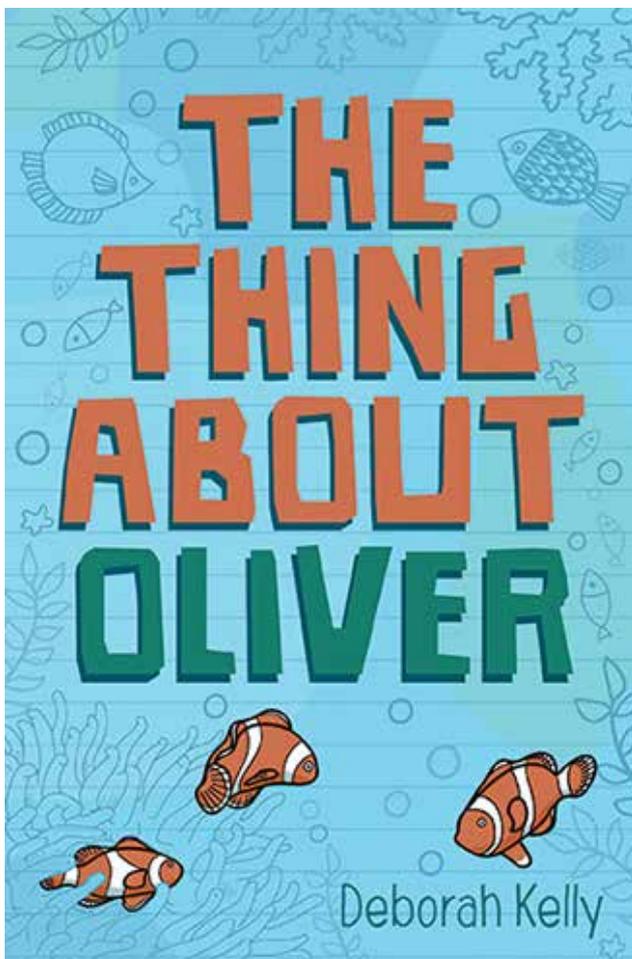




**Wombat Books**  
Stories you'll want to share

## Teacher's notes



### The Thing About Oliver

Deborah Kelly

ISBN: 9781925563818

Recommended retail: \$14.99

Reading level: Age 8+

#### Book summary

Twelve-year-old Tilly dreams of becoming a marine scientist, but she doesn't even own a swimsuit. She lives in a drought-stricken town with her mum and younger brother Oliver, who is autistic.

Oliver's meltdowns are making life unbearable. He needs so many different kinds of therapy that there's never any time—or money—left over for swimming lessons. Tilly knows Oliver's needs have to come first, but it's hard feeling invisible all the time.

When Mum announces they are moving to the Queensland coast, Tilly is excited at the thought of finally learning to swim—even snorkel! But she is also worried. The thing about Oliver is, he can't cope with even the tiniest of changes to his routine.

Wombat Books, PO Box 1519, Capalaba BC Qld 4157 [www.wombatbooks.com.au](http://www.wombatbooks.com.au)

07-32451938 [info@wombatbooks.com.au](mailto:info@wombatbooks.com.au)

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### Why study this book?

With an increasing number of children being diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) every year, it is more important than ever to have these children and their families represented in mainstream media, including books. Portraying children like Oliver and Tilly not only provides kids in similar situations with literature they can relate to, but it also helps to foster tolerance and acceptance of difference and diversity in all readers. It is also a story about family relationships and learning to cope with change - major themes that all children (regardless of whether they have a sibling with a disability or not) can relate to.

### Themes

- Family relationships
- Difference and diversity
- Coping with change
- Showing compassion
- Engaging with the marine environment

## About the author



Deb writes picture books, short stories, chapter books and educational material for children. Two of her titles have been CBCA Notable Books: *Ruby Wishfingers: Skydancer's Escape* (Wombat Books 2016) and *Me and You* (Penguin Random House 2017), a title that also won Speech Pathology Australia's Book of the Year award for 3–5 year olds. Many of Deborah's books are included in the Premier's Reading Challenge lists across Australia. In addition to writing for children, Deborah is a role model for *Books in Homes Australia* and reviews children's books for *Reading Time* magazine. For more information, please visit her Facebook page (Deborah Kelly Author) or her

website at [deborahkelly.com.au](http://deborahkelly.com.au).

## Author interview

### 1. Did you draw on personal experience when writing *The Thing About Oliver*?

I have the privilege of knowing several children on the autism spectrum and their families. There is a lot of support out there now for kids on the spectrum, which is fantastic. But often the siblings of these children are overlooked. They are sometimes called glass children, because it can feel as though their overstretched parents look right through them. They have to grow up quickly, are often expected to take on far more responsibility than other kids their age and can feel guilty about their own problems and worries in comparison to that of their siblings. They can also struggle with feelings of resentment and guilt towards their parents and the sibling with special needs.

### 2. The story centres around the move to Townsville, which is described quite vividly. Do you have a history with the area?

I spent several years living in Townsville while I attended university. Because moving there coincided with leaving home (and the whole world opening up), Townsville will always have a special place in my heart. When I visited a couple of years ago for some writing workshops, a lot had changed since I left and most of the people I knew there had moved on. However, I felt that the sights and smells, plants and animals, and the humidity that had hit me all those years ago was the same.

