

JENNA GUILLAUME

'Funny and heartfelt. I loved it.'
Melina Marchetta

WHAT I LIKE ABOUT ME

You know those movies where teenagers have the summer of their lives?

This summer is ^{not} going to be that.

WHAT I LIKE ABOUT ME

JENNA GUILLAUME

PAN

Teachers' Notes



Pan Macmillan Teachers' Notes

WHAT I LIKE ABOUT *me*

JENNA GUILLAUME

Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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Introduction

'There are a lot of things about me that aren't what you thought, but if you love me, you have to love all the things about me.' (p 53)

Maisie Martin's class has been assigned the task of writing a 'discovery' journal over her last summer holidays in high school by the 'sadistic sumbitch' (p 1) her teacher, Ms Singh. Her family's annual pilgrimage to Cobbers Bay for Christmas is a little different this year, as her dad has been asked to work on a project for his newspaper so Mum and Maisie are going with Maisie's best friend Anna. As usual, the Lee's, who are family friends, are staying next door, and Maisie renews her feelings of unrequited love for Sebastian Lee, hampered by the presence of his twin brothers and his best friend and sidekick, the annoying Beamer.

Everything changes though when Anna and Seb begin to flirt almost immediately; Beamer is even more aggravating than usual and somehow he and Maisie spend more time than ever before watching action movies in order to judge whether 'Arnie' or 'the Rock' is the best. Maisie makes a new friend in Leila Khouri, a talented young designer who offers to make her an outfit for the Miss Teen Summer Queen beauty pageant which Maisie decides to enter. (Her sister Eva had won this years before and Maisie has unresolved issues over her sister's rejection of her as a dancing partner and defection to Melbourne to study dancing.) Maisie's on-going conflict with her mother's strictures and her concern that her parents might be breaking up makes the holiday even more fraught.

Self-image, though, lies at the heart of this story. Maisie has become used to regarding herself as 'fat' and unattractive and those around her have done nothing to assuage her feelings. Eva's arrival with her girlfriend, Bess, adds another dimension to this emotional conflict, since Bess is both beautiful and big. But it turns out that both Beamer and Leila think Maisie is beautiful too, and she finally realises that so do her parents, her sister, and other close friends.

The title of this novel says it all. It's just a question of how you look at life and what you make of yourself, not what others make of you.



Themes

Self-Esteem and Self-Identity

'I'm basically the exact opposite of a Hot Girl™, despite the fact that I was birthed by a Hot Girl™, who had already birthed another Hot Girl™, and then somehow wound up with me. It's like in that old movie Twins, which I've watched with Dad a hundred times, where Arnold Schwarzenegger gets all the good genes, and Danny DeVito is the leftover sludge. My sister Eva is Arnold Schwarzenegger and I'm the DeVito sludge.' (p 7)

Discussion Point: Maisie makes lists of the things she likes about herself throughout the novel. [See Writing Exercises 5 for a similar exercise.] Towards the end of the novel, Maisie also makes a list of all the things she dislikes in herself and realises that she's been blaming her friends and family for her unhappiness rather than confronting her own problems. (p 77) How useful is to write lists of things you like/dislike about yourself?

Discussion Point: 'How am I going to find something that could sustain a whole career?' (p 139) Part of Maisie's lack of self-esteem is her uncertainty about what she wants to do with her future life, with the end of her schooling looming. Discuss such concerns and how they might be resolved.

Discussion Point: What do you make of Anna's decision to go back to her boyfriend, Dan, despite the fact that he cheated on her? What does this say about Anna's self-esteem?

Body Image

'You can't hide behind black forever, you know.' (p 119)

Discussion Point: The film *Dirty Dancing* provides a core frame of reference in this novel (p 143). The heroine of that film, Frances ('Baby') Houseman, lacks confidence since she is not conventionally gorgeous but eventually realises that the 'heartthrob', Johnny Castle, loves her. Maisie has always considered herself fat and constantly 'riffs' about it, suffering from low self-esteem, as a result. Maisie also thinks she's ugly and the one who should stay in the corner, like her movie heroine. But when she sees Bess in a bikini (p 137), she begins to re-assess her own attitudes to her body and says she is 'done with feeling ashamed of it.' (p 158). She is later devastated when an interview she's done includes 'plus size' comments (p 173) by the pageant organisers, and nearly withdraws from the pageant. But she eventually appears and proudly walks the catwalk. What changes Maisie's feelings about her size?



Discussion Point: Maisie is amazed when Bess appears on the beach in a bikini (p 137) and yearns to ask her how she has the confidence to appear like that when she is 'fat'. Comment on Maisie's reaction in relation to experiences you've had.

