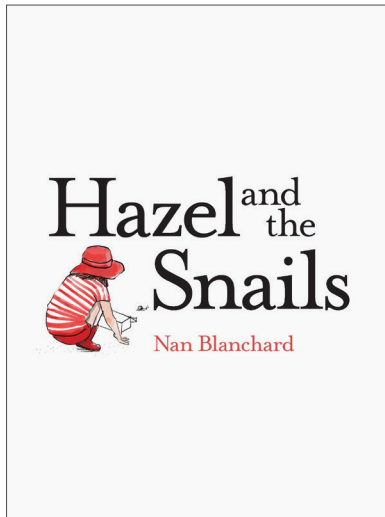




# Hazel and the Snails

NAN BLANCHARD



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## A DEBUT NOVEL DESTINED TO BECOME A CLASSIC

Six-year-old Hazel tends her colony of shoebox snails while observing, with varying degrees of understanding, her father's illness and final decline. Impending loss forms the heart of this story, but it's charming and funny, too. Richly rewarding and cleverly layered, adults will be as drawn to it as children. Nan Blanchard's assured eye is a rare quality in a new writer; seldom has the world of a young child been so delicately or acutely observed. *Hazel and the Snails* takes you straight to the heart of childhood's mysteries and delights.

*'Hazel and the Snails is a gorgeous book, full of life and humour and sad bits and I feel all the better for having read it — at my delicious snail's pace so I can savour all the pieces that gleam. And Giselle's illustrations are pitch perfect. Highly recommended.'* — Paula Green, Poetry Box

*'Moving and sweet.'* — Crissi Blair, *Family Times*

*'A tender and unusual story about a family faced with a terminal illness . . . Unfolds slowly and gently. Don't forget to flick the pages to watch the snail move.'* — Services to Schools, National Library of New Zealand Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Nan Blanchard** is a counsellor who also teaches in the Counselling and Guidance Programmes at the Institute of Education, Massey University. She lives in Wellington. *Hazel and the Snails* is her first novel for young readers.

## SALES POINTS

- A superb book for middle readers (ages eight to 13)
- The author is an exciting new New Zealand author who has been mentored by children's literature champion Kate de Goldi and Susan Paris (editor of the *School Journal*)
- Charming illustrations by well-known illustrator Giselle Clarkson throughout complete the appealing package
- The first in a new series from new children's imprint Annual Ink

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### Head lice, chocolate buttons

On Tuesday it was fine again. When the bell rang for lunch, the children rushed outside into the sunshine.

"Sunhats," Ms Taylor called after them. "Don't forget your sunhats."

"We've got ours already," Hazel said to Meg.

They sat on the bench to eat. Meg had cheese and crackers, four baby tomatoes, and some basil leaves. Hazel had a peanut butter sandwich wrapped in Libby's and six chocolate buttons. She handed one of her chocolate buttons to Meg.

"Can I have one?" asked Otis, scratching his head. Otis had head lice. And a scooter. His scooter was red with blue handles, but his head lice were too small to see.

Hazel handed Otis a chocolate button. "Mmm," he said, popping it into his mouth. "You're my friend!"



He grinned like a Halloween pumpkin and showed his face into Hazel's to show off his chocolatey front teeth.

Hazel laughed. So did Meg.

Ms Taylor walked up and down the row of children to make sure they were eating enough food and drinking from their water bottles. They were allowed to go and play when they had finished.

"Sit down, Patrick," said Ms Taylor. She put out a restraining hand. "Eat your yoghurt first. And where's your drink bottle?"

The sun was very hot. The sky was blue and cloudless.

I hope the birds don't burn, thought Hazel.



### Tilted

After school, Hazel and Gran waited at the bus stop. They were off to the library. Gran held the bag of library books, and Hazel held the snail box.

It was windy, and Hazel kept her chin on the lid of the box so the wind wouldn't snatch it. Gran held on to her glasses. Often, when it had been really windy, Gran's glasses had blown right off her face and scuttled along the footpath like a crab. Gran had chased the crab glasses. One of the arms fell off, and the tiny screw that fastened it rolled into the gutter and disappeared forever. Gran wore her glasses home with only one arm. They kept slipping sideways.

"One-armed glasses give one a drunken view of the world," she said. Gran. "Most disconcerting. Unless, of course," she added, "a drunken view of the world is what one is aiming for."

Since then, Hazel had often aimed for a drunken



There they were. They were gathered under the big tree, looking down at something. "C'mon," said Meg, running ahead. "Let's go and see."

Hazel looked around for Henry. He was leaning against the park gates, turning the pages of his magazine.

