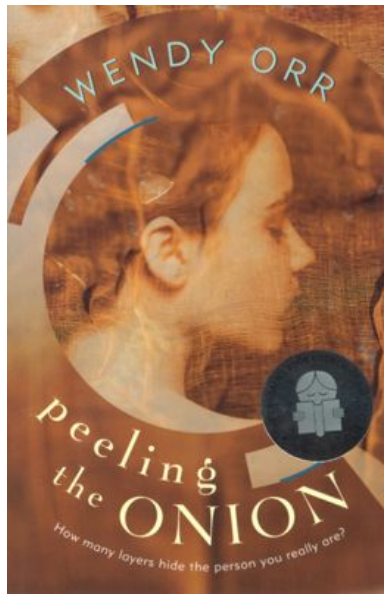


## Teachers' Resources: Peeling the Onion

Jenny rushes in; stops and turns pale at the sight of my scaffolded neck. This isn't what she expected to see - and for a moment Jenny, sunny, effervescent, ever-optimistic Jenny, stares at me and can't speak.

'They made a mistake - I broke my neck after all.'

Jenny begins to cry. And I think that maybe this is what best friends are for, not to be brave for you, but to tell you this is real, and it stinks.



Australian & US first edition

### Introduction and Plot Synopsis

**“The strength of Peeling the Onion lies in Orr’s measured approach to her subject. It would have been easy for this story to become a tear-filled tragedy of lost youth. Rather, it is the portrait of a determined young woman taking two steps forward for every step back in the face of shocking adversity.”<sup>1</sup>**

Seventeen year-old Anna – athletic, popular, ‘normal’ – is on her way home from winning a karate championship when a speeding car changes her life, and impacts the lives of everyone involved with her.

Year 12 is about to start, she has two good friends, a new boyfriend and every expectation of an exciting life to look forward to. Now, with devastating injuries, she faces permanent disability and “must come to terms with her new life and the grief of losing her old one. As well as coping with the tormenting physical adjustments, Anna has to survive the strain on family relationships, her

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Ponting, Feature Review, Viewpoint, v4 n3 1996 p18-19

friends' shocked reactions, and her boyfriend's guilt."<sup>2</sup>

"With the help of her family and friends she fights for, and regains, her independence in the basic skills of showering and dressing without aid, standing without appearing drunk, and walking.

"... Coming to terms with the other changes to her life, that result from the injuries, is tougher. There will be no more karate and no tour of Europe by bicycle.... The final year of school will have to wait. Worse still is the twisted web of guilt in which Anna feels trapped.... When each of the drivers seeks her absolution for his part in her injuries, Anna feels singularly ill-equipped, both emotionally and psychologically, to deal with their problems. This is particularly so in Hayden's case as she wishes desperately to develop a deeper relationship with him and feels responsible for his quitting the karate club."<sup>3</sup>

As the prognosis for the likelihood of recovery worsens, Anna's initial optimism and innate determination gradually give way to depression until she begins to consider suicide as the best option. Ironically, it is the rock bottom, primitive fear of facing her repressed near-death experience that gives her the strength to begin working her way back into whatever her new life will be.

However, as she struggles with her internal battles, life is going on around her. "Anna's younger siblings lighten the mood with sympathetic bouts of hypochondria and extraordinary feats of dog training. Their antics coupled with her mother's extraordinary 'bake-a-different-cake-a-day' program provide a sense of normality in an otherwise disorientated household. Even the over the top relationship between Jenny and her new boyfriend is a much more normal counterpoint for Anna's exploration of the more worldly Luke.

"... This is a story about setbacks and triumphs, goals and dreams, and about how to achieve as much as possible. As Luke says, the only thing worse than attempting part of a dream is not trying it at all."<sup>4</sup>

## **Awards**

- . Children's Book Council of Australia Honour Book for older readers, 1997
- . •Family therapy Award Honour Book 1997
- . •American Library Association 'Best of the Best List' (top 100 books in the past fifty years)
- . •American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults
- . •Winner: Maine Student Book Award, 1998-1999

Shortlisted for:

- . •Evergreen Awards 2000, (USA)
- . •NASEN Special Educational Needs Book Awards (UK)
- . •New York Public Library Book for the Teenage
- . •South Carolina Best Books for Young Adults
- . •2000-2001 Utah Book Awards

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<sup>2</sup> Olivia Craze, review, Australian Bookseller and Publisher, July 1996

