided at the end of this guide.

1. How old is Emily?
2. How old is her mother Susan?



3. What is Susan's job?
4. What has Emily's mother told her about the identity of her father?
5. What has happened to Stephen, who runs the boathouse?
6. How are Beth and Carl related to Stephen?
7. Whose son is Joel, Emily's boyfriend?
8. Who does Emily try to 'match make' with her mother?
9. Why don't Susan and Emily have continuing contact with Susan's parents?
10. What prompts Emily to find and visit her grandparents?
11. Who does Emily's grandfather tell her is her father?
12. Why does Emily run away with Joel?
13. Who is driving the car that accidentally hits Joel?
14. In what season does most of the story take place?

Character Mapping

Now you are clear about who is who in *The Caterpillar Wish*, create a character map, such as a Venn diagram of overlapping circles, showing how the main characters in this film are connected to Emily in the centre and to one another.

STUDENT ACTIVITY 3

Exploring Key Themes

1. **Identity** – having a sense of who we are and where we belong in our world
 - Emily Woodbridge wants to dis-

cover the identity of her father. Her mother has told her that ‘he was a tourist; he wandered into town and out again, a tom cat’. What does Emily do in her attempts to find her father?

- What is the significance of the story Susan tells Emily about the dragon?
- How are we shown how Emily feels about both her mother’s job and her relationships with others? How would you feel about a parent having a job such as Susan has?
- How would you describe the mother/daughter relationship between Susan and Emily?
- What indications are there of friction between Susan and her mother? What are the things that trigger this tension?
- How does the second-hand bible given to Emily suggest another way to find out the identity of her father? What clues does it give her about her grandparents’ lack of

involvement in her life?

- Describe what happens when she first visits her grandparents.
- How is her strong sense of her own worth shown at this meeting?
- Why is Emily’s friendship with both Joel and Stephen so important to her?
- How does Joel show his continuing love for, and acceptance of, Emily?
- How do both photography and bike riding give Emily a sense of independence and control over her life?
- How does Emily’s belief about her father’s identity shake her own sense of herself?
- Emily’s grandfather’s revelation about her father’s identity precipitates a crisis for several characters in the film. How do these events result in a kind of resolution and acceptance for Emily, Susan, Joel and Stephen?

2. **Families** – we can’t choose them

- Families are one of the central themes in this film. Although they all live in a small town, the different families in this film are shown to be isolated and in some cases, unhappy. Fill in Chart 1 with notes showing the similarities and differences between the family groups. You may need to refer back to your character diagram.
- The relationships between mothers and daughters and fathers and sons are central to this film. Write a paragraph about each of these relationships – between Susan and Emily, Susan and her mother, Mrs. Woodbridge and between Carl and Joel. Explain how tensions are revealed by focusing on several key scenes such as:
 - a. The early scene between Emily and her mother on the morning when the teacher stayed the night.

Family group	Major difficulty or source of conflict	Positives and negatives of family life	Connections with other extended family members	Partial resolution and acknowledgement of others needs
Susan and Emily				
Beth and Carl, Joel and Ewan				
Stephen Knight				
Mr. and Mrs. Woodbridge				

CHART 1



b. The scene late in the film when Mrs. Woodbridge comes to talk to Susan after her husband's revelation to Emily.

c. The scene when Carl goes rabbit shooting with his son Joel and Stephen.

- Given the relative youthfulness of Susan, Emily's mother, do the roles of mother and daughter sometimes seem to be reversed, with Emily playing the parental role? How is Susan's vulnerability as a parent shown in her behaviour?
- What kinds of tensions are apparent in the breakfast scene in Carl and Beth Roberts' house?
- How are Emily's grandparents presented in the film? How is their estrangement from both their daughter and granddaughter shown to have affected each of them?
- In what ways does *The Caterpillar Wish* suggest that children and parents need to understand each others' needs and accept one another?
- How does Beth, Joel's mother, exhibit hostility towards Susan,

both through what she says and how she behaves? What are the reasons for her apparent disapproval of Susan?

- What does Stephen's tragedy, particularly as it is revealed to the priest, show us about the complexities of families and their lives?
- What does Carl's accusation to Susan at the scene of the accident, 'this is all your fault', reveal about him?
- Is Carl shown to have any insights into his own behaviour?

3. Living in a small community

– under a microscope or warm and secure?