### 3. Is marine biology an interest of yours? What's your favourite fish?

I loved marine biology in high school due to an enthusiastic teacher and went on to study it at university so I could help protect the reef for future generations. Like Tilly, colourful nudibranchs are high up on my list. So is the goofy-looking parrotfish, which chomps so noisily on coral that you can actually hear it underwater. I'll never forget the time I came face-to-face with a baby tiger shark! And I love the magic of a night dive. There are tiny creatures in the water that glow at night and if you turn off your torch, it's like floating in a night sky, surrounded by stars.

## Questions and reflections

### Family relationships

1. When Mum forgets to introduce Tilly to the receptionist, it makes her feel as though she is made of glass. Siblings of children with special needs are sometimes referred to as glass children. Why do you think this is? Have you ever felt invisible or unimportant?
2. How does Tilly feel about her brother at the start of the story, compared to the end? Do you think her feelings towards Oliver have changed, and why?
3. Why is Tilly so mad at Mum when she comes home with a new haircut? Do you think she has a right to be angry?

### Difference and diversity

4. We all have our likes and dislikes. Oliver is especially picky about food. What is your favourite food? Is there a food you dislike or even hate?
  - Is there anything you used to hate, but now like, or vice versa?
  - Have you ever tried something you thought you wouldn't like, but ended up liking?
  - What is the strangest food you have ever eaten?
5. Everyone is afraid of something. Oliver is afraid of dogs. Tilly is afraid of not becoming a marine biologist. What are you afraid of?
  - Have you ever been afraid of something you aren't afraid of anymore?
  - What helped you get over that fear?
6. People with autism are as unique and individual as anyone else. How would you describe how Oliver's autism affects him and his family?
  - Do you know anybody with autism or other special needs?
  - How does their condition affect them and their family's daily life?

### Coping with change

7. We all react differently to feeling worried or upset. When Oliver is upset, he needs his spinner or to tear paper. Sometimes he screams or throws his toys or flicks the lights on and off. These things don't work for Tilly. What makes her feel better before the move to Townsville?
  - What about after the move?
  - What makes you feel better when you are worried or upset about something?
8. How do you think Tilly feels when she has to leave her fishtank behind? Have you ever lost a pet or something else you loved? How did you feel a week later, or a month later?
  - What helped you overcome that loss?

## Activities

- Find five adjectives to describe each of the main characters at the beginning of the story. Would you change any of these by the end of the book?

| Tilly | Oliver | Mum |
|-------|--------|-----|
|       |        |     |
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|       |        |     |

- When Tilly steps out of the car at the service station, she describes the air as hot and steamy like the bathroom after you take a shower. Think of an environment you have been that is different to home. It might be stepping off a plane into a new country, or moving to a new house, or taking a train into the city. In what ways was it different? Write a detailed description using all five senses.
- Tilly likes collecting interesting facts about sea creatures and drawing pictures of them in her Aqua Journal. Research three interesting or unusual creatures that live on the Great Barrier Reef. Find three interesting facts about each of them and draw a picture of each creature. Present your findings to the class.
- Find out the technical terms for some common phobias (arachnaphonia is a fear of spiders, for example). Did you come across any unusual or especially interesting phobias you didn't know existed? Conduct a class poll to find out what your classmates or students in your year level are afraid of. Did the results surprise you? Compare the results and display them in the form of bar graphs or pie charts on the school noticeboard.
- In small groups, prepare a tourist brochure about the Great Barrier Reef and the threats facing its survival. Include photos, diagrams, graphs and other information for reef visitors, including what they can do to help protect it for future generations.

## Key curriculum areas

### Year 4 English

ACELA1488

ACELA1489

ACELA1494

ACELY1692

### Year 5 English

ACELA1502

ACELA1508

ACELT1609

### Year 6 English

ACELA1516

ACELA1518

ACELA1523

### Year 7 English

ACELT1621

ACELT1622

ACELA1498

ACELT1603

ACELT1605

ACELT1795

ACELT1610

ACELY1698

ACELT1613

ACELT1615

ACELY1801

ACELY1721

ACELY1722

### Year 4 Science

ACSSU073

ACSSU075

### Years 5–6 Science

ACSSU043

ACSSU096

### Years 3–4 HPE

ACPPS033

ACPPS034

ACPPS037

### Years 5–6 HPE

ACPPS051

ACPPS055

ACPPS056

ACSHE062

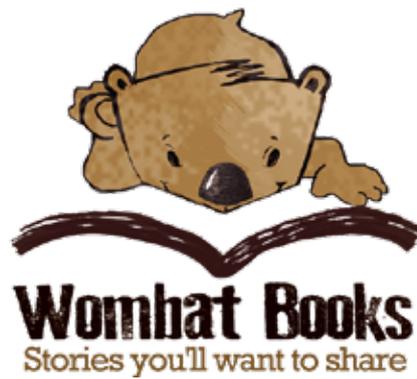
ACSSU094

ACPPS038

ACPMPO48

ACPPS059

ACPPS060



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