<sup>3</sup> Jane Ponting, Feature Review, Viewpoint, v4 n3 1996 p18-19

<sup>4</sup> Jane Ponting, Feature Review, Viewpoint, v4 n3 1996 p18-19

- Chicago Public Library Best of the Best 1997
- 2001 Beehive Awards USA



### <sup>5</sup>Author Biography

Wendy Orr was born in Edmonton, Canada, but with a father in the Air Force, grew up in various places in France, Canada and Colorado. From the time that she learned to read, she wanted to be a writer, and wrote stories, plays and poetry. However she lost her nerve when she finished high school, so studied Animal Care for a year, then moved to London and studied Occupational Therapy. While she was there I met an Australian, Tom – six months later they were married, and moved to Australia when she graduated. They have a son James and a daughter Susan who are now grown up. They farmed for twenty years but now have five acres of bush that is a home for wildlife.

Wendy started writing seriously in 1986. Her first picture book **Amanda's Dinosaur**, won an Ashton Scholastic competition for an unpublished picture book text, and she's been writing ever since. In 1991 she had a serious car

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<sup>5</sup> Photo Credit Roger Gould

accident: **Peeling the Onion** is partly based on this accident and her recovery from it.

After the excitement of her first book, publishing highlights have been:

**Leaving it to You** being shortlisted for the CBCA awards, junior readers, in 1993 (the same day that Wendy's injuries forced her to resign as an occupational therapist and become a full time writer);

**Ark in the Park** winning the CBCA Book of the Year, junior readers, in 1995.

**Peeling the Onion** receiving a wonderful reception in Australia and internationally, with awards including the CBCA Honour Book, older readers, in 1997, and an American Library Association Book for older readers.

**Nim's Island** becoming a Hollywood feature film starring Jodie Foster, Abigail Breslin and Gerard Butler.

### **Background to the Writing of Peeling the Onion**

After my accident, I gradually had to accept that total recovery was unlikely, and that my life had changed forever. The resulting sense of disorientation and loss of identity was horrific. I eventually realised that, being a writer, the only way I could deal with this was to write about it.

Of course, in any novel, no matter how fictitious the plot, the author uses their own knowledge of emotions and feelings in building the characters and story. **Peeling the Onion** went one step further, using not only emotions but actual incidents from my own life - the accident, subsequent hospitalisation and ongoing fight to recover. I wasn't interested in writing a disguised autobiography, (an 'only names and places have been changed to protect the innocent' expose) but because of the way I work, fictionalising the experience was the best means of exploring and - with a bit of luck - perhaps even understanding it.

I had the same injuries as Anna; the difference was that I was twenty years older, had a husband, two kids and a career - (actually two careers: occupational therapist and writer). I wanted to explore more about what it means to have your life turned upside down by trauma, and I knew I'd learn a lot more about it if I wrote about someone who was quite different from me.

Besides, in the twisted way that my writer's mind views the world, there was the thought that woke me one night, 'What was the point in having this accident if I don't tell the truth about it?'

By truth I meant not the facts of any incidents, or details of bony or neurological damage, but the truth about the way that Anna would have experienced this change to herself and her life.

I felt it would be wrong - almost evil - to sanitise the experience; to have Anna accepting her disabilities without rage or hate; to be rational, calm and grateful for help. I knew that if the book was read by anyone, it would be read by someone who had been through something similar, and

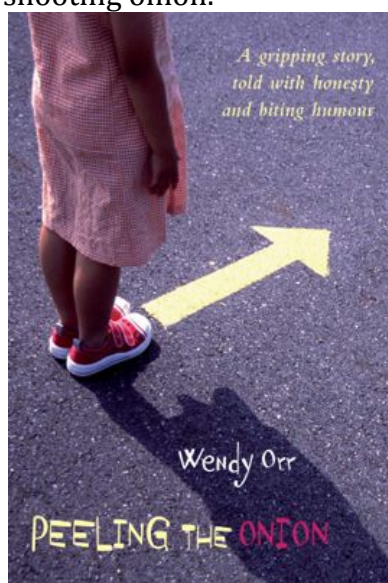
I had a responsibility not to let that person down by making them feel that they could have coped or recovered better; that their own bitterness, rage or despair was shameful or wrong.

It was the hardest thing I've ever done - and the longest, taking well over two years. The hard part was having to explore my own emotions deeply enough to write about somebody else's.

