
Teachers' Notes



THE DAY THE BRIDGE FELL

Coral Vass

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Reading level: reading age of 12+, interest age 14+

BOOK SUMMARY

Obsessed with the construction of Melbourne's new West Gate Bridge, where his father works, Ray Johnston overhears a conversation about a fault in the bridge and a plan to loosen its bolts. He tells his best friend Tom and confides in his father, who insists that he keeps quiet about it.

Ray is devastated when he hears sirens coming from the worksite. He races there to find that the bridge has fallen, taking several workers with it. Is his dad one of them? What else can he do?

THEMES

Coming of Age • Identity • Justice • Courage • Healing

Forgiveness & Guilt • Loss & Grief • Family and Friendship • Australian History

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**Coral Vass is available for author talks and workshops.
Contact Rhiza Edge for more information.**

The Day The Bridge Fell Teachers' Notes can be used in schools (independent learning, small groups, and whole classes); at home with caregivers; and as part of mental health support programs facilitated by counsellors, psychologists, children's charities, etc.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Coral is an award-winning author, presenter, editor and reviewer. She has a background in Media, and has over 25 published children's books.

Her books include *Sorry Day 2018* (Speech Pathology Awards Book of the Year and 2019 CBCA Book of the Year - Eve Pownall Award), *Grandma's Treasured Shoes* (2021 Caleb Book of the Year), and *Jørn's Magnificent Imagination* (2023 CBCA Notable and shortlisted for 2023 Speech Pathology Book of the Year).

Coral's books have appeared on ABCTV's Playschool as well as StoryBox Library. Coral is an ambassador for Reading Out of Poverty and is passionate about children's literacy and giving all children equal opportunity to learn.

AUTHOR NOTES

I have always had a passion for biographies and true stories, so for me, it was a natural pull to write an historical fiction. And what better story to tell than one in my home town.

Having grown up in Melbourne, I was always fascinated by hearing stories of the collapse of the West Gate Bridge. I remember as a child, driving over the bridge many times and holding my breath in anticipation of it potentially collapsing again while I was on it. It was hard to believe that a bridge so strong and full of grandeur could have fallen and killed 35 people.

In my research, I came to appreciate the landscape, the people, the great display of compassion and bravery, the bonds formed through hardship, the lives lost and the lessons learned.

Set in the spring of 1970, in the inner western suburbs of Melbourne, *The Day the Bridge Fell* is a story of friendship, mystery and human error.

A wise friend once said, 'After our eyes are open to the world around us, we can never see the world in the same way again.' And this is how I saw fifteen-year-old Ray Johnston. On the cusp of adulthood and involved in a great tragedy close to home, Ray finds himself facing his own 'rite of passage', which not only defines him but changes his life forever.

I spent many months and years carefully researching the historical period, as well as the local area in order to create a vivid and accurate setting for my story. For weeks, I drove around the areas of Williamstown, Newport, Yarraville and Spotwood, taking photographs of the streets and buildings in order to create a world for the Johnstons, the Demetrious and the Martins.

While the bridge collapse is based on an actual event in history, my characters, the storyline, the names and some dates are fictional. I do not claim to be an historian or an expert, however, through my reading and research, interviews and listening to the stories of those who survived, I did try to ensure my story was historically accurate. It's my hope that my reader can learn a little about history as they enjoy reading this story.

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OVERVIEW

MAIN CHARACTER

Ray Johnson is a sensitive and thoughtful teenage boy in his first year of high school, living in Melbourne’s working-class inner west during the 1970s. He is curious and observant, with a deep admiration for the West Gate Bridge, which represents pride, progress, and the strength of his community. His father, Doug, is the lead rigger on the bridge, something Ray is immensely proud of.

Ray is emotionally intelligent, although still navigating the confusing grey areas of right and wrong. When he overhears engineers discussing safety concerns, he is faced with a moral dilemma: speak up or stay loyal to his father’s instruction. This decision haunts him after the bridge collapses and he’s forced to reckon with guilt, trauma, and what it means to grow up.

Ray’s journey is one of emotional transformation—from an idealistic, proud son to a reflective and self-aware young man. Through tragedy, he learns the weight of silence, the power of forgiveness, and how broken things—like glass, and people—can be remade.

