



STRANDED

A **STUDYGUIDE** BY SALLY CAMPBELL

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STRANDED

Synopsis

In a family grieving the death of a loved one, how long does it take before the abnormal seems normal? Loss, love and family values are all up for re-negotiation in this unusual black comedy about a girl trying to start a new life a year after her mother's suicide. Seventeen-year old Claudia (Emma Lung) lives in a world of no job, no school, and no money. She has crazy, territorial fights with her younger sister, Penny (Emily Browning), who is becoming increasingly involved in stealing and drugs. Their father, Rex (Robert Morgan), simply will not get off the couch and struggles to care for the girls as he copes with his own grief.

When two children are dumped on the family, Claudia moves into her mother's abandoned car in the driveway. She plans to fix it and leave her family once and for all, but when she falls in love with the cute kleptomaniac, Cam (David Hoflin), she is forced to confront her fears and comes face-to-face with mother's decision to end her life. Will Claudia choose life? *Stranded* explores complex social issues through the eyes of a teenager determined to carve her own path as she copes with a family tragedy.





About the Filmmakers

DIRECTOR STUART MC DONALD
Graduated from Swinburne Film School in 1989. As well as writing and directing the two Australian Film Institute award winning short films, *Mr Electric* and *My Second Car*, he wrote and directed for the award winning ABC series *Seachange* and directed episodes of *The Secret Life of Us* and *MDA*. He has also directed a play starring the prisoners in a maximum-security prison and recently shot a documentary in Tibet. Stuart is nominated for an AFI Award in 2006 for *Stranded*.

WRITER KATHLEEN O'BRIEN grew up in suburban Sydney. She has worked as a photographer in the music industry, written teen novels and won awards for her short films. She graduated from Sydney's University of Technology in 1991 and her final year film, *Evidence*, won many awards, including Silver for Best Short Film at the Chicago Film Festival. She is currently developing the feature script *Anarchy for Beginners* and a novel, *Little Black Dress*. In 2006 Kathleen is nominated for an AFI Award for Best Screenplay in a short film for *Stranded*.

PRODUCERS BETH FREY AND LIZZETTE ATKINS are independent producers committed to innovative and entertaining storytelling. Together, they have CIRCE Films and bring many years of experience both within and outside the film industry, including extensive marketing, film distribution and business experience. They have developed and produced a diverse range of award-winning films, including the documentaries *Vietnam Nurses*, *Do Not Resuscitate*, *Passport to Parenthood*,

Undercover Angels: Sex, Spies and Surveillance, TV drama *Stranded*, feature film *Night, Swift* for ABC arts, animation *Mutt* and the hybrid documentary and online series *Podlove* for SBS. In 2006 they received seven AFI nominations across *Vietnam Nurses* and *Stranded*.

Awards and nominations

2006 Three AFI Award nominations - Best Short Fiction, Best Screenplay and Outstanding Achievement Award for Emma Lung (actor). Announced December 2006

2006 Winner
ATOM Award Best Short Fiction

2006 Winner
Inside Film Award Best Short Film

2006 Winner Film Critics Circle Award Best Australian Short

2006 Winner Best Long Short Dendy Awards Sydney Film Festival

2006 Winner Magnolia Award Best Actress, Shanghai TV Festival.

2005 Nominated Queensland Premier's Award for Best Film Script

Curriculum Links

This film will be of interest to teachers and students from middle to senior secondary school in the following subject areas: English, Studies of Society and Environment, and Media Studies. The study guide is divided into relevant subject areas to usefully address issues raised in each class.

English

This section of the Study Guide is designed to engage students in the study of the film as text through discussion of identity and relationships as key themes in the film. It also includes a segment





dedicated to questions and activities relevant to a narrative study of the film, including issues of genre, character, and setting.

Identity

The central character in *Stranded* is Claudia, a teenager trying to escape her family's stalled life and establish her own independent space and identity. She thinks she has to remain single-minded and not get emotionally involved with anyone. Claudia's search for her identity is partly resolved when she learns from Cam that letting someone into her life is a risk worth taking.

- Name the significant people or events that help Claudia define her identity. In your opinion, what is the most significant thing that happens to Claudia in the film that shapes her development? Why?
- In what ways is Claudia's life experience the result of the social, cultural and economic characteristics of the community where she lives?
- What are the discoveries Claudia makes that change her views of her self, her family, community and future?
- In what ways do the events in the film empower Claudia and show her capable of making choices in love and life?
- What do you think are Claudia's strengths and weaknesses? In assessing Claudia's character you may want to consider: her different relationships with the other characters in the film, her relationship with Cam, the way she responds to events she encounters on her own.
- Having a sense of identity is knowledge of who we are and where we belong. Do you think Claudia has discovered her distinctive personal identity by the end of the film? Describe her transition and the important lessons she's learned from her journey.
- The search for identity is an experience common to adolescents. Do you think Claudia is a typical teenager? Describe the film's representation of her personal goals, family circumstances, and cultural upbringing that affect her search. Did you identify with her? How? What

aspects of her experience are unique from your own?