Just like any other book, that meant thinking myself into her skin and feeling her reactions, which were not always the same as mine, but drew on my years as an occupational therapist and general observations of how individuals react to change or trauma. And with each draft, as the characters solidified in my mind, so did the differences between what was true for me, and what I believed to be true for my seventeen year-old protagonist.

The story itself followed my usual rule of finding out what happens as I go along instead of doing a thorough plot plan. This time, though, as the book's written in short, immediate episodes, instead of working straight through on a normal plot line, I leapt forwards and patched backwards, embroidering it all together as I discovered her problems and solutions. And because for me the story is largely about growth, and nearly all the characters grow or make some changes in their lives, their stories had to be worked neatly and naturally into the framework of Anna's main story. But more than any other book I've ever done, things kept happening to influence all these stories.

The title had arrived early on, but it was another 18 months before the references to onions or layers appeared, when I was invited to present something at the '1995 'Literary Feast'. After my usual panic, I gave the problem to Anna, and had her write three poems using the onion theme to describe her feelings about herself. Then, as I tidied myself up for the evening, the friend I was staying with began tidying her pantry, and suddenly asked, 'This onion's started to sprout - will it grow if I plant it?' So I not only had to go back and weave in the poems, but Deb's shooting onion.



Australian 2<sup>nd</sup> edition

## English Literature: Anna's Poems

Anna writes three poems, or revisions of the same poem, as she moves through different stages of grieving. What are the changes? How does each define her state of mind at the time?

Peeling like an onion,  
I am shedding filmy layers  
the firm white flesh revealing  
what's hidden deep inside.

Opening like a babushka  
I am sorting wooden dolls  
the last hollow doll is holding  
the baby deep inside.

Unwrapping like a present  
I am crumpling pretty papers  
under the crepe and ribbons  
there's a perfect gift inside.

\*\*\*\*\*

I am  
peeling like an onion -  
decaying slimy layers,  
hiding blackened mush inside.

I am  
opening like a babushka -  
the painted dolls are broken;  
there's no baby left inside.

I am  
unwrapping like a present -  
the paper's torn and crumpled;  
the gift's stolen from inside.

\*\*\*\*\*

I am  
peeling like an onion,  
  
shedding papery protection,  
  
and superficial skin -  
tearing, skinning, ripping off the layers -  
  
the firm and curving flesh  
of what onions used to be -  
Peeling onions makes me cry.

Shrinking down to nothing,  
my shells are disappearing  
and there's nowhere left to hide.  
But under all the layers  
- a tiny green shoot sprouting -  
I'm growing from inside.

**Activities:**

Write a poem expressing who you are.

*or*

Write your own poem using similes like the ones Anna used.

Anna uses metaphors of colour to describe emotion: *'Sadness is grey, despair matt black and anger blood red. Bitterness is almost beautiful, like an iridescent poisonous bug - shiny black shot through with a deep, reddy purple.'*

- Think of colours for other emotions: joy; tension; anticipation; jealousy; contentment; love
- Use noise metaphors for the same emotions – think of the sounds we might hear in the background of a film to heighten our awareness of grief or happiness, etc.

“Look at the descriptions of pain on pp 1, 2, 9, 18 and 52. Which one worked best for you? What key words are used which bring pain alive for you? What words do we associate with pain? At times Anna’s pain is like a cage – it is difficult for people outside it to understand what it is like. Write a few lines about an experience which sets you outside everyone else and makes the familiar world seem unfamiliar.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Children’s Book Council of Australia Short List Notes, 1997, p18

The book uses italicised sections to describe Anna's internal thoughts and emotions, while the standard text describes her outer life of action and dialogue.

- Write a short story in which the character must keep an overwhelming secret about themselves from the person s/he is interacting with.
- Write a piece in the first person, and then change it to the third person. How does it affect the way you have to tell the story?
- Write a piece in the present tense, and change it to the past. How does that affect the immediacy of the story?
- Why do you think the author chose to write *Peeling the Onion* in the first person and present tense?

Writing in the first person gives only one person's point of view. Discuss whether the other characters are exactly as Anna sees or portrays them. Could there even be a difference between how she truly sees them and how she portrays them in the privacy of her own mind, ie the internal dialogues?

Do a character study of Hairy Legs. What are Anna's conscious reasons for disliking her? Could there be other, more subconscious reasons? What does Hairy Legs represent to Anna?