Discussion Point: Maisie's beautiful sister Eva has suffered body image issues of her own and announces to her aghast mother that she is giving up dancing (p 151) because it no longer makes her happy. She says that she is looking in mirrors now and not liking what she sees (p 156). Very attractive people like Eva can also suffer from negative body image, just as much as those who aren't as 'conventionally attractive'. Why do beautiful people sometimes think they're ugly?

Discussion Point: What do you think of beauty pageants? Would you enter one? [See also **Further Reading Ideas for Class Discussion 2**]

Family Relationships

'About how lately, when Mum and Dad aren't arguing, they're barely talking to each other. About how I'm trying not to notice it, trying not to think about it. About how deep down it really scares me.' (p 25)

Discussion Point: Maisie's parents are obviously feeling the strain in their relationship but also seem to be committed to each other. What evidence is there in the novel that they are likely to enjoy a happy future together?

Discussion Point: Sibling rivalry is a well-recognised source of family tension. Eva and Maisie were encouraged to enjoy dancing together, but jealousy of her sister when Eva won the pageant ('And then Eva went and did it on her own. And won.' (p 74)) led to Maisie giving up dancing. How easy is to enjoy a sibling's success rather than to resent it?

Discussion Point: By the novel's end Maisie and Eva have resolved their differences. What was the crucial moment when things began to change between them?

Discussion Point: 'I reckon half the reason she had kids was she wanted to be the opposite kind of parent. An actual Dance Mom.' (p 31) Is Maisie being too hard on her mum in making this observation?

Romance & Friendship

'I really like you. Like, really really like like you.' (p 243)

Discussion Point: The action in this novel begins with a love 'triangle' (Seb, Anna and Maisie) but it becomes more complicated than that when Beamer demonstrates his affection for Maisie and she begins to reciprocate; and later Anna goes back to Dan. Is love always so complicated?



Discussion Point: “If all else fails just ask him questions about himself. Guys love that,’ she said.’ (p 36) Is Anna’s advice to Maisie about ‘attracting guys’ such as Seb very useful, in your opinion?

Discussion Point: The friendship between Anna and Maisie is strained by their mutual feelings for Seb (p 190) but their new honesty with each other later may herald the beginning of a stronger friendship. Do you agree/disagree?

Discussion Point: Maisie realises for the first time that Beamer is ‘hot’ (p 108) and later they kiss (p 116). What do they have in common and where does their mutual attraction stem from?

Discussion Point: Eva’s relationship to her girlfriend is also obviously founded on solid feelings, such as Eva’s admiration for Bess’s writing. What are the key things which make a romantic relationship work?

Bravery and Confidence

‘Was I brave? Just by being there? By wearing those clothes? By going on stage? By facing my fears?’ (p 230)

Discussion Point: Anna accuses Maisie of always ‘bailing out’ when difficult things (pp 185–6) are presented to her. In reading the novel, would you agree/disagree with Anna’s assessment of Maisie’s character?

Discussion Point: Maisie is bemused then angry (pp 195–7) when her dad confesses that he has been lying about working, due to his embarrassment and depression over losing his job. Can you sympathise with him? Do you understand Maisie’s feelings?

Discussion Point: ‘You are braver than you believe, and stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think.’ (p 215) Discuss this quote in relation to the characters in this novel.

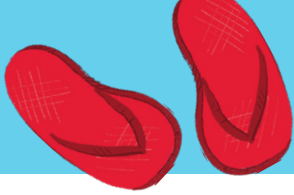
Plot & Structure

1. The novel is structured chronologically as Maisie writes daily entries in her journal preceded by numbered points detailing ‘things she’s discovered today’.

Discussion Point: Maisie creates suspense, though, by leaving some elements of the story out of an entry and returning to fill in the gaps in a subsequent entry. How effective was this device in making the story appealing to a reader?

2. Tension or suspense are essential to a novel’s structure and here are created by gradually revealing answers to several questions posed at the beginning.

Discussion Point: Are there questions unanswered in this novel? What are they?



3. Pacing a Story to achieve minor and major climaxes is integral to a novel's structure. Each 'diary entry' acts as a chapter and each begins with a tempting statement, eg 'FORGET WHAT I SAID ABOUT NO WORRIES. I AM ALL WORRIES. IN FACT, I'M IN WHAT YOU MIGHT CALL A PICKLE, IF YOU WERE A NINETY-FIVE-YEAR-OLD NAMED BERYL.' (p 90), or ends with a cliff hanger, for example, 'I decided to finally face the music. I had to find Anna.' (p 75)

Activity: Choose a passage which you found particularly effective in maintaining or galvanising reader interest in this novel.

4. The events which make up the **plot** of a novel are designed by the writer to develop or 'flesh out' both characters and themes.

Discussion Point: In which event did we learn most about Beamer? Which events highlighted any of the themes covered above?

5. Sometimes elements of a plot are left deliberately 'open' in order to engage the reader's interest, and open endings are a particularly effective device.

