

## CONVERSATIONS I'VE NEVER HAD

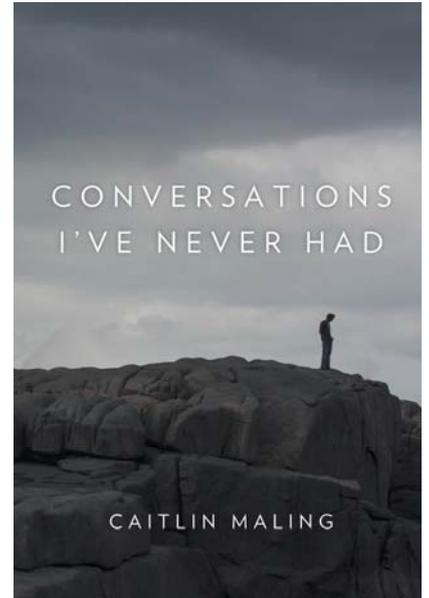
Caitlin Maling

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Themes: family, growing up, Australian landscapes and culture, identity

Year level: Y10–12

Cross-curriculum priorities: Sustainability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures



### ABOUT THE BOOK

In her debut collection, award-winning poet Caitlin Maling explores coming of age in contemporary Australia. Writing from Perth, Houston and Cambridge, Maling's early years to adulthood are told through the lens of the Australian landscape. For young settler Australians this is a place that both defines and undermines identity, a place that claims but can't be claimed in return.

Restlessly questioning and slipping between promise and possibility, Maling's Australia is richly evoked in narratives of raw power and feeling.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Caitlin Maling grew up in Western Australia, mainly in the suburbs around Fremantle. She moved to Melbourne to complete her BA in 2007, then to Cambridge to complete a Masters of Philosophy in Criminological Research. She returned to Perth and then left for Houston to complete an MFA in poetry, for which she received the WA Department of Culture and the Arts International Scholarship. She was also the recipient of the John Marsden Poetry Prize (2007) and the Newcastle Poetry Prize under 35s (2014).



### STUDY NOTES

#### LITERACY: COMPREHENDING TEXTS THROUGH LISTENING, READING AND VIEWING

##### Before reading: predicting

1. Examine the blurb and the front cover. Why do you think the publisher has chosen to package the book this way?
2. Read the blurb together as a class. Does this make you want to read the collection? Why/why not?
3. What do you think is the significance of the title?
4. What themes do you think might arise throughout this collection?

##### Class discussion: the poetic medium

5. Brainstorm the differences between poetry and prose. Using this list, create a definition for the term 'poetry'.
6. Record a list of traditional poetic forms and their conventions, e.g. sonnet, haiku, limerick etc.
7. Do any of the students in your class have a favourite poet?
  - a. What form/s do they use?
  - b. What themes do they write about?
  - c. What particular qualities do students admire in the work of this writer?
8. Do any of the students in your class write poetry themselves? What form/s do they favour and why? What is the difference between a poem and a song? Are rap artists, for instance, poets?

## Free verse poetry

9. What is free verse?
10. Where/when did it originate?
11. How does it differ from more traditional poetic forms?
12. Research three famous free verse poets. How are their works similar/different?
13. What are some of the particular challenges associated with writing free verse (as opposed to composing within a set framework)?

## Questions to guide a critical analysis of each poem

The following framework can be applied to any poem in *Conversations I've never had*. Teachers can:

- Read the poem out loud to the class.
- Have students read the poem a few times for themselves, or to a partner – paying close attention to the rhythm and the 'shape' of the poem.
- Invite students to conduct an independent close reading of the poem using the guide below.

