

Xavier in the Meantime by Kate Gordon

TEACHERS' RESOURCES

RECOMMENDED FOR

Upper Primary and Lower Secondary readers

Recommended for 10 years and over

CONTENTS

Introduction

Themes and Discussion questions

Key quotes

Character guide

About the author

Further reading and resources

USE IN THE CLASSROOM

As an English text:

- As an example of contemporary middle-school fiction;
- As a basis for a writing exercise on characterisation and point of view;
- As a text for comparative study of companion novels;
- To explore the use of metaphor.

In Health classes:

- To discuss mental health issues, particularly as they affect young people.

KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- Responding to literature
- Examining literature
- Literacy - Interpreting, analysing, evaluating
- Mental health and wellbeing

THEMES

- Mental Health, including Anxiety and Depression
- Therapy
- Family, Parental Separation
- Fostering and Parental Neglect
- Animal Rights

PUBLICATION DETAILS

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BLURB

Sometimes Xavier wakes up feeling hopeless

Every new doctor ... *this will fix it.*
Removing him from school ... *this will fix it.*
The therapy group ... *this will fix it.*
And his dad moving out. *Maybe, this will fix it.*

Despite his positive affirmations, the black dog never really leaves him. It watches from the corner of his room, never straying too far away—waiting for the perfect opportunity to sink its teeth in.

But Xavier has a plan—one he hopes will help all the kids in his support group. Enlisting the help of best friend Aster, he tries to convince his dad to turn the family sheep farm into a therapy retreat for the group session kids. But he is up against decades of tradition, his parents who are on a “break,” and the spectre of the black dog.

Can Xavier learn to cherish the moments inbetween the struggles—the moments in the meantime?

INTRODUCTION

Set in a small town in Tasmania, *Xavier in the Meantime* is a contemporary middle-grade novel that focuses on Xavier Atkins—an eleven-year-old boy who lives with depression. Xavier uses his daily affirmations to stay positive, but the “black dog” continues to stalk him. His father has moved to the family’s hogget (sheep) farm while the regular tenants are travelling, and although both his parents deny it, Xavier thinks they are separating.

Xavier attends group therapy sessions led by their well-meaning but frustrated counsellor, Maren. The kids are not enthused about writing their feelings, except for Willow who is a poet. Xavier tries writing his own poetry, which is interspersed in the novel.

Along with best friend Aster, Xavier hatches a grand plan to help the kids in his therapy group and to save the sheep on the family farm: he wants to turn it into a mental health therapy retreat. His father, though supportive of Xavier, tells him that they must be practical, as the farm supports their family financially.

Xavier and Aster, with the help of Xavier’s parents, Aunt Noni, Maren and Esme, work to bring their plan to fruition. On their trial day, Indigo turns up unexpectedly and Xavier experiences a breakdown that sends him back to the clinic. The group tell him what a wonderful time they had at the retreat, and his dad agrees to pursue the therapy retreat more permanently.

An insightful, sensitive, and at times gut-wrenchingly real story. Gordon introduces the issues surrounding mental health to younger readers in powerful, thought-provoking ways. Readers will enjoy Gordon’s beautiful, poetic language and the diverse cast of characters.

Content notes:

- Minor non-graphic mention of self-harm (“Hana sometimes hurt herself on purpose” p21)
- Use of terms “crazy” and “freak.” Xavier and the other kids in group therapy sometimes use the word “crazy” to describe themselves (p16). Indigo Michael calls Xavier a “useless weirdo freak” (p56)
- Bullying and violence: Zach shows up to group with a bruise on his face. He was assaulted by kids at school. (p79-80)
- Willow came to Australia as a refugee. She was placed into a detention centre as a child. (p21)
- Xavier experiences a breakdown and is hospitalised (Chapter 22, p157)

THEMES & DISCUSSION

THEMES

- Mental health
- Depression
- Therapy
- Family
- Parental Separation
- Friendship
- Gender expression
- Animal rights
- Clothing/dress
- Land rights

ACTIVITY: Break into small groups and choose a theme from the list above, or another you can identify. Choose some examples from the text that show how this theme is explored and present as a Powerpoint or Prezi.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

Before you start reading:

Examine the cover of the novel. What do you think the cover and the title suggest the book will be about?

