



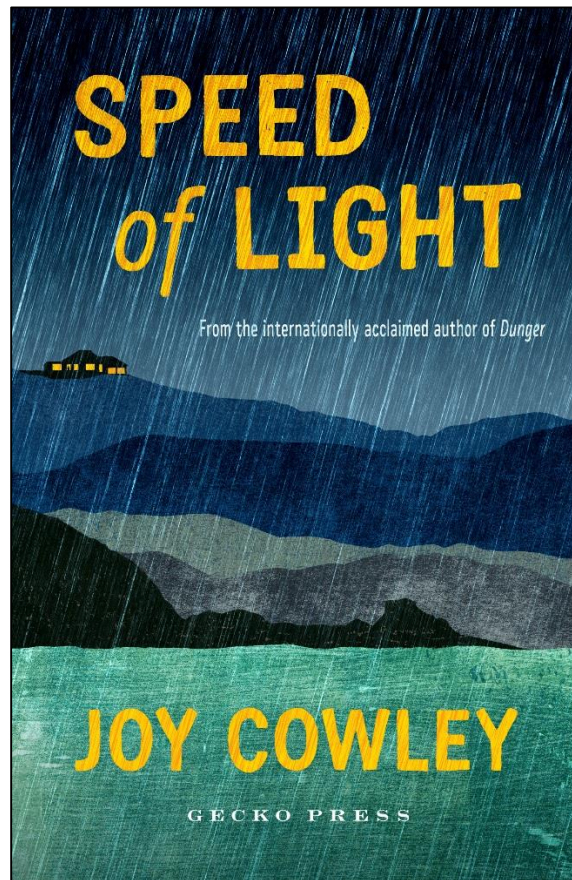
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**Teaching Notes**

*Speed of Light*

by Joy Cowley



**Synopsis**

With a father more interested in money than his family, a brother in prison, a sister with a secret, and a mother in denial, it's no wonder Jeff buries himself in the safe world of mathematics.

When a storm hits Wellington, a strange old woman is blown into Jeff's life, challenging everything he thinks is true.



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## **The Author**

Joy Cowley is one of New Zealand's best-loved writers whose work is enjoyed by children all around the world. She began writing for children at the age of 16 when she had an after-school job editing the children's page for a local newspaper. Since then she has written and published books, stories and learning materials for both children and adults. She has been awarded an OBE for her services to children's writing, the A W Reed Award for Contribution to NZ Literature, and the Prime Minister's Prize for Literary Achievement. After many years living in the Marlborough Sounds, Joy now lives in Wellington, New Zealand.

## **Themes**

This sophisticated and beautifully written novel about a family in crisis has several themes.

An overarching theme of the book is that of family relationships. As events unfold the Lorimer family undergoes trying times, with their secrets, memories and love, sorely tested. Jeff's strained family life is juxtaposed with that of the relaxed and loving Fitzgibbon household.

The themes of greed, fraud and keeping up appearances are explored in depth. Winston Lorimer's greed and obsession with outward appearances are contributing factors to the family's downfall. This is illustrated by the family's choice to live in a remote, inaccessible and stylish house, and Winston's eagerness to become embroiled in, and then unwittingly falling victim to, an elaborate and fraudulent property scheme. Winston and Helen's obsession is taken to further extremes when they would rather disown their criminal son, Beckett, than potentially negatively affect others' perception of their family, or ruin the chances of making their property deal. The stress and tension associated



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with these themes leads to the family unravelling and comes to a head with an ugly incident of domestic violence.

The theme of abuse is evident not only in the episode of domestic violence, which is a clear manifestation of a cycle of abuse that Winston is caught in and has suffered through as a child, but also in other examples of abuse unleashed on other characters. Winston verbally and emotionally abuses all members of his own family, as well as employees and innocent victims, such as Eddie and Maisie.

Despite this negative behaviour the themes of humanity and finding support in unlikely places is also evident. This can be seen in Jeff's ability to be open to and willing to befriend good and decent people, even when the other members of his immediate family are wary of them.

These characters, such as Eddie and Maisie, help Jeff and his family as they struggle through a dark time.

The themes of dark and light are seen throughout the book, both literally and metaphorically. The physical darkness of a raging storm sets off a spiral of negative events for Jeff and his family, as they emotionally and spiritually battle dark secrets, emotions and relationships. Maisie is bathed in light as she passes away after she has imparted her words of advice about finding and holding onto the light, which have helped Jeff get through the dark and turbulent times.

Something further that Jeff relies on to help him cope during this time is mathematics. This theme is evident throughout the book, as Jeff uses mathematics and numerology as a guiding force through the times of adversity. The reliability and logic of numbers helps comfort him in his increasingly uncertain world.

Other themes that are illustrated and play an important part in the book are those of the supernatural, and life and death. These are particularly seen through the mysterious character of Maisie. Her beliefs and the wisdom which she



imparts to Jeff during the last weeks of her life, and her motivation for doing so, are explored.