<b>GUIDE TO THE CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF A POEM</b>	
<b>Point of view</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Who is the speaker (persona) in the poem? How would you describe this persona?</li> <li>2. What is the speaker's tone? What reveals this tone (syntax, diction, lexicon)?</li> <li>3. Is the poem ironic?</li> </ol>
<b>Figurative language</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What images does the poet use and how do they relate to one another?</li> <li>2. Do these images form a unified pattern throughout (a motif)?</li> <li>3. What is the most powerful image for you and what senses does it appeal to?</li> <li>4. How has symbolism been used in the poem? What might different images symbolise?</li> <li>5. Can you find examples of figurative language, such as simile, metaphor and personification?</li> <li>6. Can you find examples of metonymy, allegory and literary allusion in the poem?</li> </ol>
<b>Structure</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How has the poem been structured?</li> <li>2. In what ways does the structure/form of a poem contribute to its meaning?</li> <li>3. Why do you think the poet chose to structure the poem in this way? Does the structure complement the thematic concerns?</li> <li>4. Can you identify distinct stanzas? A rhyme scheme, syllable count or rhythm?</li> <li>5. Is the 'shape' of the poem significant? How has space been used in this poem?</li> <li>6. Can you find examples of onomatopoeia, assonance and alliteration?</li> <li>7. Are there any examples of repetition? What is the effect of this?</li> </ol>
<b>Thematic concerns and reader response</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What themes can you identify?</li> <li>2. What emotions does the poem evoke in you? How is this achieved?</li> </ol>

## Key themes to consider throughout this collection

- The relationship between personal identity and place
- The juxtaposition of the 'landscapes of memory' and the Australian landscape itself
- Evolving family relationships during adolescence
- Transcendence (i.e. the existence of meaning beyond physical/literal representation within the poem)

## During reading: comprehension strategies to practise with students

- Inferring
- Summarising
- Identifying key ideas/themes
- Drawing conclusions

## Discussion questions

Below are a number of questions for each poem within the collection – these can provide a starting point for classroom discussion. However, the guide to critical poetry analysis (above) can be applied to every poem selected for a close reading assessment.

'The path to the dam' (p. 8)

3. How is enjambment used in this poem – what effects does it create?
4. How does the shape of this poem create meaning?
5. How is the theme of absence expressed?
6. What might the final two lines symbolise? *there was no / way up.*

'To Robert Thompson' (p. 9)

7. Who is the real Robert Thompson?
8. How is the speaker's identity both merged with, and fractured from, Robert Thompson?
9. Why do you think Robert Thompson has remained significant to the speaker into adulthood?

'Sundays' (p. 10)

10. How would you describe the shape of this poem?
11. Why do you think this poem is devoid of punctuation?
12. What metaphors does the poem use?
13. How would you describe speaker's (and her mother's) relationship with the father in this poem?

'Donnelly River, 13' (p. 12)

14. Locate Donnelly River on a map of Australia and research the history of the area ([www.donnellyriver.com.au/history](http://www.donnellyriver.com.au/history)). View images of the setting.
15. How are the themes of family and Australian culture portrayed in this poem?
16. Why do you think the speaker fails to warn her father about the snake?
17. How would you describe the speaker's self-image?

'fourteen' (p. 15)

18. Why is this poem called 'fourteen'?
19. What is the significance of the jungle gym?
20. What is the effect of the use of second person in this poem?

'Asphodel' (p. 16)

21. Create a class definition for the term 'nostalgia'. Would you describe this poem as nostalgic?
22. What is an asphodel?
23. Why does this poem refer to the Australian play *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (1955)?
24. What is the mood or tone of this poem? How can you tell this?

'sixteen' (p. 17)

25. What is the effect of the celestial imagery?
26. What is the significance of the poem's mythological allusions?
27. Who/what do you think the 'pigs' symbolise? ... *we drifted / our island down the tce / collecting pigs*

'Shark days' (p. 18)

28. What are the defining characteristics of a 'narrative poem'? Is 'Shark days' such a poem?
29. What is the effect of including dialogue within the poem?
30. What, in your opinion, distinguishes poetry from 'poetic prose'?

'Bloodlust' (p. 19)

31. What is the significance of this title?
32. How is the motif of time constructed?
33. What is the effect of the inclusion of medical terminology? What images are conjured and what is the significance of these?