Ray’s Strengths	Ray’s Weaknesses
Empathetic and Loyal: Deeply connected to his family and friends, especially Tom.	Struggles with Guilt: Feels responsible for not speaking up.
Emotionally Brave: Willing to face hard truths, even in the face of fear.	Conflicted Loyalties: Torn between what’s morally right and family loyalty.
Inquisitive: Drawn to the bridge not just for its structure but for its meaning.	Avoidant: Avoids crossing the bridge for a long time, showing emotional trauma.
Reflective and Growth-Oriented: Learns to forgive himself and see the world differently after tragedy.	Carries Responsibility Beyond His Years: Blames himself for things beyond his control.

OTHER CHARACTERS

Doug Johnston (Dad): A lead rigger working on the West Gate Bridge, Doug is a proud, hard-working man devoted to his family and his job. His insistence that Ray keep quiet highlights generational ideas of masculinity, obedience, and stoicism. After the collapse, Doug’s survival becomes symbolic for Ray, but their relationship is tested by the secrets they share.

Tom: Ray’s best friend and emotional anchor. Tom is loyal, practical, and not as emotionally entangled with the bridge as Ray. He supports Ray through his guilt and is there in the aftermath. Tom’s friendship represents consistency and groundedness, as well as the everyday goodness of people during hard times.

George Demetriou: Ray’s neighbour and a Greek-Australian ironworker. He represents the multicultural working-class community of the time and the real human cost of industrial tragedy. George’s presence underscores themes of belonging, mateship, and collective grief.

UNDERSTANDING BRIDGE CONSTRUCTION

In *The Day the Bridge Fell*, the West Gate Bridge is more than just a structure—it represents ambition, engineering, and pride for Melbourne's working-class community. But what does it actually take to build a bridge of this scale?

Building a large bridge—especially one as complex as the West Gate Bridge—involves years of planning, engineering, and hard physical labour. It's a process that combines technical precision with human effort, requiring both brain and brawn.

Bridge building typically involves: design and engineering planning, laying foundations, erecting supports and towers, installing trusses and girders, assembling the bridge deck, rigging, welding, bolting, safety checks and inspections.

Many different workers contribute their skills, often in dangerous and demanding conditions.

Key Roles

Lead Rigger: A lead rigger is responsible for lifting, moving, and positioning heavy structural components like steel beams and girders using cranes, pulleys, and other lifting systems.

Ironworker: Ironworkers are the tradespeople who install and connect the steel framework that forms the skeleton of a bridge or high-rise building.

Engineers: Engineers design the bridge and ensure it meets structural and safety standards. They calculate weight loads, tension, stress, and materials needed.

Foreman: Foremen are on-site supervisors who manage construction crews, assign tasks, and ensure timelines and safety procedures are followed.

DANGERS

Bridge construction, especially in the 1970s, was extremely dangerous. Safety standards were not as strict or regulated as they are today. The collapse of the West Gate Bridge in 1970, which killed 35 workers and injured many more, remains one of Australia's worst industrial accidents.

This tragedy exposed issues such as:

- Lack of proper communication between engineers and workers
- Pressure to meet deadlines
- Gaps in safety protocols and worker protection

MELBOURNE'S INNER-WEST & THE WEST GATE BRIDGE (1970S)

The novel is grounded in a powerful historical moment: the collapse of the West Gate Bridge in 1970, one of Australia's worst industrial accidents. The inner-western suburbs of Melbourne are presented as vibrant, working-class, multicultural and tight-knit.

The bridge stands as a metaphor for ambition, change, and, later, trauma. It's both a literal and symbolic structure—linking not only two parts of the city, but two stages of Ray's life: innocence and experience.

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MESSAGE OF THE NOVEL

The Day the Bridge Fell is a powerful exploration of growing up in the shadow of both physical and emotional catastrophe. It portrays how young people deal with moral complexity, survivor's guilt, and the pressures of loyalty to family and community. It also reminds readers that strength isn't found in perfection, but in resilience, self-forgiveness, and the ability to reframe brokenness as something capable of transformation.

