

Dugongs of the Sky

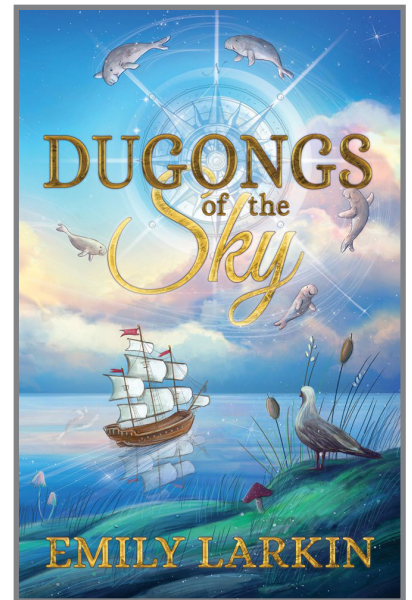
AUTHOR

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SYNOPSIS

The sky dugongs are in danger, but Captain Scree Barnacle is determined to save them.

Her voyage to overturn an ancient hunting law means sailing the perilous Starstruck Straits—and dealing with sabotage. But who is threatening Scree's mission, and are others in danger too?

Can the Wildkin captain and Patch, her plucky ship's mate, untangle a magical plot, help the lost creatures find their way home, and save the animals?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emily Larkin is a Queensland-based author and academic who writes for children, teens, and adults. She is the author of *The Whirlpool*, a picture book illustrated by Hélène Magisson and published by Wombat Books. Emily's young adult novel, *Within the Ward*, was published by Rhiza Edge and explores mental health in a dystopian future. Her short fiction features in the Rhiza Edge anthologies *Crossed Spaces*, *Dust Makers*, and *Stepping Sideways*, and it was Emily's pleasure to also co-edit *Stepping Sideways* with Lynne Stringer. Emily's short fiction and poetry can be found in Australian and international literary journals such as *Meniscus*, *Idiom 23*, *The Write Launch*, *Seizure*, *Literary Orphans*, *Black Fox Literary Magazine*, *The Zodiac Review*, *Number Eleven Magazine*, *Flumes*, *Sad Girl Diaries*, and *Streetlight Magazine*, and Emily collaborated with Thomas Hamlyn-Harris on a visual narrative that was published in *After the Pause*. Emily holds a Doctorate in Writing from the University of the Sunshine Coast and teaches writing and literature at the University of Queensland. She loves animals, nature, and spending time with family and friends.

THEMES

- Friendship and loyalty
- Courage and leadership
- Diversity, prejudice and inclusion
- Animal welfare
- Conservation and environmental responsibility
- Identity and belonging

CURRICULUM LINKS

Year 4 - English, HASS

Year 5 - English, Science, HASS

Year 6 - English, Science, HASS

STUDY NOTES

GENERAL QUESTIONS

- What mission sets Captain Scree Barnacle on her voyage at the beginning of the story?
- What are sky dugongs, and why are they in danger?
- What signs suggest that something suspicious is happening aboard the Whitetider?
- Who is Boppit, and when do we first realise there is more to him than meets the eye?
- What is coin magic, and why does it create problems for some characters?
- What personal challenge is Scree facing as both a captain and a friend?
- What genre (or genres) would you say this book belongs to? What features make you think that?
- Why do you think the author chose flying dugongs as the animals at the centre of the story?
- If you were part of the Wavebearers' Council, what arguments would you need to hear before agreeing to change the hunting law?
- If you suddenly discovered that someone aboard your ship was keeping a dangerous secret, how would you respond?
- Which character do you relate to the most in this story? Why?
- Did your opinion of any character change as the story progressed? What caused that change?
- What was the most surprising, intriguing, or dramatic moment in the novel for you?
- Why do you think some characters justify harming animals for profit or tradition?
- What do you think the novel suggests about what it truly means to be courageous?
- If there were a sequel to *Dugongs of the Sky*, what do you think might happen next?