'eighteen' (p. 20)

34. Consider the personification of the kites that 'eat the sky' and the metaphor of the *green and red teeth*. What images are conjured here? And what mood or tone is evoked?
35. What is the building effect of the emphasis of age in the titles of Maling's poems?

'Concessional: Cassandra to Helen' (p. 22)

36. Who are Cassandra and Helen?
37. How/why does the poet use mythological allusion in the poem?
38. What is the effect of repetition in this poem?

'Pine' (p. 24)

39. How is the speaker's identity linked to the pine trees in this poem?
40. Consider the description of *those chainsaw Christmases*. What is the effect of pairing two such seemingly unrelated or even irreconcilable words together?
41. What is this poem about, and who is its speaker?

'After a girl goes missing' (p. 26)

42. How is the theme of absence constructed throughout the poem?
43. What is the significance of the image of the corrugated iron horse and his wise man?
44. How might this community be seen to stand in for *any* small community?

'Lust' (p. 28)

45. How do alliteration and assonance in this poem relate to the 'story' the poem conveys?
46. Why is this poem called 'Lust'?
47. Consider the effect of white space used in this poem.

'Things we learn from our Father' (p. 29)

48. Locate Yallingup on a map of Australia. How would you describe this place?
49. Do you think the list of 'things we learn from our father' would be the same for children growing up in another part of the world? Which 'life lessons' are unique to an Australian setting?
50. What is the tone of this poem?
51. Does the speaker's relationship with her father change across the poem?

'Things I missed about Cervantes while in Cambridge' (p. 34)

52. Locate Cervantes on a map of Western Australia and Cambridge on a map of England. View images of both settings. Compare the natural landscapes.
53. How is the theme of homesickness communicated in the poem?

'Holiday' (p. 35)

54. What is the significance of the cockroach metaphor in the poem?
55. What is the speaker's tone? Which words reveal this tone?
56. Is this poem's title ironic?

'Back in Perth' (p. 36)

57. Which *parts of the self* do you think the speaker has *left behind*?
58. What is the most powerful image for you in this poem and what senses does it appeal to?
59. How is the theme of family constructed?

'Medea to Jason' (p. 37)

60. In Greek mythology, who are Medea and Jason?
61. How is the theme of revenge represented in this poem?
62. How do the poem's images relate to one another? Do they form a unified pattern throughout (a motif)?
63. How does the poet deploy space in this poem?

'For my Lady M' (p. 38)

64. Who are the biblical figures Judith and Holofernes?
65. Who do you think 'Lady M' refers to? (Lady Macbeth?)
66. What is the speaker's tone? Which words reveal this tone?
67. How do contemporary cultural and mythological allusions inform your reading of this poem?

'Lament for Cervantes' (p. 40)

68. How is Australian culture and identity constructed here?
69. Critically discuss the representation of masculinity in the poem.
70. What is the effect of the poem's use of capitalisation and enjambment?

'The fish' (p. 42)

71. How would you describe the relationship between the speaker and her stepfather?
72. What is the speaker's tone? Which words reveal this tone? Is the poem ironic?
73. What is the effect of the pairing of words separated by a forward slash in this poem?

'Marriage' (p. 43)

74. How do you think the speaker feels about the institution of marriage? Which words give you a clue?
75. How would you describe the relationship between husband and wife of this poem?
76. What images does the poet use and how do they relate to one another?

'Eurydice speaks' (p. 44)

77. In Greek mythology, who was Eurydice?
78. Who is Edward Hirsch, to whom the poem is dedicated? ([www.edwardhirsch.com](http://www.edwardhirsch.com))
79. Read Hirsch's poem 'Self-Portrait as Eurydice' ([www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/0403/poetry/hirsch.html](http://www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/0403/poetry/hirsch.html)). What similarities/differences can you identify in a comparison with this poem?

'Aftershock' (p. 46)

80. Research the Christchurch earthquake of 2011 ([www.nzhistory.net.nz/page/christchurch-earthquake-kills-185](http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/page/christchurch-earthquake-kills-185)).
81. Why do you think the speaker draws on imagery from the natural world in this poem?
82. How is the theme of death constructed in the poem?