After reading:

Design your own cover for the novel. Write a short paragraph about your design choices.

COMPANION NOVELS

Xavier in the Meantime is a companion novel to *Aster's Good, Right Things*. Companion novels are independent stories written by the same author that use the characters and setting from an existing work.

- Discuss why the author may have chosen to write this story as a companion novel, rather than a sequel to *Aster's Good, Right Things*.
- Research the companion novel form and compile a list of other examples.
- Chose any work for which you would like to write a companion novel. Write a persuasive letter to "The Publisher" about why this companion novel should be written and include a sample paragraph.

STRUCTURE

Each chapter begins with a "Daily Affirmation."

- Discuss why you think the author chose this framing device.
- Pick an example and discuss how you think the affirmation relates to what happens in the chapter.
- Write some of your own affirmations to use over a week. Reflect on your affirmations at the end of the week.

In Chapter 22, Xavier experiences a breakdown and the writing style and structure is markedly different.

- Discuss how this chapter is written in comparison to others in the novel.
- Try writing the chapter from the perspective of someone else in the group. How does this change your understanding of the scene?

THEMES & DISCUSSION

PERSPECTIVE

While *Aster's Good, Right Things* is written in first-person perspective, *Xavier in the Meantime* uses third-person perspective.

- Discuss what affect the perspective has on how you read the story.
- Rewrite one of the scenes from *Xavier in the Meantime* in first person perspective.
- Write a scene set during *Xavier in the Meantime* in third person that focuses on another character. Discuss how focusing on a different character does or doesn't change the story.

POETIC TECHNIQUES

Although many of the other group session members aren't keen on writing, Xavier, Aster and Willow enjoy writing poetry.

- Examine the poems they write and pick out some of the key poetic techniques.
- Many of Xavier's poems reference the sky and outdoors. Take your notebook outdoors and write a poem inspired by the nature around you.

MENTAL HEALTH

Xavier struggles with depression and the pressure to be 'cured.'

- Have you ever felt pressured to act happy when you aren't?
- Can you identify some of the mental health strategies Xavier uses in the novel?

In the novel, Xavier attends group sessions with others struggling with mental health issues.

- Why do you think it's important to discuss your feelings with other people you trust?
- Become a "mentally healthy classroom." Research strategies that will make your classroom a supportive environment and create an action plan together. After a month, conduct a reflective discussion about what worked and how you could improve.

SOCIAL ISSUES / ACTIVISM

Xavier wants to turn the family hogget farm into a mental health/therapy retreat for kids.

- Xavier is a vegetarian and is passionate about animal rights. Pick an issue you feel passionate about (for example: the environment, technology, human rights) and create a poster with your idea about how to make a difference.
- Brainstorm your own business or philanthropical idea that could help kids with their mental health.

IDENTITY & COMING OF AGE

Xavier expresses his identity through his clothing and dress.

- Write a paragraph describing yourself wearing your favourite outfit.
- Write a contrasting paragraph describing yourself wearing colours or items of clothing you dislike but doing an activity you enjoy. Even though you are describing yourself, does this feel like a representation of you? Why or why not?

KEY QUOTES

How can you help someone else with their broken mind when yours is every bit as broken?
(p20)

The black dog crawled into his lap and snuggled in. It was soft, despite its angles. It could have been nice, having a dog on his knee. But the dog had claws. And the claws dug in. As if they could easily rip off his skin, and the dog knew his happiness didn't go any deeper. (p21-22)

Xavier woke up feeling hopeless. He knew why he felt this. He knew it was because he hadn't had enough sleep and because the sky outside was grey and bleak and he hadn't had his pills yet. He knew, also, the strangest, most inexplicable and ridiculous reason of all—Because waking up feeling hopeless drains all the hope away. (p39)

I've had days like this before and I have survived. I've had days like this before and I am still alive. I've had days like this before and my mother is still here. I've had days like this before and I will survive this one. (p46)