Meg had already reached the others. Hazel could see her pink and white striped leggings. Like Milly-Molly-Mandy's ripped frock, thought Hazel. She felt homesick for Gran. Gran loved Milly-Molly-Mandy.

Hazel walked over, and the circle opened to let her in. At first, she couldn't see anything. But then she could. There on the ground lay a baby hedgehog, as still as the swings, with its eyes closed. Dead.

"Poor little thing," said a big girl.

They all nodded solemnly. Where was its mother, Hazel wondered?

"We should bury it," said someone.

"Yes," said the big girl. "We should."

The big girl used her hands to scrape a hole in the dirt. Then, very tenderly, she placed the little hedgehog in the hole. The other children ran backwards and forwards, gathering leaves and twigs and grass from around the park. They covered the hedgehog carefully. They placed layer after layer of



steering wheel like Mary Poppins but without her umbrella.

Hazel hoped the ants would stay. She reached out to coax a swimming towel ant onto her finger. It scuttled away – small and black and shiny – and ran down the red stripe on the towel, on and on and on.

Gran and Sue and Hazel were off to the beach. It was boiling hot. Gran's face was flushed in a way she called unbecoming, and her hair was stuck to her forehead.

"The sea is the place to cool down," she'd said earlier, rummaging in the wash for Hazel's togs.

They packed up the car. Hazel's snails and her blow-up dolphin went into the boot with the picnic.

"Cooler for them in here," said Sue, slamming the boot shut. "They're likely to get sunstroke in the back." She grinned at Hazel, and her nose wrinkled. Hazel grinned back. Sue was kind and cushiony.

Mum said. Dad said she was expensive.

Sue wore her flowery yogi beneath her towelling robe and jandals on her feet. They clicked when she walked like a small audience clapping. Hazel wore her togs, too, but she had sandals instead of jandals and she had her goggles on already.

"Can you see through those?" asked Gran.



She turned around to peer at Hazel in the back.

Hazel nodded. But she couldn't see. Not really. She was inside a globe. The ant on Gran's seat was bulbous and blurry like her own face when she looked in the kettle. She pulled the goggles off. They made a sucking sound like a snail coming off the side of the compost bin only louder.

How observant I am, thought Hazel, pleased.

Ms Taylor liked them to use all their senses. "Observe the world around you," she said. After observing the world, they usually wrote a poem.

Hazel observed the ant. It was back to its old self. At the beach, the sand was hot. It filled up Hazel's sandals and burnt her feet. "Ouch!" she shouted, hopping up and down. "It hurts!"



### Snakes forever

After school, Hazel went to Meg's and they jumped on the trampoline. It-squak, it-squak, it-squak. They squeaked and shrieked. They had the hose on the tramp so it was wet and slippery. The hose was a snake. If Hazel and Meg touched the hose, they turned into snakes. Forever. Hazel had already turned into a snake forever three times.

"His," said Hazel the snake. "His."

She had only seen snakes in books. Some were fat and brown, and some were thin and green with patterns like the hose.

"His," Hazel said again. She narrowed her eyes and flicked out her tongue. "His." Her tongue should be green.

They jumped higher and faster. There was next-door's cat asleep in the garden.

"His," said Hazel to the cat. "His." The cat took no notice.



"Ouch," said Meg. She had fallen backwards. Her 'ouch' was a small explosion like the puff of Henry's asthma inhaler. She lay flat on her back, a starfish. Hazel lay flat on her back like a starfish, too.

They kicked the hose off the tramp. Hazel watched it flop on the grass and settle under the lemon tree.

"What shall we do now?" asked Hazel.

"Bonjour," said Meg.

Hazel frowned. Meg had been going to French classes on Fridays after school. Now she spoke French all the time. Even on the trampoline.



They finished singing, and Ms Taylor put down her accordion. "Is there anything more you'd like to say, Hazel?"

Hazel shook her head. She looked around at the class. She imagined her small chrysalis giving a tiny wave from the pocket of her shorts.

"That's all," she said, sitting down on the mat next to Meg.



### Hairy

Hazel had to have a haircut before Dad's funeral. Gran and Sue packed her up from school.

"You look raggedy," Mum had said that morning, kissing Hazel on her nose.

Haircuts were always excellent because Maggie the hairdresser was chatty and Hazel could choose a killypop from the big glass jar on the counter afterwards.

Maggie had a lot of boyfriend trouble. The boys she liked always liked other girls. They didn't realise how funny Maggie was. Hazel felt very sorry for Maggie.

Today Maggie made Hazel laugh a lot. She told her a funny story about her ex-boyfriend, Wesley, and how his truck got stuck in mud. Hazel laughed. The woman next to Hazel laughed, too. She had