We all act and speak differently with different people. Write three pieces of dialogue of how you might describe an event (eg - going to a party; failing a test; meeting someone you like) to: your best friend

your mother

someone in your peer group you don't know very well

## **Identity**

What are the characteristics that make you the person you think you are? What if you became disabled in some way - would you still be the same person? Write a story in which the character has lost an ability that they believe is essential to who they are. Remember that you can imagine a character who is very different from yourself: for example: What if the character has supernatural powers that become damaged? Would someone who is very old mind becoming physically disabled as much as someone young?

"Anna defines herself by what she does and achieves. Write six reporting statements to describe Anna at the commencement of the novel, eg Anna is an excellent student, Anna has achieved awards in karate, etc. Rewrite the sentences to describe Anna as you see her at the conclusion of the novel.



“What is Anna’s greatest fear in relation to her *inner* self?”<sup>7</sup>

Anna also defines herself by the different roles she plays in life: friend, girlfriend, daughter, niece, sister, grand-daughter. Why does she feel that she has also lost a sense of self in these roles?

### **Friendship and Social Interactions**

Write journal entries for the day after the accident or other significant dates as if you were

Hayden

Trevor Jones

Jenny

Caroline

Why do you think Caroline acts as she does?

Why does Trevor Jones need to see Anna? Does she have the moral right to say no? At what point do we need to protect ourselves from the demands of others? Is this also a possible explanation of Caroline’s dropping Anna?

Becky’s birthday is the same as the accident. How did the knowledge of this affect Anna? Can you find a quote that symbolises this?

The walking stick Luke gave Anna was a symbol of hope and support, the earrings Jenny gave her were a symbol of Anna's integrity and Jenny's love, and the cakes Mrs Duncan made for her daughter were a symbol of motherly love and a celebration of her achievements. Think of a gift you would give Anna, explain why you chose it and what it symbolises. Using evidence from the text, give reasons why and how you think Anna would benefit or gain from this gift.<sup>8</sup>

### **Stages of Grief**

“Anna, who was a gifted athlete, grieves the loss of her old life and struggles to come to terms with the fact that she is forever changed, both physically and mentally. Written with Anna’s inner dialogue interspersed in present tense throughout the story, author Wendy Orr leads Anna through her grief, using each

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<sup>7</sup> Children’s Book Council of Australia Short List Notes, 1997, p18

<sup>8</sup> Alia Imtoul, Carrie Brinkerhoff, Ellen Wiese and Julia Sautner

stage to add dimension and depth to her character, without creating a stereotype of someone in the grieving process.”<sup>9</sup>

Psychologists such as Elizabeth Kubler Ross have identified stages of grief that can be a useful way of looking at the grieving process, whether the loss is for the death of a loved one, a job, a physical object such as a house, or the loss of self and abilities that Anna goes through.

Discuss Kubler-Ross’s or other theoretical phases of grieving and draw as an onion with inward growth rings, such as...

Pain Shock Denial Anger Bargaining Depression Acceptance

Discuss the characters' actions or utterances that illustrate the different stages.<sup>10</sup>

A teenage Dutch girl who had broken her neck wrote to Wendy after reading the Dutch edition of *Peeling the Onion*. On her eighteenth birthday, she wrote again. Part of her letter beautifully expresses the final stage of acceptance:

*“The last month I feel so good. Most of all, spiritual, but because of that I don’t feel the pain very much. The pain is there, but it’s a little part of me. When I feel bad, physical and spiritual, the pain becomes me. Eva<sup>11</sup> is pain, but now, I’ll try to be Eva, a girl with a whole life to go, a happy girl with a physical problem. I think this is the first time in years I felt like this. ... One year ago I didn’t want to live any more, and without help I can say that life is beautiful, and I mean it. I didn’t want to go to another psychologist, I wanted to do it alone, and I knew I could!*

*Of course I hope there will be a day without any pain at all, because it is still there in my life and there are things I can’t do.*

### **Vocabulary:**

Babushka  
Catharsis  
Chasm  
Denial

### **Symbols:**

The walking stick Luke gave Anna was a symbol of hope and support, the

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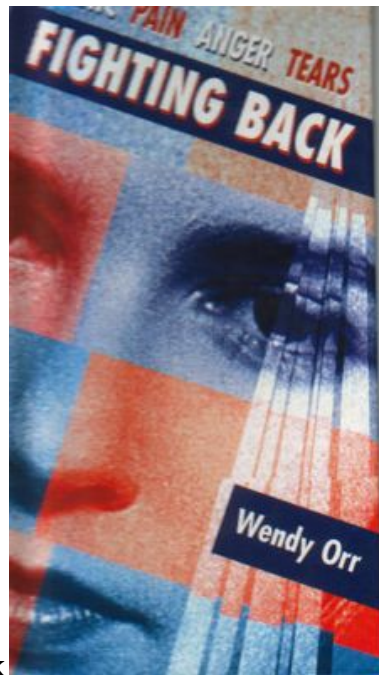
<sup>9</sup> *Spinning Straw into Gold: Techniques for Transforming Personal Tragedy into Fictional Truth*, Lisa Rabe, Thesis for MFA, Vermont University, 2003