Movies never showed that depression is rarely cured forever. That it will probably come back. And that when it did for Xavier, the people he thought understood him might be confused. (p41)

Doctors would be there, and nurses, and they were the best people, for now, but doctors and nurses don't make you less alone. Nobody who is paid to be there can ever make you feel less alone. (p66)

[Iris Atkins] "Things are complicated. Life is complicated. Family is complicated, but that doesn't mean the love is any less." (p74)

Not much seemed simple, in Xavier's life. The affirmations were simple and he liked them for it. (p79)

How could hugging a sheep heal a soul? How could any small act of kindness make a tiny dent in all the sorrow of the world? (p81)

[Aster] "I think this is how friendship works. If one of us loses hope, the other one has to find it." (p82)

He wished that every smile didn't feel like lying. He wished that he could hold on to the hope, properly. He wished that it didn't always feel as if it was made from slippery ooze, as if it was sliding through his fingers. (p88)

Xavier was just his own self. Sometimes, this felt like a good thing—as he looked down at his kooky outfit of orange dungarees, lime green skivvy and paisley socks, he felt pride in his own uniqueness. But it was a frightening thing, too, to feel completely alone in who you were. (p97)

KEY QUOTES

[Mike Atkins] "I do all I can to make sure those animals out there get a much better life than most of our competitors and ... that's all I can do." (p101)

He [Mike] understood now, the difference between being a bit nervous and feeling as if you're being chased by a herd of buffalo; the difference between feeling a bit sad and feeling like there is nothing inside of you; that you are nothing; that the whole world is fog and you are the blackest part in the centre of it all. (p102)

Xavier didn't use makeup very often—he didn't like the feel of it on his skin—but when he did, it seemed to place a thin, yet impenetrable, barrier between him and the world. He felt better, stronger, more capable. (p111)

It [makeup] was like putting on a costume. A mask. It made him feel safer. His clothes were the same. A barrier between him and all the scary stuff out there. And a way to have colour when all he felt was grey. (p111)

[Noni] "Kids going through a rough time can be ... unpredictable, in their responses to things like this. Even lovely, lovely experiences can have unexpected reactions. I just want you to be prepared for that." (p117)

Going to bed early was where it started. Going to bed early and staying in bed late. Staring at the wall. Staring into space. Staring at the black dog. Watching it watching him. Not showering. Not eating. (p122)

"You say you're on a break, but you're not broken. You still love each other, so how can you be? The only thing that makes sense to me—if you're not broken up and if you and Dad are still together and if you both want to be together ... the only thing that makes sense to me is that both of you need space from me." (p138)

It howled so loudly that the sky shattered—the whole sky shattered and it rained down on Xavier. And he was wet with it, drowning in it, drowning in the sky. (p154)

Here was colour. Here was light. Here was no dog. Here was dancing clown doctors and here...For now, at least, was love. (p167)

He was never safe. But he told himself that this meant that he just had to cherish the moments when the dog wasn't here, more. He just had to cherish these moments. The times in between. The meantimes. (p177)

Some change was good. But sometimes staying yourself was exactly what was needed. (p182)

KEY CHARACTER GUIDE

XAVIER ATKINS

- Protagonist.
- 11 years old.
- Has been diagnosed with clinical depression.
- Is home-schooled.
- Attends group therapy sessions.
- Is a vegetarian.

IRIS ATKINS

- Xavier's mum.
- Has Crohn's disease, a chronic bowel illness.
- She describes herself as a "hippie."
- She had postpartum depression after having Xavier.
- Is a vegetarian.

MIKE ATKINS

- Xavier's dad.
- He is from a country farming family.
- His family has owned a hogget farm for generations.
- He works on the farm but usually lives with the family in the cottage next to the Albatross School. At the beginning of the novel, he has moved into the farmhouse while the tenants are away.
- He has recently started baking as a hobby.
- His parents didn't believe in showing 'weakness'.

ASTER

- Xavier's best friend.
- 11-years-old.
- Attends the Albatross School.
- They first meet in *Aster's Good, Right Things*.
- Has been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder.
- Writes poetry.