FRIENDSHIP AND LOYALTY

- How would you describe the friendship between Scree and Patch at the beginning of the novel?
- What moments in the story show that Patch is loyal to Scree?
- How does Scree demonstrate trust in her crew? Are there times when she struggles to trust others?
- How is Boppit treated by different characters aboard the Whitetider? What does this reveal about friendship?
- Can you identify a moment when a friendship is tested? What causes the tension?
- In what ways do Scree, Patch and Boppit help each other grow? How does the author show that friendship can lead to personal growth?
- Is it possible to be both a strong leader and a loyal friend? How does Scree balance these roles?
- How does the author develop the friendship between Scree and Patch through dialogue and shared experiences? Provide specific examples.
- By the end of the novel, how have the main characters redefined what loyalty means to them?
- Identify a moment where a character must choose between loyalty to a friend and loyalty to a rule, role, or belief. What does this decision reveal about their values?
- How do secrets influence trust between characters? Is loyalty strengthened or weakened by keeping secrets in this story?
- Patch is loyal to Scree, but does he always agree with her decisions? How does disagreement affect their relationship?
- How does the power dynamic between captain and crew complicate friendship aboard the Whitetider?
- Consider Boppit's situation. How does fear affect his ability to trust others?
- Are there moments when loyalty becomes dangerous? Provide examples.
- Do you think loyalty should have limits? Use evidence from the text to support your argument.

COURAGE AND LEADERSHIP

- What different types of courage are shown in the novel (physical courage, moral courage, emotional courage)? Provide examples of each.
- Can you find a moment where Scree has to make a hard choice? What does she decide?
- How do we know that Scree cares about her crew?
- What makes someone a good captain or leader?
- If you were captain of the Whitetider, what would you have done differently?
- How does Captain Scree demonstrate bravery in her mission to overturn the hunting law?
- Is Scree always confident in her leadership? How does the author reveal her doubts?
- How does leadership aboard the Whitetider differ from leadership within the Wavebearers' Council?
- How does Patch demonstrate leadership, even though he is not the captain?
- Can someone show courage without being in a position of power? Use an example from the text.
- How does the author use tension and conflict to test Scree's leadership abilities?
- When does leadership require listening rather than commanding? Does Scree learn this lesson?
- Are there characters who misuse power? How does this contrast with Scree's leadership style?
- Do you think courage is something people are born with, or something they develop? How does the novel support your view?
- By the end of the story, in what ways has Scree grown as a leader?
- Should a good leader prioritise rules, people, or principles? Use evidence from the novel to support your argument.

ENGAGING WITH THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

- Who are the Wildkin in the story? How are they different from humans?
- How are some Wildkin treated by others in the novel?
- Can you find an example of a character being judged before others know the full truth about them?
- Why do you think some humans distrust or dislike Wildkin?
- What does the story suggest about being "different"?
- Can you think of a moment when a character changes their mind about someone else?
- What is the difference between being cautious and being prejudiced?
- How does the author encourage readers to feel empathy for characters who are treated unfairly?
- In what ways does language (dialogue or description) reveal bias in the story?
- Are traditions ever used to justify unfair treatment? Provide an example from the novel.
- How do friendship and understanding help reduce prejudice in the story?
- Do you think prejudice in the novel reflects real-world issues? Explain your thinking.
- What responsibility do characters have to challenge unfair treatment when they see it?
- What does the novel suggest about inclusion and belonging?
- Why is it important to question stereotypes?
- How might the story change if Wildkin and humans were treated equally from the beginning?

ANIMAL WELFARE

- Why are the sky dugongs in danger?
- How do the characters feel when they see the dugongs harmed or threatened?
- Why are the sky dugongs important to the world of the story?
- What reasons do some characters give for continuing to hunt dugongs?
- Do you think those reasons are fair? Why or why not?
- How does the author make readers care about the dugongs?
- What is the difference between hunting for survival and hunting for profit?
- How does Scree show that she values animal life?
- Why might it be difficult to change an old law, even if it harms animals?

- How does the novel show the connection between people and the natural world?
- In what ways does the story reflect real-world issues about endangered animals?
- Should humans always have the right to use animals for their own benefit? Explain your thinking.
- How do laws influence the way animals are treated?
- How does the author use emotion, imagery or description to influence the reader's opinion about hunting?
- What parallels can you draw between the sky dugongs and real endangered Australian animals?
- After reading this novel, has your thinking about animal protection changed in any way?

CONSERVATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

- What does it mean to conserve something?
- How does the natural environment affect the characters' lives in the story?
- What dangers do the Starstruck Straits and surrounding waters present?
- How do human actions impact the natural world?
- What role does protecting the environment and animals' habitats have in conservation, both for planet and for the animals in danger?
- What is the difference between using natural resources carefully and exploiting them?
- Why might some people ignore environmental damage if it benefits them financially?
- How does the author show that the environment is valuable, even beyond its usefulness to humans?
- How does the novel suggest that individuals can make a difference in protecting the environment?
- Are there characters who believe conservation is unnecessary? What reasons do they give?
- How does the story demonstrate that environmental responsibility sometimes requires sacrifice?
- Can protecting the environment ever create conflict? Provide an example from the novel.
- What connections can you make between the conservation issues in the story and environmental challenges in Australia today?
- Do you think one person can create meaningful environmental change? Why or why not?
- How does the novel encourage readers to think about their own responsibility toward animals and ecosystems?
- If you lived in the Realm of Tides, what actions could you take to protect the sky dugongs?

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

- Which characters struggle with who they are in the story?
- How does Patch feel about being a Wildkin? Does he always feel proud of who he is?
- Why might Boppit feel like he does not fully belong?
- How can being "different" affect a person's sense of belonging?
- Can you find a moment where a character feels accepted? What makes that moment important?
- What does belonging mean to you?
- How does the ship (the Whitetider) act as a place of belonging for some characters?
- Are there times when a character hides part of their identity? Why?
- How does fear influence whether a character feels safe to be themselves?
- In what ways do labels (like Wildkin, Rumshuckle, captain, boy) shape how others treat a character?
- How does the author show that identity is more complex than appearances?
- Can someone belong in more than one place or group at the same time? Find an example in the novel.
- What role does acceptance play in helping characters grow?
- Do you think belonging is something we find, or something we build? Explain using evidence from the story.
- How might the story change if characters felt fully accepted from the beginning?
- What message does the novel send about embracing who you are?

KINDNESS

- What is one moment in the story where a character shows kindness?
- Who is the kindest character in the book? What makes you think that?

- How does Patch show kindness to others?
- How are the sky dugongs treated by different characters? Who shows them kindness?
- Is it always easy to be kind? Why or why not?
- How does kindness help build friendships in the story?
- Can kindness change someone's behaviour or decisions? Can you find an example?
- Is kindness ever mistaken for weakness in the novel? Why might that happen?
- How does kindness influence Captain Scree's leadership?
- Does showing kindness sometimes require courage? Explain with an example.
- How does kindness help challenge prejudice or unfair traditions in the story?
- Are there moments where kindness involves sacrifice? What does this show about a character?
- How might the story have changed if certain characters had chosen cruelty instead of kindness?
- Does the novel suggest that kindness can create real change in laws, systems, or communities? How?
- Is kindness presented as a personal trait, a moral responsibility, or a political act? Explain.
- Can kindness be strategic? Is there a difference between genuine kindness and performative kindness?

MAGIC

- Where do we first see magic in the story?
- What makes the magic in this world different from magic in other books you've read?
- How do the sky dugongs connect to magic?
- Do all characters believe in magic? Why or why not?
- How does magic create problems or danger in the story?
- How does magic help move the plot forward?
- Is magic shown as something that should be controlled, protected, or shared? Explain.
- How do different characters use or respond to magic differently?
- Does magic make things easier for the characters, or does it create more complications?
- How does magic connect to themes of responsibility and leadership?
- Could the story exist without magic? What would change?
- Is magic in this novel a symbol for something else (for example: power, nature, freedom, tradition)?
- Who has power over magic in the story, and what does that suggest about fairness or control?
- Does the novel suggest that magic belongs to everyone, or only to certain groups? Why might that matter?
- How does magic shape the world of the story? Consider the social, political, or environmental aspects of *Dugongs of the Sky* and how they were affected by magic.
- How does the presence of magic change the way characters understand not just their world but also themselves?

