

*Timefire* Teachers Notes

Title: *Timefire*

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years 4 to 6



## SYNOPSIS

Gilbert Black travels back in time from 2033 to major bushfires in Australia's history. Gil, whose mother disappeared in a bushfire when he was a baby, is accused by schoolmates of being a firebug. One sweltering summer night a fire starts. A mysterious man offers an escape and Gil travels through a 'fire tunnel' to Fairhaven in 1983. He meets his teenage grandmother just before the Ash Wednesday fires. Gil then 'fire travels' to other major bushfires as far back as 1851. He discovers his mother's family are 'fire seekers' who keep a balance between the elements and so is he. He returns to the future armed with his new knowledge, to prevent the biggest bushfire ever.

## CHARACTERS

**Gilbert Black** (Gil for short) is a thirteen-year-old boy from Redesdale in 2033. He lives with his dad **Nathan** and his dog Yip on a farm. Gil loves watching a show called Detective Danger on his phone and also is fascinated by history. He has an uncanny ability to predict fires which gets him into trouble.

**Vargo** is a mysterious man in a long black coat who turns up in 2033 and teaches Gil about fire travel. He is Gil's grandfather.

Gil meets the following family members when he travels back in time:

In 1983 Fairhaven and 2009 Kinglake: **Jenny Burns**, his grandmother

Also in 1983 Fairhaven: **Roger Burns**, his great-grandfather

In 1939 Noogee: **Fred Burns**, his great-great grandfather

In 2009 Kinglake: **Sarah Burns**, his mother

and in 1851 Kyneton: **Elsie Burns**, his great, great, great, great, great, great grandmother.

*Timefire* is recommended for ages 10-13 (upper primary).

Australian Curriculum Learning Areas applicable:

HASS Year 5 Australian Communities – Their Past, Present and Possible Futures

Science Year 6 Science as a Human Endeavour

English Years 5&6 Literacy, Literature and Language

## HASS Year 5

*The Year 5 curriculum focuses on colonial Australia in the 1800s and the social, economic, political and environmental causes and effects of Australia's development, and on the relationship between humans and their environment.*

*Students investigate how the characteristics of environments are influenced by humans in different times and places, as they seek resources, settle in new places and manage the spaces within them. They also investigate how environments influence the characteristics of places where humans live and human activity in those places.*

Several chapters of *Timefire* are set in the summer of 1851, just after the major bushfire called 'Black Thursday' and shortly before gold was first discovered in June. Leading up to the bushfires that destroyed a large part of the state of Victoria (or the colony, as it was at the time) there was a drought. The characters in the story live in a rural area near Kyneton where squatters farm the land which has been appropriated from the local Indigenous people. Mention is made of burning off the grass to 'increase the green pick' for the sheep, as being a possible cause of the fires.

## Science Year 6

*Scientific knowledge is used to solve problems and inform personal and community decisions.*

- *Discussing how modern approaches to fire ecology in Australia are being informed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' traditional ecological knowledge and fire management practices.*
- *Investigating how understanding of catastrophic natural events helps in planning for their early detection and minimising their impact*

- *Recognising that science can inform choices about where people live and how they manage natural disasters*

In *Timefire*, several generations of Gil's family are aware of Indigenous fire management. His great-grandfather in 1983 is misunderstood when he tries to do a controlled burn and loses his job over it. He has read about it and believes it will minimise the chance of bushfire but unfortunately, he is 'before his time'. Gil's grandmother in 2009 mentions she has been working under the guidance of some local Indigenous people to do cool burns and to plant better trees, more suited to the environment. Gil has learnt a lot at school in 2023 about Indigenous fire management and is surprised when he goes back to the past and people don't yet understand it. This shows how knowledge can develop over time and generations.

- *Considering how personal and community choices influence our use of sustainable sources of energy*
- *Discussing the use of electricity and the conservation of sources of energy*

The area that Gil lives in in 2023 is filled with paddocks of solar plates. His phone is solar charged. The fuel used in cars is called Sunflower fuel. These all indicate a much needed shift to a more sustainable form of energy in the future.

English

Year 5

Language

*Language variation and change:*

As he travels back in time, Gil encounters some language he doesn't understand and some people also don't understand him. This is largely due to the generational change in language and various times through history. Examples include:

On page 54

“Jenny giggled. ‘It’s bread, you nong.’

Bread? Gil picked up a fluffy white slice which compressed to nothing between his fingers. Bread in 2033 was brown and heavy with seeds and bore no resemblance to this.

‘What’s a nong?’ he asked.

Jenny snorted. ‘You.’”

Slang expressions like ‘nong’ (meaning idiot!) can definitely change from one time to another.

And on page 74

“‘This might seem like a strange question,’ he said to Fred. ‘But what date is it?’

Fred stared at him. ‘Friday 13<sup>th</sup>,’ he said, pronouncing it as “Fridey”. ‘Not a good omen for Noojee eh?’

Gil wondered where on earth Noojee was. He’d never heard of it.

Fred’s gaze rested on Gil’s backpack and the smile faded from his face. He reached out a finger to touch it. ‘What’s that you got on your back, if you don’t mind me askin’?’” Fred shortens a lot of his words, with his accent more close to the English one than the modern-day Australian one.