Just like Ray's pieces of shattered glass, humans too can be reshaped—stronger, wiser, and with a new way of seeing the world.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

GENERAL QUESTIONS

i. The Importance of Collecting Relics

Read pages 21–22.

Ray and Tom collect bolts, wire, and stones from the West Gate Bridge construction site. Why is this activity meaningful to them—particularly to Ray?

- a) What do these objects represent for Ray?
- b) How do they connect to his values of honesty and integrity?
- c) What does the bridge mean to the community?

ii. Looking Through Coloured Glass

Read pages 20–21.

Tom sees the world through coloured glass, while Ray sees things as black and white.

- a) What does the coloured glass symbolise in the story?
- b) How does this moment foreshadow a shift in Ray's thinking?
- c) In what ways does Ray's worldview change from the beginning to the end of the novel?

iii. Courage and Moral Dilemmas

- Outline five different ways Ray demonstrates courage throughout the novel. Think about physical bravery, emotional vulnerability, and moral decision-making.

iv. Learning to Forgive

- How does Ray learn to forgive others, such as his father?
- In what ways does he learn to forgive himself?
- What makes self-forgiveness especially difficult for Ray?
- Why is this theme important in the story?

v. Foreshadowing through the Model Bridge

Read pages 3–4.

Ray's younger brother Michael stomps on Ray's 3D model of the bridge.

- How does this scene act as foreshadowing?
- What does it suggest about fragility, destruction, and Ray's emotional journey?

vi. Book Cover Interpretation

- Look at the cover of *The Day the Bridge Fell*.
- What mood or emotion does the image convey?
- How does the title connect to both the literal and metaphorical "falling" in the story?

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vii. The Blurb as a Framing Device

- Read the back-cover blurb.
- What key ideas or themes are introduced here?
- Does the blurb prepare the reader for the emotional weight of the story?

viii. Chapter Structure & Countdown Technique

- How do the opening lines of each chapter set the scene?
- How does the format give the reader context in relation to the character and setting?
- How does the time countdown help to tell the story?
- How does this structure build suspense?
- What does it add to the tension and pacing of the story?

ix. Favourite Scene

- Do you have a scene that stood out emotionally or dramatically?
- Why did it resonate with you?
- How does it reveal something important about Ray or the world around him?

x. Character Development & Reflection

- Compare Ray's behaviour and mindset in the first chapter to the final chapter.
- What are the biggest changes in his personality or perspective?
- What are the most important things Ray learns about himself?
- How does Ray's relationship with his father, Doug, evolve throughout the story?
- What challenges do they face?
- How does tragedy shift the way they communicate?

xi. Favourite and Least Favourite Characters

From the following list of characters, choose your favourite and least favourite: Ray Johnston, Tom Martin, Doug Johnston, Patricia Johnston, Michael Johnston, George Demetriou, Theodora Demetriou, Frank Martin, Daphne Martin, Nico Demetriou, Alec Demetriou, Sam and Barry.

- What traits or actions led to your choices?
- How are characters used to represent different generational or cultural experiences?

xii. The Real-Life Impact of the West Gate Bridge Collapse

Read the newspaper excerpt on page 38.

- What does this quote tell us about working conditions in the 1970s?
- How did the collapse change workplace safety in Australia?
- Why is this important to understand when reading the novel?

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xiii. Beyond the Final Chapter

- What do you think Ray will do next?
- Could he grow into someone who speaks out for justice or workplace reform?
- How might his experience inspire activism or a future career?

COMING OF AGE

1. How does Ray change over the course of the novel? What events contribute to his growth?
2. What does it mean to “grow up” in this story? Does Ray stop being a child the day the bridge falls?
3. In what ways do Ray and Tom experience their own “rites of passage” during the novel?
4. Do you think Ray is more mature than some of the adults in the story? Why or why not?
5. Do you think the story is more about Ray’s guilt or personal growth? Why?

IDENTITY

1. How does Ray’s identity as “Doug Johnston’s son” influence how he sees himself?
2. What role does pride in his working-class background play in shaping Ray’s identity?
3. Ray often collects broken pieces of glass and metal. How do these items reflect his state of mind and personal journey?
4. In what ways does Ray struggle to define himself apart from his father and the bridge?
5. Why is Ray fascinated by the construction of the West Gate Bridge? What does it represent to him?