- It is often said that small towns can be stifling places in which to grow up, though other people believe that there is a closeness and strong sense of community not usually found in big cities. What are some of the positive and negative aspects of small town life shown in this film?
- Would the secretive life and infidelity of Carl, the policeman, have been easier to conceal in a larger environment or would his double life have the same consequences for himself and his family, wherever he lived?
- What do the final images of togetherness at the end of the film suggest about how life might change for these people?
- How would life be different in the holiday season for the permanent



residents in a coastal town like Robe, where the population more than doubles in summer? What sort of opportunities might this provide for people who live there all the year?

STUDENT ACTIVITY 4

Style, images and soundtrack

1. Use of the camera by Emily

- Emily is often shown photographing men in Robe. Why does she do this and how do these close-ups of secretive but intimate images relate to the film's themes of identity, family and small town life? Why does Emily throw her camera away after her second visit to her grandparents?

2. Joel's drawings

- While Joel refuses to show his father his drawings of Emily, he hangs them outside her house for her when she is very upset. How does this gesture both mirror and contrast with Emily's taking photos?

3. Close ups

- There are numerous close-ups of key images and surfaces in this film. Some of these include the glass mobile of the butterfly, people filmed through windows and through and behind doors, images in mirrors, fabrics and surfaces



of timber and rock pools. How does this use of the camera relate to and illustrate the film's central concerns?

4. The landscape

- The landscape of Robe is shown through Emily's bike rides around the town and in the surrounding countryside. Weather, wind, fog and water figure prominently in creating and establishing mood. Sciberras has said of filming in Robe in winter, 'I wanted a place that took off in summer but in winter drew another life, a life that is isolated, hidden, captivating and most importantly beautiful'. What season is shown in the final scenes of the film? What do you think these choices indicate about how things are changing?

4. Colours

- Emily is often shown in a red coat as she cycles through the town. What does this suggest about her as an individual?



5. Music

The soundtrack was composed by Burkhard Dallwitz who has said of the challenges the film presented:

I chose to compose for a small ensemble...which included a couple of unusual instruments including the Glass Harmonica. With its ethereal and crystalline sound quality it seemed a perfect fit in underscoring the sometimes fragile state of some of the characters. At the same time it could also evoke a more sinister atmosphere where necessary. The two featured songs by Chloe Hall (All or Nothing) and Melanie

Horsnell (Beautiful Excuse) support two crucial scenes in the film.

- What other sounds, apart from music and peoples' voices, are heard on the soundtrack?
- How conscious of the soundtrack were you while watching the film? Were there any points where you found it intrusive?

6. Narrative

This film is a character-driven narrative.

- How much did the narrative drive



and the unresolved central issue of the identity of Emily's father maintain your interest in the outcome?

- Did you find the ending of the film emotionally and dramatically satisfying?
- If you would have preferred a different conclusion, how would you have constructed an ending?

STUDENT ACTIVITY 5

Characters

Here are some descriptions of the film's main characters from the film's director and other people who were part of the film. Choose one of the characters and expand on the given observation by agreeing, disagreeing and/or modifying the statements through close reference to the film

- Emily:
Emily refuses to give in to the apathy and inertia that surrounds her. By example and with gentle insistence she forces them to see another way. She glides through town on her bike, tasting the air, and has not learnt to ignore truth and sensual beauty. (Sandra Sciberras, Director)
I thought the character of Emily was a very different teenager to stories of teenagers I'd read before. I liked the way she was smart and precocious in the good sense of the word. (Victoria Thaine, actor)
- Susan:
Susan has a brittle exterior that masks her sensitivity and vulnerability. She is mistrustful of men



and Emily is the only beneficiary of her love; at times they seem more like best friends than mother and daughter. (from *The Caterpillar Wish* Press Kit)

- Carl:
*I found Carl easy to write. I loved writing him...I just feel like I get those men. Like I understand their f*****,...their psychotic behaviour and their weirdness.* (Sandra Sciberras, Director)

STUDENT ACTIVITY 6

Taking it Further

1. Susie Porter, the actor who plays



Susan, Emily's mother, won a 2006 Australian Film Institute (AFI) Award for her role in *The Caterpillar Wish*. Comment on the other main performances in the film from Victoria Thaine (Emily), Phillip Quast (Carl), Robert Mammone (Stephen) and Khan Chittenden (Joel). Who would you give an award to for

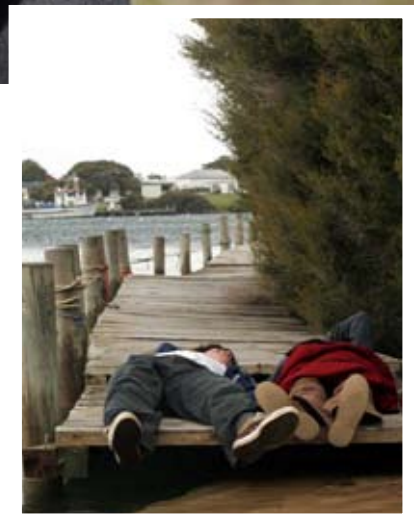


their performance? Give reasons for your choice.

