



# TEACHING NOTES



## Memphis Grace

By Catriona McKeown

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Reading level: 15+ years

Graceland was named after the King of Pop's mansion by her Elvis-obsessed mum. But she's not rich, not famous and definitely not noticeable. She's just always been Mikaela's best friend.

That is, until Mikaela leaves school without explanation and Graceland finds herself noticed by Cooper Dally. Popular boy and Mikaela's EX-BOYFRIEND. Now she's the centre of attention: big parties, new dresses and girlfriend to Cooper. Graceland is finally changing her stars.

But Cooper has expectations Graceland can't meet. And when the truth behind Mikaela's leaving comes out, Graceland realises Cooper might not be the guy she thought he was. Worse, it could cost Graceland more than she's willing to give to be noticed.

### Themes

- Looking past disability to see the person behind it
- Friendships and relationships
- Coercion and consent

## Discussion questions and classroom activities

### THEMES

#### *Looking past disability*

1. In HASS class, Grace is confronted by her teacher about Hitler's attitude towards people with disabilities during World War II.
  - Research what key criteria were required to belong to Hitler's Aryan race. How many people in your class would have been allowed into the Aryan race?
  - Do you think Mrs Higgins is making a fair comparison between Hitler's regime and a contemporary issue (pre-screening for Down syndrome)?
  - Grace reacts strongly to Mrs Higgins' questioning, especially when she mentions children born with Down syndrome were killed under Hitler's regime. Why do you think Grace responds the way she does?
2. Grace's attitude towards Jack changes from the beginning to the end of the novel. What were the main factors that influenced Grace?
  - How did Grace's change in attitude towards Jack impact on him throughout the novel?
3. As Grace begins to spend more time with Jack, she struggles to be patient with his strange behaviour and quirky ways. This changes towards the end of the novel, and in the final chapter we see Grace show a deeper understanding of why Jack acts the way he does:

*His eyes start fluttering from the ceiling to the floor and back to the ceiling again.*

*'It's okay, Jack. I know you're nervous, but Mum is going to be so excited you're here. You don't need to be worried, okay?'* (p. 223)

What is it about the change in Grace that means some of Jack's autistic traits are no longer an issue in their friendship?

4. Think about your school. How do you think it could improve in making sure all students are included in all aspects of school life?
5. How might you, as a student, help build an even better culture of acceptance in your school?
6. What barriers might need to be broken down before your suggestions from Questions 4 and 5 could be implemented?
7. Jack and Grace have a few discussions about the role DNA plays in our behaviour. When discussing the DNA of voles, Jack says, *'They have longer strings in their DNA that make them spend more time with their mate and with their offspring. Because they have more receptors, they have a greater release of vasopression, dopamine and oxytocin into their brain when they're with their mate'* (p. 144).  
Research the following and explain what these naturally occurring hormones do in our brain:
  - Vasopression
  - Dopamine
  - Oxytocin

8. Jack then says *'There's something in their [voles] DNA that causes them to get good feelings from being with their family. And so, they want to stay'* (p. 145). Do you believe DNA can influence a person in the way Jack suggests?
  - Give reasons for your answer based on evidence you have researched (and reference the article/ website you used).
9. DNA is often described as a blueprint that controls the characteristics of organisms, including people. What other things can influence people's characteristics?
10. As Grace's group explain in their project, there is evidence to suggest autism may be caused by a DNA variety and could be hereditary. Do you see Jack's DNA variety as a good thing or a bad thing?
11. Does Jack's autism make him a good friend for Grace, once she gets to know him better?
  - Why/why not?
  - In what ways?