JUSTICE

1. How does the novel explore responsibility, trust, and authority?
2. When Ray overhears the engineer’s warning, he has a chance to act. Was his choice to stay quiet just? Why or why not?
3. Do you think Doug made the right decision by telling Ray not to speak up? What would you have done in Ray’s place?
4. Who do you think was most responsible for the bridge collapse—and was justice ever served?
5. How does the novel show the tension between loyalty and justice?

COURAGE

1. What does courage look like in *The Day the Bridge Fell*? Who shows the most courage, and how?
2. Ray doesn’t run away from the disaster—he runs towards it. Why is this moment so significant?
3. Is speaking up always courageous? Is staying silent ever the braver choice?
4. How does Ray’s courage change from the beginning to the end of the book?
5. What challenges does Ray face after overhearing the two men discussing the bridge? What would you

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have done in his situation?

FORGIVENESS & GUILT

1. Ray carries a heavy sense of guilt after the collapse. Do you think this guilt is justified?
2. Why is it so hard for Ray to forgive himself? What helps him begin to heal?
3. How does guilt affect relationships in the story—between Ray and his dad, or Ray and Tom?
4. What does the novel suggest about how we move past guilt?
5. How does Ray's relationship with his father influence his actions and choices throughout the story?

LOSS & GRIEF

1. How does the collapse of the bridge impact Ray's sense of safety and innocence?
2. What signs of trauma or grief does Ray show in the aftermath?
3. How do different characters process grief? Compare Ray, Doug, George, and Tom.
4. Have you ever experienced a moment where something felt permanently changed? How did you cope?
5. How does grief affect Ray and the people around him? What does the story say about resilience and recovery?

FAMILY & FRIENDSHIP

1. What kind of father is Doug? In what ways does he support Ray? In what ways does he let him down?
2. How would you describe the friendship between Ray and Tom? How is it tested and how does it survive?
3. George is not a blood relative, but plays an important role in Ray's life. What does this say about chosen family?
4. How does grief affect the way family members communicate—or fail to?
5. How does Ray's relationship with his father influence his actions and choices throughout the story?

AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

6. Why is the West Gate Bridge important in the history of Melbourne? What did it represent at the time?
7. What does the novel reveal about working-class life in 1970s Australia?
8. How does the novel honour the memory of those lost in the real West Gate Bridge collapse?
9. In what ways has Australia changed since the 1970s, particularly in how we view labour, safety, and responsibility?
10. What does the bridge collapse represent beyond just a physical disaster? How does it affect Ray and his community?

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CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

CREATE A WORKPLACE SAFETY AWARENESS POSTER

Task:

In small groups or individually, students will design a visual poster that promotes the importance of workplace safety.

The poster should:

- Include a strong slogan or message
- Highlight key safety practices
- Use imagery and colour effectively
- Refer to real or fictional examples (e.g. conditions on the West Gate Bridge site)

Students may research safety posters from different eras for inspiration.

Extension Option:

Include a QR code or digital link on the poster that leads to a short speech, video, or written explanation of why workplace safety still matters today.

DIARY ENTRY - RAY BEFORE AND AFTER THE COLLAPSE

Task:

Have students write a diary entry he may have written during the events of the novel.

1. Students write two diary entries from Ray's point of view:
 - **Entry One:** The night before the collapse
 - **Entry Two:** A few days after the collapse
 - Optional Prompt: "Sometimes I think if I had just spoken up..."
2. Encourage students to consider:
 - Ray's tone, thoughts, and feelings
 - His relationship with his father and Tom
 - The internal conflict about overhearing the engineers
 - His emotional response to the tragedy
3. The entries should be personal, reflective, and use language appropriate to a teenage boy in the 1970s.

Extension Option:

- Have students perform one of the diary entries as a short monologue.

WRITE A NEWS REPORT ON THE COLLAPSE

Task:

1. Students take on the role of a reporter at the scene on the day of the collapse.
2. Their article should include:
 - A headline
 - A lead paragraph summarising the event
 - Quotes from “witnesses” (students can create quotes from Ray, Tom, workers, or residents)
 - Factual information (what happened, when, where, possible cause)
 - Emotional and community impact
3. Encourage attention to journalistic style and structure.