2. Apart from the setting in Robe, a coastal town in South Australia, do you think this film is particularly Australian in its depiction of values and attitudes?
3. This story is told largely from Emily's perspective. How would the emphases change if it had been told from Joel, Beth, Carl or Susan's perspective? Select one of these characters and write an outline of several key scenes seen through this person's eyes, e.g. How would Carl show his being locked out of his house by his wife, or how would Susan present the scene in the hotel when Emily shows her the inscribed bible?
4. Many films, stories and television series and dramas have been made about growing up, from *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens to *The Year My Voice Broke* (John Duigan, 1987), and *Home and Away*. What particular insights does this film add to the genre of 'growing up' stories?
5. Write a review of the film. Include the following:
 - A brief account of the story, without telling the ending
 - Description of the film's major



- strengths and weaknesses
 - Who you think would be most likely to enjoy this film
 - A star rating from 1 to 5.
6. The film's title. What does a caterpillar wish for? To become a butterfly, to metamorphose from the embryonic to the fully fledged. Comment on the appropriateness of the film's title. Does it evocatively encapsulate the film's main themes?
 7. Films such as *Lantana*, another Australian film dealing with issues of trust and relationships, have sometimes been accused of presenting male characters as being emotionally immature. How does *The Caterpillar Wish* present males and females? Think carefully about Joel and Stephen as well as Carl and Mr. Woodbridge before responding to this question. Conduct a class discussion about whether men are more often presented in



stereotypical or clichéd ways than women in Australian films.

OTHER FILMS

Below is a list of films exploring similar themes of identity and families. Many of these films are available for purchase or loan from ACMI or video shops. ATOM has produced study guides for many of these films.

- The Year My Voice Broke* (Australia)
- Looking for Alibrandi* (Kate Woods, 2000, Australia)
- Stranded* (Stuart McDonald, 2005, Australia)
- Peaches* (Craig Monahan, 2004, Australia)

Yolngu Boy (Stephen Johnson, 2001, Australia)
 Jewboy (Tony Krawitz, 2005, Australia)
 In My Father's Den (Brad McGann, 2004, NZ)
 Heathers (Michael Lehmann, 1989, USA)
 The Ice Storm (Ang Lee, 1997, USA)
 The Sweet Hereafter (Atom Egoyan, 1997, USA)

WEBSITES

<http://www.thecaterpillarwish.com>
 The film's official website with a number of informative links (Accessed 29 December 2006)
http://www.afc.gov.au/newsandevents/afcnews/converse/sandra/newspage_202.aspx
 Transcript of an interview with director Sandra Sciberras about the process of script development and working with others at the IndiVision Project Lab in the lead up to shooting *The Caterpillar Wish*. (Accessed 1 January 2007)
http://www.abc.net.au/atthemovies/broadband/default.htm?program=atthemovies&pres=20060607_

2200&story=6
 Listen to a video interview with Director Sandra Sciberras and actors Susie Porter and Victoria Thaine with clips from the film. From ABC program *At the Movies*. (Accessed 30 December 2006)
<http://fuse.fusion.com.au/MagazineIssue.aspx?article=10>
 Account of the approach taken to developing the title sequence for *The Caterpillar Wish*. (Accessed 3 January 2007)
<http://www.infilm.com.au/features/caterpillarwish.htm>
 Feature article by Luke Buckmaster about the place of this film in the genre of Australian films set in small-towns; includes comments from both the Director and Producer.
<http://www.abc.net.au/triplej/review/film/s1659151.htm>
 Review of film from Triple J website. (Accessed 30 December 2006)
<http://www.safilm.com.au/content.aspx?p=119>
 Producer Kate Whitbread talks about filming *The Caterpillar Wish* in Robe, South Australia. (Accessed 30 December 2006)

ANSWERS TO THE ACTIVITY 1 QUESTIONS

1. 17
2. 32
3. Topless barmaid
4. He was a tourist who left town without leaving an address or being aware of Susan's pregnancy.
5. His wife committed suicide, taking their child with her.
6. Beth is Stephen's sister
7. Carl and Beth Roberts
8. Stephen Knight
9. Because Susan's parents rejected her when she became pregnant and they disapprove of her job
10. Being given the bible with the family inscription
11. Carl Roberts
12. Because she is distraught about the possibility that Carl may be her father and Joel her half-brother
13. Carl, Joel's father
14. Winter

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