'generation why' (p. 50)

83. What do you think is the significance of the title?
84. How would you describe the attitude towards modern technology in this poem?
85. Can you identify a rhyme scheme, syllable count, rhythm or distinct stanzas? How do these things emphasise the poem's meaning?

'Leonora 2010' (p. 52)

86. Locate Leonora on a map of Western Australia and view images of the setting.
87. What can you infer about the treatment of Indigenous Australians in Leonora in this poem?
88. The final three lines of the poem allude to Leonora Detention Centre, which housed asylum seekers until the centre's closure in 2014. How does the introduction of this theme affect your reading of the poem?
89. Is this a poem about racism?

'Gendericide' (p. 53)

90. Why do you think the poet chose this title?
91. What is the significance of each of the *ways to kill the female child* that the poet lists?
92. How does this poem make its impact, and what is the contribution of form to this impact?

'Easter up the Gascoyne' (p. 54)

93. Locate the Gascoyne region on a map of Western Australia and view images of the natural landscape.
94. Do you think nature is presented as a transcendental force in this poem? Why/why not?
95. Can you find examples of simile, metaphor and personification? What do they symbolise?

'TV pastoral' (p. 56)

96. Create a class definition of the term 'pastoral'. Why is this poem a 'pastoral'?
97. Why do you think the poet utilises biblical allusion?
98. What is the speaker's tone? Is the poem ironic?
99. How is juxtaposition used throughout?

'At the Ballarat Art Gallery' (p. 57)

100. Locate Ballarat on a map of Western Australia and view images of this setting.
101. How is the natural world linked to the speaker's identity in this poem?
102. What is the tone of this poem and how is it established?

'The break' (p. 58)

103. What is the relationship between the speaker's sense of place and their sense of personal identity?
104. Why do you think the poet has chosen to structure the piece in eight stanzas containing only two lines?
105. What might the recurring fire motif symbolise? What other motifs can you find?

'Hector' (p. 59)

106. Who is Hector?
107. How does the poem's layout help construct its meaning?
108. What images does the poet use and how do they relate to one another? Do these images form a unified pattern throughout (a motif)?

'Living waters' (p. 61)

109. What is synecdoche? Discuss in relation to the dog of this poem (where it = the mining industry)
110. How does the poem negotiate a relationship between the speaker, her husband's desert money, and the Yulparija people?
111. What is the significance of the poem's title?

'A380 letter' (p. 62)

112. Who is the speaker in this poem? How would you describe this speaker?
113. What is the speaker's tone? Which words reveal this tone?
114. How is the theme of love depicted?

'Writing to Perth from Houston' (p. 64)

115. How are the themes of nostalgia and homesickness illustrated in this poem?
116. What is the speaker's tone?
117. What emotions are evoked in your reading of this piece? How is this achieved?
118. Do you agree with the speaker's assertion that *Moving is too close to mourning*?

'North of the river' (p. 65)

119. How are the motifs of water and electricity significant in this poem? What might they symbolise?
120. What do you think is meant by this: *you had marked where your stones would lay with razors*?
121. What do you think is meant by poem's final lines?
122. What is this poem about?

'Shark nights' (p. 67)

123. Debate the validity of the following claim: 'The shark is portrayed as the villain of the poem.'
124. What do you think is the significance of the final two lines?
125. What is the connection between title and poem? What does the shark stand for?

'Hurricane season' (p. 68)

126. How is the natural world represented in this poem? What is its relationship to the speaker?
127. How is the theme of displacement evident throughout the poem?
128. Do you think this poem exhibits any traits of Romanticism (circa 1800–1850)? Why/why not?

'Town' (p. 70)

129. How are the themes of nostalgia and homesickness illustrated in this poem?
130. How is the Australian economy portrayed?
131. What is the effect of white space and indentation in this poem and how do these interact with ideas of form and structure?