Discussion Point: At the end of the novel what was suggested about Maisie's future and her relationship with Beamer? What was Eva going to do with her studies? How would their parents' marriage develop?

Characters

Action in this novel revolves around several **Major Characters:** Maisie Martin, the narrator; her parents; her sister Eva; her best friend Anna; Sebastian Lee; his friend Beamer; Leila Khouri.

There are also several **Minor Characters:** Dan, Anna's ex-boyfriend; Laura and Jimmy Lee, Seb's parents; Kane and Lincoln, Seb's twin brothers; Ms Singh, Maisie's teacher; Jo, Will, Hannah and Kieron, Leila's friends; Bess, Eva's girlfriend.

1. Characters are described in this novel in comparison to well-known figures in popular culture. For example, Maisie compares herself to Danny DeVito in *Twins* (p 7), and to 'Baby' in *Dirty Dancing* throughout the novel.

Discussion Point: What other such comparisons regarding characters did you notice in this novel?

2. The detail used to create a character can provide a varied and interesting analysis of their key features.

Discussion Point: Read Maisie's description of Leila: 'Here's the gist ... She was loud and warm and bright, like the sun.' (pp 32-3) Write a similar description of a person they know.



Discussion Point: Maisie describes her mother in lively style: ‘This is what happens ... fell swoop?!’ (p 5) What literary devices are employed in this passage?

3. Dialogue can also add to the way in which characterisation is established.

Activity: Read the conversation between Anna and Maisie (pp 79–81) which gives a number of hints as to their characters, and discuss.

4. Writers generally create a **mixture of characters, some intended to invoke sympathy in the reader, and others not to.** There are also some characters who defy categorisation – whose motives remain obscure.

Discussion Point: Which characters did you have sympathy for and why? Which ones were unattractive, or annoyed you? Were there any ‘minor’ characters you would have liked more information about?

5. Contrast between characters can also be used as a narrative device.

Discussion Point: Which characters in this novel are contrasted to another?

Style & Use of Language

1. The novel is written in **first person** and in **immediate past tense, from the narrative point of view** of the narrator, Maisie Martin.

Activity: This narrative could also have been written in another voice. For example, how might Anna have described their arrival at Cobbers Bay, based on what we learn about her character later in the novel? Write a short piece in Anna’s voice.

2. Narrative voice is created by a range of devices including syntax and choice of words, use of language, etc.

Activity: Examine passages such as the following and how language is used in it: ‘Sebastian had this expression on his face ... my shoulders.’ (pp 18–19)

3. Literary Devices such as metaphor and simile are frequently used as description, often humorously, in this novel. eg. ‘I actually felt like the sasquatch that some of the guys at school call me.’(p 26) ‘She looked a bit like a peacock who’d had a run-in with my grandma’s knitting basket.’ (p 32) ‘Not only did I go shopping, but I did it with the four horsemen of the apocalypse.’ (p 146)

Activity: Locate other examples of such inventive literary devices and turns of phrase in this novel.

4. Humour is another device used by this writer to deal with serious and not-so-serious themes. Often the humour relies on references to popular culture which makes the reading contemporary and appealing, for example:



‘Is anyone even on LinkedIn? What are you, a forty-nine-year-old investment banker? I hissed at him.’ (p 44)

Sarcasm is another device used in the following:

‘People have really strong opinions about tomato sauce. Source: It’s the kind of debate that divides friends. Nations.’ (p 90)

Exaggeration is also a humorous device used here:

‘Mum has either been possessed by an alien or turned into a Stepford robot.’ (p 102)

Discussion Point: What other types of humour were used in this book?

5. Discussion Point: What other aspects of style do you identify in this novel? Provide examples.

Setting

1. This novel is set in Cobbers Bay, a fictional quiet beachside resort. In setting a novel in a real place, a writer is confined in some ways by reader expectations; Cobbers Bay isn’t a real place but has many similarities to similar resorts.

Discussion Point: How does it remind you of resorts you have visited?

2. Activity: How would you describe Cobbers Bay from the hints in this text? Make a list of its key features.

3. The author uses contrast to describe Cobbers Bay as well, eg. ‘Luckily I... basically true.’ (p 4)

Activity: Describe your own suburb using a contrasting description like this one.

4. Setting can also be internal or domestic, for example Leila’s house and studio is described (pp 68–9).

Activity: How would you describe your own home? Make your description as vivid as this example.