Extension Options:

- Create a layout that looks like a 1970s newspaper.
- Record the report as a news bulletin video or podcast segment.

KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

CURRICULUM V9

YEAR 8

English

AC9E8LE03 - explain how language and/or images in texts position readers to respond and form viewpoints

AC9E8LY01 - identify how texts reflect contexts

AC9E8LY05 - use comprehension strategies such as visualising, predicting, connecting, summarising, monitoring, questioning and inferring to interpret and evaluate ideas in texts

AC9E8LE04 - identify intertextual references in literary texts and explain how the references enable new understanding of the aesthetic quality of the text

AC9E8LY03 - analyse and evaluate the ways that language features vary according to the purpose and audience of the text, and the ways that sources and quotations are used in a text

YEAR 9

English

AC9E9LA08 - analyse how vocabulary choices contribute to style, mood and tone

AC9E9LA02 - understand how evaluation can be expressed directly and indirectly using devices such as allusion, evocative vocabulary and metaphor

AC9E9LE04 - analyse texts and evaluate the aesthetic qualities and appeal of an author's literary style

AC9E9LY01 - analyse how representations of people, places, events and concepts reflect contexts

AC9E9LY03 - analyse and evaluate how language features are used to represent a perspective of an issue, event, situation, individual or group

AC9E9LA01 - recognise how language empowers relationships and roles

AC9E9LE02 - present a personal response to a literary text comparing initial impressions and subsequent analysis of the whole text

AC9E9LE03 - analyse how features of literary texts influence readers' preference for texts

AC9E9LE05 - analyse the effect of text structures, language features and literary devices such as extended metaphor, metonymy, allegory, symbolism and intertextual references

Civics and Citizenship

AC9HC9K06 - the influence of a range of media, including social media, in shaping identity and attitudes to diversity

YEAR 10

English

AC9E10LA01 - understand how language can have inclusive and exclusive social effects, and can empower or disempower people

AC9E10LE06 - compare and evaluate how “voice” as a literary device is used in different types of texts, such as poetry, novels and film, to evoke emotional responses

AC9E10LE05 - analyse how text structure, language features, literary devices and intertextual connections shape interpretations of texts

AC9E10LE04 - evaluate the social, moral or ethical positions represented in literature

AC9E10LE03 - analyse how the aesthetic qualities associated with text structures, language features, literary devices and visual features, and the context in which these texts are experienced, influence audience response

AC9E10LY03 - analyse and evaluate how language features are used to implicitly or explicitly represent values, beliefs and attitudes

AC9E10LE07 - analyse and evaluate the aesthetic qualities of texts, for example, analysing and evaluating the use of literary devices

AC9E10LY01 - analyse and evaluate how people, places, events and concepts are represented in texts and reflect contexts

AC9E10LA02 - understand that language used to evaluate, implicitly or explicitly reveals an individual's values

CURRICULUM 8.4

SENIOR SECONDARY

English

The Day the Bridge Fell can be used as a text for Years 11 and 12. It can be used in English, Literature and Essential English. The applications can include the intersection of humanities, health and history. Character arcs and motivations can also be observed.

AUSTRALIA IN THE 1970S: THEN VS NOW

Set in Melbourne's inner-west in the 1970s, *The Day the Bridge Fell* takes place during a time of major change in Australian society. By comparing life in the 1970s to today, we can better understand the characters' values, choices, and the world they lived in.