'Tacit knowledge' (p. 72)

132. What does the term 'tacit' mean? How does the title relate to the rest of the piece?
133. How does the poem deploy the speaker's geographical displacement?
134. What do you think the snake in the poem might symbolise?

'Homesick song' (p. 73)

135. Why is this poem a 'song'?
136. How has the poet made use of rhyme, half-rhyme and homophones?
137. What emotions are evoked in reading the piece – how is this achieved?

'Family rule' (p. 74)

138. How is the speaker's father characterised in this poem?
139. How is the theme of regret portrayed in the poem?
140. What do you think is meant by the final line: *test me, / come on, test me*?
141. What is the effect of the italicised speech fragments?

'Terroir' (p. 76)

142. Why is this poem dedicated to a bottle of wine?
143. How is the natural landscape linked to the speaker's body?
144. What images does the poet use and how do they relate to one another? Do these images form a unified pattern throughout (a motif)?

'You will wear white' (p. 77)

145. How is the theme of friendship constructed in this poem?
146. What is the speaker's tone? What is the effect of the poem addressing a second person?
147. What do you imagine when you think of your own future? Write a free verse poem depicting your vision for yourself in the style of 'You will wear white'.

'How I spent my 18th year' (p. 78)

148. How does the speaker portray her eighteenth year?
149. Would you describe this as an existential piece? Why/why not?
150. How do the final two lines inform the rest of the poem?

'Directions' (p. 80)

151. What is the significance of repetition of the phrase *by way of* (pp. 80–81)?
152. Why do you think the poet addresses the reader directly (e.g. *by way of your eyes*)?
153. How is the Australian landscape constructed in this poem?
154. Why do you think the poet has chosen to present the poem in one long, flowing stanza?

## **After reading: written activities, essay questions and oral presentation topics**

The following questions can be adapted for in-class essay assessment, a take-home research essay or a 5–10 minute oral presentation.

155. Critically analyse the relationship between setting and the theme of identity in any two poems from Caitlin Maling's *Conversations I've never had*.
156. Compare and contrast the patterns of imagery and the use of symbolism in any two poems within Caitlin Maling's *Conversations I've never had*.
157. How are stereotypical cultural perceptions of Australia challenged and/or supported in any poem of your choice from Caitlin Maling's *Conversations I've never had*?
158. Compare and contrast the use of allusion, paradox and/or ambiguity in any two poems within Caitlin Maling's *Conversations I've never had*.

159. Critically analyse the relationships between significant historical events and figures and their representation in literature. You may refer to any poem of your choice from Caitlin Maling's *Conversations I've never had*.
160. Compare and contrast the use of sound devices (rhyme, assonance, consonance, alliteration etc.) to create particular effects in any two poems within Caitlin Maling's *Conversations I've never had*.
161. Critically discuss the representation of one or more of the following in Caitlin Maling's *Conversations I've never had*: gender, race, childhood, adolescence, family, nature, regret, trauma.
162. Evaluate the validity of the following claim: '*Conversations I've never had* is primarily concerned with the landscapes of memory.'
163. What connections does Maling make between nature and art in her debut collection, *Conversations I've never had*?
164. How does Maling represent Australian culture, place and identity in her debut collection, *Conversations I've never had*?

## Close reading task

165. Invite students to conduct a close reading of a poem of their choice (using the guide to critical analysis previously provided). They should submit a 1,500-word outline of their interpretation of the poem (line by line). Students must utilise appropriate linguistic terminology (i.e. be familiar with the correct names for the poetic devices they discuss, such as *enjambment*, *motif* etc.) and support their ideas with quotes.