### **Friendships and relationships**

1. Grace's friendships develop throughout the novel and we get to know some new characters at the same time Grace does. Rank the characters Ellen, Hayley, Nikki, Brad, Cooper and Jack, in order of who is the best to worst kind of friend for Grace. What are the defining characteristics that make some friends better than others? Suggested table for completion below:

| Name of character | Positive qualities (include page number and evidence from text) | Negative qualities (include page number and evidence from text) |
|-------------------|---|---|
|                   |   |   |
|                   |   |   |

2. Would you rank Grace's friends differently at the beginning of the novel, compared to the end?
  - What factors impact on any changes you would make? Give names and incidents that occur to support your answers.
3. Throughout the novel, Grace begins to doubt whether some of her friends are as trustworthy as she first thought.
  - Which of Grace's friends clearly betray her?
  - Which of her friends are we unsure about?
  - Do you think this reflects reality, that some people are easier to get to know and trust than others?
4. The word 'grace' has a few different meanings; one is when you receive forgiveness you don't deserve. Which of Grace's friends deserve her grace/forgiveness?
5. There is an inspiration quote that says *'Forgiveness doesn't excuse their behaviour. Forgiveness prevents their behaviour from destroying your heart'*. What do you think this quote means?
  - What might Grace forgiving Cooper look like?
  - Do you think she has forgiven Cooper by the end of the novel? Give an example from the final chapters.
6. Of all Grace's friends, some were more generous than others in encouraging her to pursue her dreams. How important is it for friends to support each other to achieve what they want in life?

## **Coercion and consent**

1. In a blog post at <https://www.bustle.com/articles/67926-is-it-rape-if-you-say-yes-5-types-of-sexual-coercion-explained>, the author Eden Strong discusses five warning signs that a sexual encounter may have been coerced, and is therefore sexual assault.
  - Is this a trustworthy article? What makes it trustworthy/not trustworthy?
  - List the five warning signs of coercion. Were there any that surprised you?
  - Which warning signs listed above suggest that if Grace had slept with Cooper at his party, it would have been considered coercion?
2. The University of Michigan's Sexual Assault Prevention and Awareness Center defines consent at <https://sapac.umich.edu/article/49>. What does consent mean in a relationship?
  - In the definition, the quote says 'It is the responsibility of the person initiating the sexual activity to get this permission'. How is this complicated in incidents of coercion in sexual assault?
  - Do you think Cooper believed he had Grace's permission to sleep with her?
3. When Mikaela tells Grace that her sleeping with Cooper had been coercion, Mikaela is still hesitant to call it rape. Why do you think Mikaela was so confused about whether it was really sexual assault?
  - List the ways Mikaela's experience of sexual assault impacted on her behaviour towards her friends.
  - Why do you think Grace and her friends become so determined to let 'the world' know what Cooper was really like?
  - Do you think the girls' action against Cooper was warranted? Why/why not?

## **KEY CURRICULUM AREAS**

### **English**

ACELA1564

ACELA1569

ACELT1641

ACELT1774

### **Science**

ACSSU184

ACSSU185

ACSHE191

ACSHE230

### **HPE**

ACPPS089

ACPPS090

ACPPS092

ACPPS093

ACPPS094

### **History**

ACDSEH024

ACDSEH107

ACHHS188

ACHHS190

## About the author

Catriona works in a Christian school on the Fraser Coast, Queensland. Although she has a history and English background as a teacher, her current work and studies are in Inclusive Education. She works with teenagers from Year 6 through to Year 12, many of whom have Autism. Her love of writing character-driven stories reflects her passion to see all young people reach their full potential, and to see the world they live in become a better place. She seeks inclusion not only in schools, but in society as a whole.

*Memphis Grace* is Catriona's second young adult book with Rhiza Edge. Her first, *The Boy in the Hoodie*, won the Caleb prize in 2016 for unpublished manuscript.



## Author note

A few years ago, I needed to spend some time in a Year 10 science class. Not having been very interested in science class at the age of 15, I found sitting in a science class the second time round fascinating. I asked the students in the class how they weren't being blown away by the things they were learning. But instead, the students were half falling asleep. I combined this experience, together with the current teaching trend (embedded in the Australian Curriculum) for students to learn to work together in groups, to bring together Jack and main character, Grace.

In writing young adult books, I also draw on my experiences of not always choosing wisely when it came to friends, or boyfriends, when I was a teenager. I want to inspire today's teenage girls to think more deeply about their relationships and who they are choosing to be in their 'tribe'. Having friends with similar values and interests is so important. Likewise, I want to encourage teens to be strong in who they are and what they want, and to know the other person's true character, before diving into a serious relationship with them.