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Pawley, St John's College, Dandenong

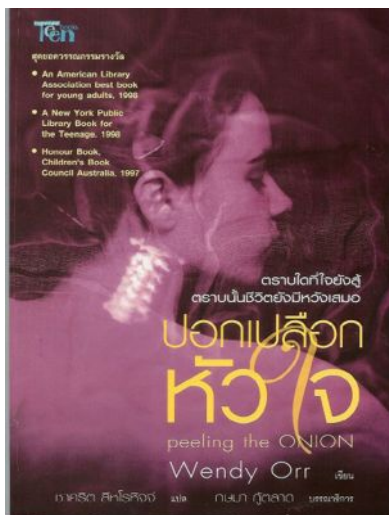
<sup>11</sup> Name changed to protect privacy

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Peeling the Onion has been published in many editions and countries. Discuss the symbolism in the different titles and covers:



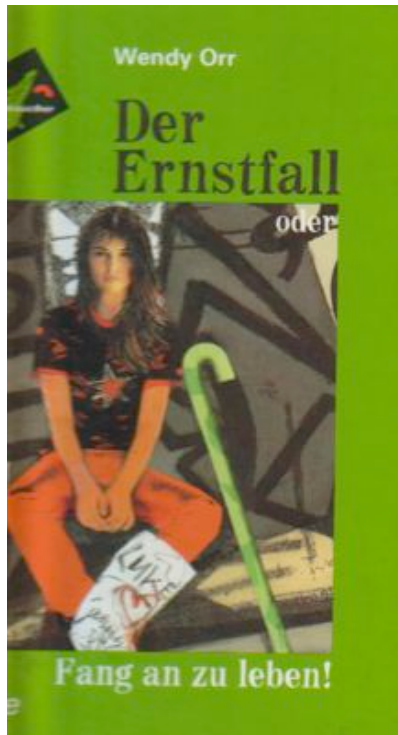
UK: Fighting Back



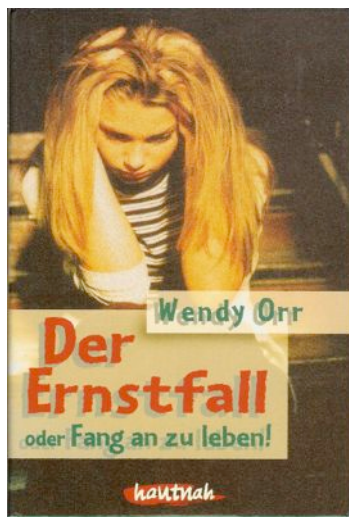
Thailand

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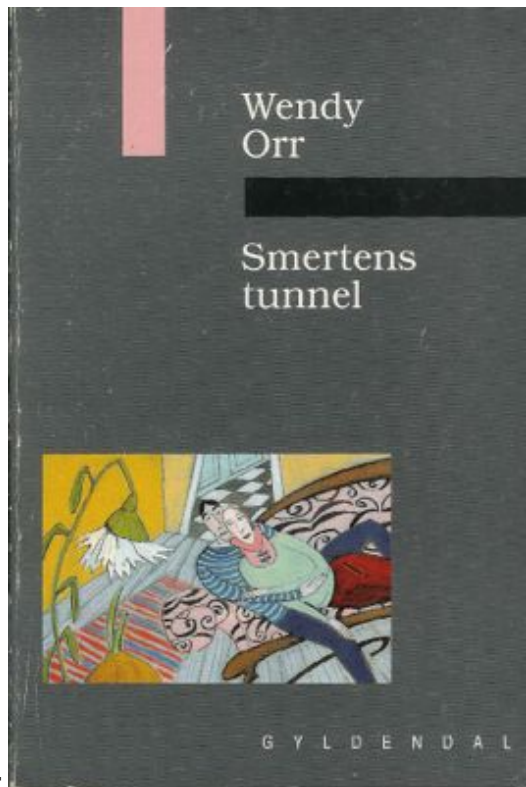
<sup>12</sup> Alia Imtoul, Carrie Brinkerhoff, Ellen Wiese and Julia Sautner



Germany: The Catastrophic Fall: Time to Start Living! (Der Ernstfall: Fang an zu Leben!)