## Creative writing

166. Invite your class to create their own free verse poetry around the theme of 'identity', perhaps holding a poetry reading at your school or even publishing a school poetry journal. In pairs, have students brainstorm the sounds, sights and smells of their childhood to help generate initial ideas for their verse.
167. Ask students to consider which landscapes are special to them, and to use free verse as a way to define themselves in relation to these ideas of 'home'.
168. *Poepatetics* is the poetry of walking: *poe* from *poesis*/making and *patetics* from peripatetic's or walking, travelling: Allow students to conduct an exercise in *poepatetics*. They should visit a setting that is special to them and allow their walking and observations to inform the rhythm of their work. They can record their musings in either written form, through sketches, or through photographs. Upon returning to class, allow them to use this experience to create a free verse poem in the style of Caitlin Maling.
169. Have students work collaboratively on a group poem depicting the theme of 'place and personal identity'.
170. Have students draft a poem that uses metaphor, rhythm and repetition in similar ways to their favourite piece in *Conversations I've never had*. The exercises below may prove helpful.

## Rhythm

171. Which syllable/s carry the stress in the words below? The first four have been done for you. *Hint: read the words aloud.*
  - **subject**
  - **balloon**
  - **important**
  - **variability**
  - garden
  - encouragement
  - contract
  - talkativeness
172. Select a poem from *Conversations I've never had*.
  - a. Identify the stresses in each line. Is there a pattern of some kind? (*Hint: read the poem aloud to a partner and have them record where the stresses fall*).
  - b. Free verse poetry does not rely on a regular metre (a prescribed pattern), but rather uses stress patterns based on *meaning*. Find three examples of this in your poem.
173. The combination of stressed and unstressed words/syllables helps to determine the rhythm of the poem. Why do you think Maling has chosen to write free verse poetry as opposed to utilising a more traditional form such as the sonnet or the ballad?
174. How has repetition been used to help create rhythm?
175. How does the structure give momentum to the poetry when read aloud?

## Rhyme

176. Select your favourite poem from *Conversations I've never had*.
- What is internal rhyme? Can you find examples of this in your poem?
  - What is the difference between a 'perfect rhyme' and a 'half-rhyme' or 'slant rhyme'? Can you find examples of these in your poem?
177. How does Maling employ alliteration, assonance and consonance to emphasise a poem's meaning?

## Free verse poetry challenge!

178. Write one stanza of free verse (or take one from *Conversations I've never had*). Write the second stanza using exactly the same line length, sound pattern and rhythmic pattern as the first.

## CROSS-CURRICULAR LINKS

### Science

179. Research the history of the locations explored in the collection, e.g. Cervantes, Donnelly River, Yallingup, Fremantle, Leonora etc. View images of these landscapes as a class and compare their features.
- Map the location of the different poems included in the collection across Australia and the globe.
  - What species of plants and animals are found in each of these locations?
  - How many of these are currently endangered? Why is this the case?
  - What are some of the main environmental concerns for each of these areas?
180. Why do you think the author has chosen poetry to explore issues concerning the environment and identity? Why not a non-fiction book? What particular effects might be evoked by the poetic medium?
181. *Sustainability*: Research ways in which students can contribute to sustainable living. For 'change the way you live' links visit: [www.wwf.org.au/get\\_involved/change\\_the\\_way\\_you\\_live](http://www.wwf.org.au/get_involved/change_the_way_you_live). Create a poster or pamphlet advertising this information to your school community. Suggested topics:
- Sustainable shopping
  - Transport – car and air travel and offsetting
  - Saving water
  - Reducing energy consumption
  - Reduce, reuse, recycle
  - Green building design
  - Ethical and responsible investment

### History

182. Have students research the history and culture of the traditional owners of the land in their region. Students can present their findings as a report, using these subheadings to structure their information.
- Geographic area
  - Laws
  - Spiritual beliefs
  - Traditional diet
  - Traditional shelter
  - Hunting/gathering tools and techniques

### Art

183. *Poepatetics*: Go on a nature walk close to your school. Students should take a sketchbook and/or camera to record their discoveries. Upon returning, have them create an artwork depicting one of the themes below. Students may choose to present their art through a variety of mediums including sculpture, photography, painting, illustration, digital media etc.
- My favourite place
  - A unique Australian setting
  - Environmental conservation in my local area
  - Environmental destruction in my local area

## ADDITIONAL LINKS

Visit the author's website: [www.caitlinmaling.com](http://www.caitlinmaling.com)