5. Discussion Point: Is setting important in this novel? Why/why not?



Writing Exercises

1. Write a diary entry recording either how you spent a weekend or a few days of your holiday. Try to make the entry as amusing as those in the novel.
2. The packaging of a book includes the blurb and cover which must offer the reader an insight into the contents without giving the ending away. Examine the cover of this book, assessing how the words and images on the front cover interact and whether they are descriptive of the novel after you've read it. Design your own cover using any medium you choose. Read the back cover blurb. Then make up your own back cover blurb summarising the themes of the novel in a few hundred words.
3. 'Keep your expectations low. That way you won't get disappointed.' (p 39) Write your own argument for the negative or affirmative, using the novel as basis for your argument.
4. Write the lyrics for a song about Maisie's experiences over this summer holiday.
5. Maisie makes lists of the things she likes about herself. Later she writes another one about things she dislikes about herself. Write a list beginning 'What I like about me ...'. And another list 'What I dislike about me ...'

Note to teachers: These lists don't necessarily have to be shared. Encourage spontaneity and honesty.

Quotes for Discussion after Reading the Novel

1. '*Privacy comes with trust, and you have to earn trust, Maisie.*' (p 8)
2. '*It's like rule number one for friendship: don't kiss your best friend's guy.*' (p 80)
3. '*Instead I'll do what any healthy well-adjusted sixteen-year-old would do. I'll bury my worries deep, deep down, and use copious amounts of alcohol to forget they exist.*' (p 89)
4. '*Sometimes, viewing something from someone else's perspective can have very unintended consequences.*' (p 104)
5. '*Girls like me... we're not made for dancing.*' (p 143)
6. '*Ah, you only get one body, you might as well enjoy it.*' (p 149)
7. '*But what about what I'd sacrificed? What about how I'd been the sacrifice?*' (p 152)
8. '*All my life I've been different. I just wanted to fit in.*' (p 173)
9. '*1. Life really isn't like the movies.*' (p 217)
10. '*Don't give them that power. That power is yours.*' (p 227)



Further Reading Ideas for Class Discussion

1. Maisie and Beamer engage in a competition in this novel to watch and choose the best action hero. Who is the best action hero in your opinion – Dwayne (‘the Rock’) Johnson or Arnold (‘Arnie’) Schwarzenegger? Have fun watching one or two of their films and reading/writing reviews of them.
2. What do you think of beauty pageants? Research a variety of opinions about them written by a range of critics.
3. Maisie’s dad is made redundant which is quite common in the newspaper industry at present. Read and research the influence of digitisation on print media and discuss further.
4. Read and compare this novel to other YA novels in which self-esteem is an issue, eg. *Take Three Girls* by Fiona Wood, Simmone Howell and Cath Crowley; *Laurinda* by Alice Pung; and *In-Between Days* by Vikki Wakefield.
5. Read about young women’s issues and the choices they make in relationships, work and life, in texts such as those listed below under **Further Reading**. Discuss this reading in relation to this novel.

Further Ideas Using Technology

1. Access websites which deal with body image and attitudes to weight and self-image.
2. Locate information about Jenna Guillaume online.
3. Create a mock webpage to advertise Leila’s designs. Make it as interesting as she is!
4. Create a poster advertising this book using an online design program
5. Create a book trailer for this novel.

Conclusion

This young adult novel is a-laugh-a-minute but also a very serious account of the travails of a teenage girl whose life implodes on a holiday but who develops new resilience, and survives to tell the tale – to her ‘discovery’ journal. Until now, Maisie has had a tendency to eschew her own talents and assets but eventually she realises that she has a lot to offer. Maisie Martin learns to like a lot of things about herself – and they’re things she once didn’t!



Author Note

Jenna Guillaume is a journalist and author who grew up in Wollongong and now lives in Sydney. Her debut novel *What I like About Me* (Pan Macmillan) was published in 2019. She has been writing about pop culture, identity, feminism and social media at BuzzFeed Australia for the last five years, and was previously features editor at *Girlfriend*.

Further Reading

Fiction:

Pung, Alice *Laurinda* Black Inc Books, 2014.

Wakefield, Vikki *In-Between Days* Text Publishing, 2015.

Wood, Fiona; Howell, Simone; and Crowley, Cath *Take Three Girls* Pan Macmillan, 2017.

Non-Fiction:

Ford, Clementine *Fight Like a Girl* Allen & Unwin, 2016.

Maguire, Emily *Your Skirt's Too Short: Sex, Power, Choice* Text Publishing, 2010.

Sparrow, Rebecca *Ask Me Anything (Heartfelt Answers to 65 Anonymous Questions from Teenage Girls)* UQP, 2014.

Websites:

'Book Trailers for Australian Children's Literature' *Ipswich District Teacher-Librarian Network* <<https://idtl.net.au/book-trailers.php>>

'How To Make a Book Trailer' *Tristan Bancks* <<https://www.tristanbancks.com/2016/03/how-to-make-book-trailer.html>>

'6 tips for making a book trailer that works' *The Reading Agency*

<<https://readingagency.org.uk/young-people/003-skills/5-tips-for-making-a-book-trailer-that-works.html>>