FURTHER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Character

- In pairs, rehearse and perform the adapted dialogue between Scree and Patch (Chapter 2). Focus on expression, gesture, and tone.
- Which character would you most like to be friends with? Support your answer with evidence from the text.
- Which character changes the most throughout the story? Explain what causes this change and how the author shows it.
- Were you surprised by any character's actions? Why?
- If you were in Patch's position onboard the Skerry, how would you have responded to Reef?
- If you suspected someone was being bullied onboard the Whitetider, what would you do? How can you tell if your actions truly helped?
- Who do you think is the most likeable character in this story? Who is the least likeable? Brainstorm with your peers.
- What does Scree learn about leadership and friendship? Does she become a better captain by the end? Explain.

Setting

- What would be the best and most challenging aspects of living on a ship? Justify your ideas.
- Define the following nautical terms using context clues, then compare with a peer: porthole, starboard, crow's nest, lateen-rigged, mainmast, tacking, rigging, riptide.
- If you worked on the Whitetider, what role would you choose and why?
- How do details such as food, clothing, wildlife, and legends enrich the setting?

Plot and structure

- What is the first clue that Boppit fears Garumph?
- Identify a key plot twist. How does it affect the direction of the story?
- What are the consequences of the coin magic? Why do certain characters resent their forced forms?
- What is the climax of the novel? Explain why it is effective.
- Analyse selected chapter endings. How does the author build tension or suspense?
- Examine the scene break in Chapter 20. What purpose does it serve?
- Write an alternative ending to the novel. Include figurative language and edit carefully for clarity and impact.

Narrative perspective

- The novel uses third-person narration with shifting focalisation. How does this shape readers' understanding of characters?
- How does the story change when the perspective shifts?
- Rewrite a key scene from a different character's point of view (e.g. Reef, Estefani, Falco, or a dugong calf).

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES**Endangered species research project**

- Students choose a real endangered Australian animal and research:
 - Habitat
 - Diet
 - Threats
 - Conservation efforts
- They present findings in: a poster, a short speech, or a digital slideshow. Students should draw parallels between their chosen species and the sky dugongs.

Character trait map

- Create a trait map for one of the following:
 - Captain Scree Barnacle
 - Patch
 - Boppit
 - Reef
 - Estefani
- Students must include:
 - Adjectives describing the character
 - Direct evidence or quotes from the text
 - How the character changes over time
 - A symbol that represents the character
- For comparison, students may analyse two characters and explore how their leadership styles or moral choices differ.

Rewrite the ending

- Students write an alternative ending to the novel. Options:

- The council rejects Scree's petition
- A new threat to the dugongs emerges
- A character makes a different moral choice
- Encourage the use of literary devices such as imagery, foreshadowing, or metaphor.

'Save the Dugongs' campaign

- Students design a campaign to protect the sky dugongs. They must include:
 - A slogan
 - A persuasive paragraph explaining why the dugongs should be protected
 - A visual element (poster, digital slide, or banner)
 - One practical action citizens of the Realm of Tides could take
- Students may present their campaign as if speaking to the Wavebearers' Council.

Design the Whitetider

- In pairs or individually, students design their own version of the Whitetider. Aim to include the following:
 - Draw and label key areas of the ship (crow's nest, deck, cabins, rigging, etc.)
 - Explain the role of at least three crew members
 - Include one "secret feature" that could help protect the dugongs
- Students may present their design as a recruitment pitch for new crewmates.

Captain's log entry

- Students write a captain's log entry from Scree's perspective during a moment of tension in the novel. Ideas for inclusion:
 - What has just happened
 - Scree's private thoughts or doubts
 - Her hopes for the crew
 - Any worries about sabotage or leadership
- For extension, students may write from Patch's or Boppit's perspective instead.

Wavebearers' Council debate

- Create a mock council meeting. Divide students into roles:
 - Captain Scree (arguing to overturn the hunting law)
 - Council members (some supportive, some opposed)
 - Hunters defending tradition
 - Citizens concerned about the economy
 - Environmental advocates
- Students must prepare arguments and respond respectfully to opposing views.
- After the debate, reflect: was the decision fair? What made an argument convincing?

Wildkin Field Guide

- Students create a field guide entry for a Wildkin. Include:
 - Physical characteristics
 - Abilities or strengths
 - Habitat
 - Cultural or social traits
 - Challenges they face in society
- For extension, students design their own original Wildkin species and explain how it would fit into the Realm of Tides.