Also on page 164

“Angus grunted. ‘As could be expected. And you, Gilbert?’

‘I’m OK,’ said Gil.

‘OK?’ said Angus. ‘What does this mean?’

Gil smiled. ‘It means alright. Thank you.’”

In this case, it is Gil's language which is hard to understand as the word 'OK' was not yet used in 1851.

Year 6

English

Literature and context

*Make connections between students' own experiences and those of characters and events represented in texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts.*

- *Recognising the influence our different historical, social and cultural experiences may have on the meaning we make from the text and the attitudes we may develop towards characters, actions and events*

Using things in common experienced by each of the characters, the reader can experience through the modern Gil, how he relates to other generations and times. Gil, Jenny and Elsie are all bullied because of parents whose attempts to help the community are misunderstood. The family motto, which seems old, is just as applicable in 2033 as before 1851. And the nature of bushfires never really changes, although they do seem to be getting a bit worse. Gil is able to tell each family member he runs into, that he comes from the future, so explanations are given when it is difficult to understand. Gil knows he can't wear 2033 clothes in 1939 or 1851. His phone is actually useless in any time other than the one he comes from and he must find other ways of communicating and getting information.

THEMES

Family

By travelling in time, Gil is in the unusual situation where he can meet family members of different generations, when they are the same age as he is. This means he can more easily relate to them and realise no matter the time, some things don't change, such as bullying and

the need to be brave in difficult situations. It also highlights the differences between the earlier and later times in terms of technology, the environment and understanding of the original inhabitants of the land.

#### The environment

Bushfires happen in each time period during the novel, but it is mentioned the fires are getting worse and that the cause of this is climate change. Indigenous fire management is shown as a way to try to naturally control the ecosystem and the growing acceptance of this over the years is demonstrated. Sustainable sources of energy are envisaged as being mainstream in 2033 along with the replacement of plastic with biodegradable alternatives.

#### Resilience

Gil is bullied by Minnie Minogue at school and the other students follow along, sending messages on their phones and ignoring him on the bus. Jenny is also bullied in 1981. Gil notices that even though there are no phones, his bullying is not that different from the smoking tough kids Jenny has to deal with in Fairhaven. During the course of the story Gil gains a lot of confidence from being brave enough to face bushfires and make his own decisions. He eventually is able to stand up for himself against Minnie.

#### Learning from experience

All through the story, Vargo tells Gil, 'You can't change the past, you can only learn from it. The future is the only thing you can change.' It takes a while for Gil to understand this and he keeps trying to change things in the past, only to find it is, as Vargo says, impossible. However his trips to the past give him valuable information so that he is the only one that can make a difference, and just when it counts.

## Discussion ideas

1. How do community attitudes to indigenous fire management vary in different times during the novel. Why do you think this is?
2. Gil has a dog called Yip, but what other pets do the characters have in this story have? How does Yip help Gil to deal with his problems?
3. What would you take with you if a fire threatened your home? What items would be most important to you to not lose in a bushfire?
4. What time in Australia's history would you most like to travel back to and why?
5. How would you feel if you met your mum or dad when they were the same age as you? Do you think you would get along? What would you do together?
6. What are Vargo's three rules of time travel? Can you think of any other rules that would be useful if you go back in time?

## Activities

1. What do you think life will be like in ten years? Choose three things you imagine will be different and write about them.
2. Draw either your own family tree from the past or made-up one for the future and look at or imagine the important events that happened in these years. This can be in Australia or overseas. How would these events affect the members of your family?
3. Design a flowchart of safety procedures that could be used to prevent or minimise injury or damage in the case of a bushfire.



4. What other places around the world are prone to bushfires? Mark these places on a map of the world. How are they different to Australian bushfires and how are they the same?

#### Inspiration for the story

As a child I lived on a farm in Central Victoria and on hot summer days with north winds, we often anxiously watched the horizon for smoke. I often wondered what I would take with me if we had to get out quickly. Fortunately our house was never threatened by bushfire but not everyone around us was so lucky. My grandparents house in Fairhaven was burnt down in the Ash Wednesday fires and while they were OK, we were very sad to lose the lovely house with all its memories. I also knew people affected in the 2009 fires and I think everyone watched the 2020 fires with horror. There were so many stories about the way people came together in their difficult times and I think this is where this story came from.

I love time travel stories. I love the idea of being able to meet your relatives when they were younger. And I love the idea of a kid being able to do something extraordinary, if they are brave and clever enough to do it.

Neane McKenzie is a children's writer and optometrist who lives in western Melbourne. Originally from Bendigo, Neane lived in New Zealand, Europe and North East Africa before returning to Victoria. Neane has had three middle-grade novels published with MidnightSun Publishing: *Cryptosight* (2019), *Xenoflight* (2022), both adventure stories about Australian cryptozoology (creatures that may or may not exist) Her new novel *Timefire* (2023) is a time travel story about bushfires.

Neane was awarded a Maurice Saxby mentorship in 2016, a KSP Writers Centre fellowship for 2023 and has a diploma in Professional Writing and Editing from RMIT. She is a fan of bushwalking, cats, coffee and running.