Germany: Book Club Edition:



Denmark: Tunnel of Darkness (Smerten's Tunnel)



Netherlands: When I Peel Onions I Cry (Van ueien shillen moet je huilen)



Italy: My Life is Made in Layers (La Mia Via Fatta di Strati)

### **Activities**

Pre-Reading activity:

French Onion soup:

100 g onions

2 Tbs butter

25g flour

1 ½ litres water  
1 vegetable or chicken stock cube

Finely chop or slice the onions, examining the physical properties of the onions as you do so: notice the tough papery outer layer, the sheer skin under that, and the many white layers that become translucent as they're cooked. Notice the tears that may be shed as the onions are peeled or chopped! (Run cold water over your wrists to stop your eyes from smarting.)

Melt the butter in a large pot over a medium heat, sauté them till golden, sprinkle them with the flour and cook till lightly browned. Add the stock, pepper to taste, and simmer, covered, for ten minutes.

Meanwhile, cut 12 slices of baguette, cover thinly with 100 g of grated gruyere or Swiss cheese, and place in the bottom of the soup bowls. Pour the soup on top – if you can cover the bowls, wait ten minutes before serving.

(From *La Cuisine Familiale*, by H P Pellaprat, Flammarion, Paris)

Creating an Onion to Peel (end of reading activity).

Create an onion using a small Styrofoam ball as the centre and tissue paper as the layers. Write notes on Anna's characteristics and problems on each layer, working backwards through the book – so the outer layer will represent the Anna whom we first meet, and will obscure the layers underneath.

Discuss: was Anna's inner personality always there, or did it develop over time?

Do the tissue paper layers completely obscure what is underneath, or do the inner layers affect the outer?

Repeat twice.

*Or*

Papier Maché Onions

1) Write a self-reflective poem at the start of the study unit

2) Make the onion as you would a piñata:

Inflate a balloon

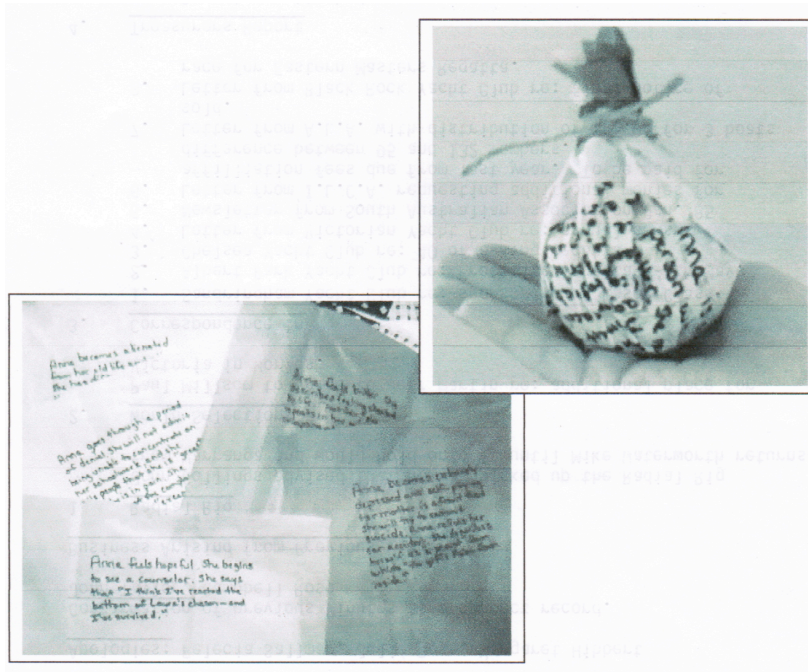
Mix up wallpaper paste

or

1/3 c white glue (PVA, Elmers) mixed with 1/3 c water

Tear newspaper into 2-3cm (1-1/2") strips

Soak strips in paste or smear with glue; cover balloon & let dry



Final layer could be brown paper to represent onion, or scraps of wrapping paper or coloured junk mail ads to be more colourful/hopeful

Puncture the balloon and make a small hole in the top of the onion

3) Roll up the poem and insert into the onion.

4) At the end of the study unit, write a new self-reflective poem. Cut the onion open and compare the two poems.