A final theme in the book is that of reform, and the positive effects this can have on the individual and those around them. An example of this is when Winston must physically rebuild himself after his stroke, which helps him to face up to and apologise for the array of mistakes he has made, and the damage it has caused his family - the family Jeff never gave up on.

### **Activities**

1. Before reading, discuss the title, cover illustration and genre.
2. The novel is written in the third person. Why do you think the author chose to do this? Was it effective? Choose a passage in the book and rewrite it in the first person narrative.
3. The novel is narrated from Jeff's perspective. Choose a passage relating to one of the main events of the novel and re-write the passage as a monologue in another character's voice, such as the morning after the storm from Maisie's perspective. Think about the kind of vocabulary your chosen character would use, and how their opinion of the event might differ from Jeff's. Present your monologue to your class.
4. Figurative language is used to convey ideas that might otherwise be difficult to express. Examples of figurative language mentioned and /or evident in the book are metaphor, parable and allegory (p. 128). Find examples of each type of figurative language from the book and/or create your own example.
5. The author particularly uses nature imagery in the metaphors and similes, for example, 'Jeff got used to it, the ebb and flow of each day, currents moving in set patterns.' (p. 147) and 'Those eyes black as coal, shone with silent laughter.' (p. 155). Find three more examples of nature similes from the book. Then in pairs, think of six other types of forces of nature and create a simile or metaphor for each.



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6. The book explores the relationship between Jeff and the other members of his immediate family. In groups, discuss the following: Do you like Jeff and the other members of his family as characters? What do you think of their reactions to different situations and what do their reactions tell us about them and their personalities? Do you think they have a realistic familial relationship? Why or why not? What conflicts and resolutions are evident for the family within the novel? Do you believe that their relationships develop and change through the book? If so how, and what are the main events which contribute to the development and change?
7. Do you think Jeff is a strong protagonist? Why/why not? Which other characters do you feel display strength or weakness? In pairs, write character studies on three of the main characters. Begin by making a chart to list the strengths and weaknesses of each. How do their particular strengths and weaknesses affect the part they play in the novel?
8. The book has many beautiful descriptions of real-world settings and places, as well as ideas and feelings, for example, the description of Jeff's family's house and the storm brewing (pp. 9-10), Maisie's explanation to Jeff that life is merely a dream (pp. 72-73), or Jeff's relief at the comforting chaos of the Fitzgibbon household (pp. 102-103). Using the author's style as inspiration, write your own descriptive paragraph or poem about either a place, idea or feeling that is important to you.
9. There are allusions in the novel to fairy tales, myths, legends and science fiction or fantasy films, for example, Hansel and Gretel (p. 33), *The Matrix* (p. 87) and Orpheus (p. 130). Find any others in the novel. What is their significance in relation to the key ideas of the novel?



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10. Andrea explains to Jeff that as well as the domestic violence and physical abuse he witnessed at home, there are other types of abuse such as child abuse or elder abuse (p. 187). In groups, find an organisation that has been set up to help victims of abuse. Design a marketing campaign to help draw attention to their work. The campaign could include elements such as pamphlets, scripts for school talks, radio jingles, posters, slogans, etc.
11. Maisie tells Jeff that she is a dream-keeper and her job is to help him ‘...bring back the memory of Light.’ (p. 128). Choose your favourite quote from Maisie, or one of the key ideas that she talks to Jeff about, and create your own artistic interpretation of it. Use, for example, a diorama, painting, model, poem, cartoon strip, movie storyboard, video, etc.
12. Jeff starts to read aloud the letter from Beckett to Winston (p.184). Write the conclusion of Beckett’s letter and then a reply from Winston.
13. Create an illustrated timeline of the main events of the novel. Then choose one event at, or near the end of the book, that is important, and describe how it helped you understand a key idea of the novel.
14. Imagine you are a film producer attempting to gain financial backing to turn *Speed of Light* into a feature film. Write up your proposal, include one or two scenes from the novel turned into a film script, your choices for the soundtrack, casting, location, etc. Or imagine the novel is going to be turned into a stage play. Design a suitable set, programme notes and advertising poster for the play.
15. Which is your favourite chapter in the book? Why? Write a plot summary of it. Study the bold, italicised opening paragraph of your chosen chapter. Write an explanation of why it is relevant to, and how it links with, the contents of your chosen chapter. Use examples from the novel’s text.
16. The author of the novel, Joy Cowley, stated that: “*Speed of Light* is a story about the tension between light and dark, and how the darkness serves the light. It’s a story that confronts our notions that comfort is good and discomfort is evil,



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whereas the seed of new growth actually lies in the shadow.” Using this quote as a starting point, write an essay about how a language feature used in the book, such as symbolism or imagery, helped you understand the key ideas or themes.

17. The cover artwork and design is by Keely O’Shannessy. What do you like/dislike about it? Design your own version of the cover.
18. Review the book for your favourite magazine or website. What did you like about the book? Why? What did you dislike about the book? Why? Give it a rating, such as stars or a number out of ten.