- Write a diary of a week in Claudia's life describing her thoughts and emotions in the circumstances she encounters.
- When Claudia reveals to Cam that her mother committed suicide she shrugs off his sympathy and says, 'Makes a good story'. What does she mean by this? Discuss Claudia's response to her mother's suicide and her way of coping. Does she need help from outside sources or can she recover on her own?

Relationships

Stranded revolves around the relationships of its central characters



and the events and choices by which these relationships evolve. The film's Director, Stuart McDonald, says that:

Acting is more about re-acting so we worked to weave together all of those interconnected relationships. My favourite scenes in the film are those in which we are drawn to the way they relate rather than one performance.

- Describe the relationship between Claudia and Penny. In what ways are they enemies and in what ways is their behaviour complicit? Is their relationship typical of siblings? What



are the similarities and differences from your knowledge or experience of sibling relationships? Would their relationship be different if they were brothers? Explain your answer.

- Life for the Kelly family is interrupted by the intrusion of the opportunistic Linda and her two young kids. Why do you think Penny brings them to her family despite her father and sister's desire to be left alone? How does their arrival impact the family?
- *Stranded* is also a story about first love between Claudia and Cam. Describe the development of their relationship and its effect on the film's outcome.
- Compare Rex's relationship with his girls at the start of the film to his relationship with them at the film's conclusion. How has it changed? Describe the key events that lead to this change.
- In your opinion, do you think Rex made the right choice to send Linda's kids away with the Vinnies when it's the thing he most dreads for his own family? Does he have a choice? Discuss as a class.
- A significant relationship in the film is between Rex, Claudia, and Penny, with Vicki, their dead wife and mother. Describe the ways in which Vicki is represented in the film and the relationship of Claudia, Penny, and Rex with her and her absence.

Narrative Study

The activities and questions outlined below are designed for class discussion and/or independent study. They are

intended to explore the film as text and analyse how meaning is shaped in the film.

- What did you think about the film? Did you enjoy it? Why or why not? What are its key themes? What aspects of the film had the greatest impact on you?
- Consider the following issues and discuss in small groups or as a class:
 - The thematic issues and problems at the heart of the film;
 - The way these problems are resolved by the end of the film;
 - The centrality of Claudia, as the film's central character, in resolving these problems;
 - The extent to which the problems have actually been resolved.
- A film's genre is the category a script or story falls into depending on its distinctive style or content. What aspects of *Stranded* might lead it to be categorized as a melodrama? Discuss.
- *Stranded* has been described as an 'unusual dark comedy'. Do you think this accurately represents the film's style? Define 'dark comedy' and write a short essay describing its relevance to the film. Consider the role of humour in the film and whether you think the themes of the film are treated in a humorous or satirical manner.
- Is *Stranded* a woman's film? To what extent does the centrality of Claudia as the female protagonist bring up issues important to women and



addressed to a female audience? How are the issues raised through Claudia's experience relevant to men and women? Discuss.

- What is the significance of Tweetie's death? What does it symbolize and how does it affect change in the film?
- Choose one scene in the film and write it as prose. How would you describe the setting, characters, and plot that corresponds with the scene you have chosen? How would the story change if it were being told as a novel and not as a film? Describe or discuss the aspects of narrative that are specific to film, including the use of editing, the use of *mise-en-scène* (all of the things photographed, including lighting, costumes, make-up and setting), and the use of sound.
- Divide a sheet of paper into three columns. In the first column list at least three uses of symbolism in the film. In the second column describe whether each use of symbolism is visual or auditory or both. Finally, in the third column, explain the impact of the use of symbolism and its importance to the film.
- Discuss the relationships introduced at the beginning of the film. Does the lack of harmony within the family give us any clues about how the story will unfold? In your opinion is the film's plot predictable or were you surprised by the way it progressed? What actions are taken to restore equilibrium?

Studies of Society and Environment

Stranded tells the story of the Kelly family within a community context. Despite the Kelly family's desire to be left alone, they are not isolated. Social, economic, and cultural aspects of their community influence their choices and development. This section explores the interdependence of family and communities in the context of dysfunction and loss discussed in the film.