	1970s	Today
Working-Class Life	<p>Many families in suburbs like Footscray, Yarraville and Altona were working-class, often relying on jobs in construction, factories, and manufacturing.</p> <p>Trades like rigging, welding, and ironwork were male-dominated and physically dangerous.</p> <p>Immigrant communities, particularly Greek and Italian Australians, were growing rapidly, contributing to a multicultural but sometimes divided Australia.</p> <p>Families tended to live locally and know their neighbours well.</p>	<p>Australia has a more service-based economy; fewer people work in heavy industry or trades.</p> <p>Health and safety regulations in workplaces are much stricter.</p> <p>Multiculturalism is more recognised and celebrated, with broader inclusion of languages, cultures, and traditions.</p> <p>Suburbs once considered "working-class" are now often gentrified and expensive.</p>
School Life	<p>Uniforms were often stricter, and schools were more formal.</p> <p>Corporal punishment (physical discipline) was still legal in many schools.</p> <p>There were fewer resources—no laptops or mobile phones, and classroom technology was basic (e.g., chalkboards, overhead projectors).</p> <p>Students were expected to respect authority figures without question.</p>	<p>Schools are more student-centred, with a focus on wellbeing, inclusion, and digital literacy.</p> <p>Corporal punishment is banned.</p> <p>Students use modern technology daily (laptops, tablets, smartboards).</p> <p>There's more emphasis on critical thinking and student voice.</p>
Social Expectations and Masculinity	<p>Men were often expected to be tough, unemotional, and the main providers.</p> <p>Talking about feelings or mental health was rare and often discouraged.</p> <p>Parents were respected but not always emotionally available.</p>	<p>Ideas about masculinity are shifting—men are encouraged to talk about their emotions and mental health.</p> <p>There's greater awareness and support for gender equality, mental health, and inclusive parenting styles.</p>

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Media, Culture & Entertainment	<p>No internet, social media, or streaming. People listened to vinyl records, watched TV (often in black and white), and went to the cinema for entertainment.</p> <p>Australian culture was shaped by shows like Countdown and events like the Whitlam Dismissal.</p> <p>Kids played outside more often and had greater independence in their neighbourhoods.</p>	<p>Access to global media via streaming, YouTube, TikTok, and gaming.</p> <p>More diverse representation in media and stories.</p> <p>Increased concerns about screen time and online safety for young people.</p>
Infrastructure and Industry	<p>Melbourne's West Gate Bridge was under construction and seen as a symbol of modernisation and progress.</p> <p>Workplace accidents were common in construction due to limited safety regulations.</p> <p>Environmental awareness was only just emerging as a public issue.</p>	<p>Infrastructure projects now involve advanced engineering, digital modelling, and strict safety and environmental protocols.</p> <p>Workplace health and safety laws are enforced nationally.</p> <p>Sustainability is a core consideration in construction and public works.</p>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Imagine you were a teenager living in Ray's suburb in the 1970s. What do you think your daily life would look like—at school, at home, and with friends?
- Ray didn't have access to phones, the internet, or social media. How might this have affected the way friendships were built and maintained?
- If you were in Ray's shoes—without the ability to text or message your friends instantly—how would you communicate your fears or concerns?
- Why do you think people like Doug (Ray's dad) took such pride in their work, even though it was dangerous?
- Today, safety at work is more strictly enforced. Why is it important to have rules that protect workers? Can you think of any jobs today that are still high-risk?
- How would you feel if a parent or loved one worked in a physically dangerous job like construction or rigging?
- Ray and his neighbours live in a tight-knit community. What are the advantages and challenges of living in such a place?
- In the novel, Ray knows the workers, neighbours, and shopkeepers personally. Do you feel your own neighbourhood has a strong sense of community? Why or why not?
- How have communities changed over time, especially with the rise of online communication?

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- How do you think students' voices and rights have changed in schools since the 1970s?
 - Do you think Ray would have made different choices if he had the support of a school counsellor or access to mental health resources?
 - Are there benefits to a simpler school life without screens and digital distractions? What might you miss?
 - In *The Day the Bridge Fell*, the bridge is more than just a structure. What does it symbolise for Ray? For his father? For the community?
 - Today, what kinds of public structures or projects symbolise progress in your city or suburb?
 - Have you ever witnessed or experienced a moment when something you admired or trusted suddenly felt unsafe or flawed? How did it change your view?
 - What are some ways Australian society has become more inclusive since the 1970s? What are some things we're still working on?
 - Immigrant families in the novel, like George Demetriou's, were part of a changing Australia. What contributions have migrant communities made to Australia today?
 - Do you think we remember and honour the sacrifices of workers from past generations enough? Why or why not?

EXPLORE FURTHER

The Day the Bridge Fell is set in Melbourne in the 1970s. Do some research on your own town or city and discover what life was like in the 1970s.

Create your own table and compare life in your home location to that of the 1970s. Consider technological changes and advancements, societal progress, and environmental concerns.