Family

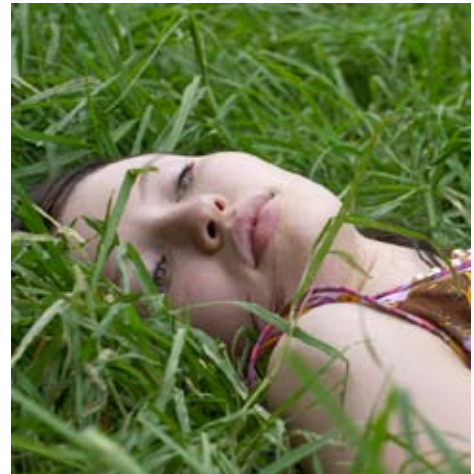
Family is one of the film's central themes. *Stranded* is a film about an Australian family's experience, exploring

issues related to the breakdown of the family unit, dysfunction, and the family's collective identity in the struggle to recover from loss.

Divide the class into groups and have each consider, discuss, and present their views on the role of family in the film and in their lives.

- Ask each group to develop their own definition of family. What does it mean to them? Students should consider the many ways that family impacts them, including family traditions, income, environment, religious beliefs, and other aspects central to their family identity.
- The film's writer, Kathleen O'Brien, says that she:

... Wanted to show that affection and



love and family life can take different forms, and that the world is filled with people who have different ideas about parenting and survival but at heart human connections are fundamentally the same.

Ask each small group to discuss this statement. How does the film challenge conventional notions of families and the family structure? How does it compare to each group's initial definition of family?

Ask each group to present their views to the class by way of initiating a class discussion. The teacher may want to direct the students to specific issues raised in the film, including:

- How does Rex's grief interfere with his ability to parent effectively? In what ways does his behaviour change over the course of the film? Do you



think he's a good father? How have you formed your judgement of him?

- When Rex asks Cam 'don't you have a home to go to?' Cam responds, 'No, not really.' Why do you think this is included in the film? What do we learn from it about the representation of the family unit in the film and about Cam and his notation of family?
- In your opinion, what do the two children who are dumped on the Kelly family bring to the story and our understanding of family as defined by the film?
- What expectations does Claudia have of her family and them of her? Are these expectations met?
- Why do you think the film writer does not explain the reason for Vicki's suicide? Discuss the importance of suicide to the film and its impact on the family.
- Does Claudia change her opinion of her family over the course of the film?

The film's exploration of family values raises issues relevant to the viewer's personal experiences and understanding of family. Have the students work independently to consider factors central to their personal experience of family.

- Each student should consider the extent to which the film requires its audience to draw on their personal experiences in understanding the film. Consider the family as represented by

the film versus the representation as perceived by the viewer.

- Do you relate to Claudia's experience? How? Of the issues that Claudia confronts with her family, which ones are unique to her and which ones are shared and/or universal?
- Write a short essay or prepare a presentation using visual means, prose or poetry to illustrate the most important influences the family has on an individual and the way this is demonstrated in the film.
- Outline the major events that occur in the film on a timeline. Is there a simple chain of 'cause and effect' that leads to the plot's progression? If not, what are the complicating factors? As a class, debate whether placing a film into a simple 'cause and effect' chain helps or hinders our understanding of the story.

Community

- The film's setting is central to our understanding of the Kelly family and their journey. Describe their community and home as depicted in the film. What conclusions can you draw from the setting about the family and the community in which they live? Are there stereotypes that are often used to describe this setting? Discuss.
- The film writer describes the Kelly family as being 'particularly Australian'. What aspects of the Kelly family and the community in which they live are identified as being Australian? Can





you relate to the place where they live? What are the similarities and differences to the community where your school is located?

- Reflect on the factors influencing the formation of your own culture and identity. These could include birthplace, family background, ethnicity, class, gender, peers and other relationships and group affiliations.
- Describe the role played by the Vinnies in the film. How is this used as a source of humour in the film? To what extent is their role satirical? Discuss the more serious aspect of their presence in the film. What is their role in the community and how does it influence the Kelly's experience?
- Research five organizations or groups that are important to the community where you live. What is the mandate of each organization you have identified? Do they provide services that are useful to you and/or your family and friends? Present your findings to the class.
- At the outset of the film, the Kelly family feels that they are okay so long as no one else is allowed in; outside authority is regarded with suspicion. The events in the film challenge this view and force them to re-assess their family's place within the broader social fabric in which they live. Write an essay describing the factors that lead to their transformation.
- Research and discuss some of the community services available in Australia to help families coping with one of the following issues: depression, suicide, grief, and drug addiction. Provide details of the services in a report and compare your research with the rest of the class. As a class, create a directory of services including information about the service, its purpose, and contact information, that may be useful to students at your school.

The Characters

Divide the class into small groups to brainstorm profiles of the major characters in the film. Each student should then write a character profile of their favourite character and present it to the class.

• Claudia

As the central character in the film, Claudia's journey is shaped by her independence as much as by her relationships with the other characters in the film. The film writer, Kathleen O'Brien, says of Claudia:

Claudia has all the characteristics I admire in a teenage girl. She is strong, funny and loving and very perceptive ... At times she appears too tough and as Penny would say, 'frigid', but it is from this place that her transformation, as she finally gets the car going and heads up the highway with Cam, becomes such a satisfying release.

- Do you agree that Claudia is an admirable character? What do you admire most about her? What do you like the least?
- Why do you think that Claudia



appears too tough? What is she afraid of?

- Describe Claudia's transformation in the film and the significant events that shape her transition.

• Penny

Penny is a nightmare little sister who is constantly fighting with Claudia. Her struggle with the loss of her mother leads her to drug abuse and stealing. Kathleen O'Brien found that Penny was:

... Great fun to write and an unusual foil for Claudia. I really wanted the two sisters to get violent and cruel with each other (as I believe brothers and sisters do) and a lot of people have identified with this love/hate sibling relationship.

- Discuss the social and economic realities that shape Penny's behaviour.



- Describe the similarities and differences between the two sisters.
- What are the unique ways in which Penny copes with her family situation and with her sadness?
- **Discuss** Penny's feelings of hatred for her mother as expressed when she says a prayer at the burial of the dead bird. Does the film attempt to resolve these issues?
- Kathleen O'Brien had wanted to do more with Penny's character but was not able to because the film was constrained to a length of fifty minutes. In what ways could Penny's character have been further developed to enhance the film?

• **Rex**

Rex is a loving father who is crippled by his grief and finds himself unable to take an active role in the family. Kathleen O'Brien explains:

Rex is my idea of a great father. Despite his passiveness, he is there for Claudia and Penny and has a close but unsentimental relationship with the girls. He lets them do what they want to do without too much interference and when it comes to the crunch, does the right thing by them.

- Do you agree with Kathleen O'Brien that Rex is a great father? Why or why not?
- Do you think that Rex is looking for his identity? Explain your answer.
- How does his dress and image in the film influence your view of his character?

• **Cam**

Kathleen O'Brien describes Cam as:

... Gorgeous, loving and a bit lost until he meets Claudia. His kleptomania is a ruse to excuse his stealing but it shows he is quite smart, charming and has a good sense of humour. He is totally non-judgemental and accepting of their situation, which is what they appreciate.

- How would you describe Cam when you first meet him in the film?
- What do we learn about Cam as the story progresses that makes his character surprising and endearing?
- Is Cam a good partner for Claudia? Why or why not? Explain.

Media Studies

- Write a film review for *Stranded* rating it out of a possible total of four stars.
- The filmmakers were constrained by the length of the film, which was limited to fifty-two minutes. Could this film be expanded to a full length movie? Would you pay to go see it?
- The film's Director, Stuart McDonald, says that *'with the look of the film we wanted to give it a distinctive visual style but not so much that it became distracting.'* Describe two cinematographic moments in the film and write an essay explaining their effect on our understanding of the film. Do you think the *'distinctive visual style'* has been achieved? Discuss.
- Research the actors who played the key roles in the film. How effective do you think the casting was in terms of the selection of actors who could faithfully depict the film's characters?
- Discuss the filmmaking techniques used in *Stranded*. What, in particular, did you notice about the way the film was shot and edited? What about the use of voiceover and music? Dissect the program into its component parts, identifying the key roles that would have been needed for each.
- Identify three great films made by Australians about Australians. Do you think it is important that Australian stories are made into films?
- If this film had been made with American characters in an American setting, do you think it would have been totally different? Discuss.

AWARDS

AFI AWARD FOR BEST SHORT
FICTION FILM - Stuart McDonald

AFI AWARD BEST SCREENPLAY IN
A SHORT FILM - Kathleen O'Brien

AFI AWARD OUTSTANDING
ACHIEVEMENT IN SHORT FILM
SCREEN CRAFT –

Emma Lung for Acting

INSIDE FILM AWARD BEST SHORT
FILM

FILM CRITICS CIRCLE OF
AUSTRALIA AWARD BEST
SHORT FILM

ATOM AWARD BEST SHORT
FICTION

DENDY AWARD FOR BEST LONG
SHORT

BEST ACTRESS MAGNOLILA
AWARD AT SHANGHAI TV
FESTIVAL- Emma Lung

Stranded is distributed by Ronin Films
in Australia and New Zealand.
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