ESME RODGERS

- Esme is 16-years-old and works at the ice-cream cafe.
- She has brightly coloured hair that often changes colour. It's now lemon yellow.
- She wants to enrol in a Social Work course at university.
- She also struggles with unspecified mental health issues.

KEY CHARACTER GUIDE

INDIGO MICHAEL

- Aster's classmate.
- Aunt Noni's foster child.
- Indigo's mother leaves for the mainland with her boyfriend.
- She cuts off her hair and bleaches it.
- She has a breakdown and is hospitalised.

WILLOW

- Attends Xavier's group therapy sessions.
- She has warm brown skin, bright blue eyes and cropped natural hair.
- Came to Australia as a refugee and spent time in a detention centre.
- She writes poetry.

ZACH

- Attends Xavier's group therapy sessions.
- He is bullied and assaulted by the kids at his school.
- When he is bullied, he says his Dad will only tell him to "toughen up" or will blame him.
- He comes from a "broken family."
- After the farm visit, Zach writes Xavier a letter asking to be friends.

MAREN

- Facilitator of the group therapy sessions.
- She has a "hint" of a French accent.
- She looks young, and is around 22 or 23.

ACTIVITY: Invite students to write a character profile for the character of their choice. The profile could include details about the character's appearance, their thoughts, their feelings, and even a drawing of what they imagine the character to look like.

ACTIVITY: Create a character tree or map, on poster board, to show how each character relates to one another.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



ABOUT #OWNVOICES

The term ‘own voices’ or #ownvoices was coined by YA author Corinne Duyvis in 2015 on Twitter. #Ownvoices refers to works where the author is writing about a marginalised or under-represented experience that they identify with. This could be related to race, gender, disability or an wide range of other identities.

Aster’s Good, Right Things and *Xavier in the Meantime* are considered an #ownvoices novels because the author shares the neurodiverse experiences of her characters.

Find out more about #ownvoices here: <https://bit.ly/2QyQUuV>

Kate Gordon grew up in a very booky house, in a small town by the sea in Tasmania. She also spent much of her time dreaming about being a writer, and spent many a lunch hour walking around the playground reciting poetry. The other children thought she was a little bit odd. After studying performing arts and realising she was a terrible actor, Kate decided to give in to genetics and study to be a librarian herself. She never stopped writing and in 2009 won a Varuna fellowship.

Kate’s first book, *Three Things About Daisy Blue*, a Young Adult novel about travel, love, self-acceptance and letting go, was published by Allen and Unwin in 2010. Her second book, *Thyla*, was published by Random House Australia in April 2011 and her third book, *Vulpi*, the sequel to *Thyla*, was published in April 2012. She published another YA novel, *Writing Clementine*, in 2014 with Allen and Unwin.

Her recent publications include the CBCA Notable YA novel *Girl Running, Boy Falling* (Rhiza Edge), the *Juno Jones, Word Ninja* series (Yellow Brick Books), *The Heartsong of Wonder Quinn* (UQP) and a picture book called *Bird on a Wire* (Hardie Grant).

In 2021, Gordon won the prestigious Children’s Book Council of Australia Book of the Year Awards in the Younger Readers category for her novel *Aster’s Good, Right Things*.

Kate lives in Hobart, in a mint-green cottage, with her husband, her very strange cat, and a wonderful little girl who goes by the name of Tiger. Kate dreams that one day she and her little family will live in another cottage, by the beach, with goats and chickens. In the meantime, she fills her house with books, perfects her gluten-free baking techniques, has marvellous adventures with Tiger, and she writes.

ACTIVITY: As a group, brainstorm interview questions for author Kate Gordon.

If your class would like to submit their questions, email info@rivetedpress.com.au.

FURTHER READING & RESOURCES

MIDDLE GRADE NOVELS ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH



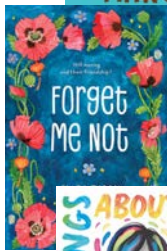
Some Kind of Happiness by Claire Legrand

- Middle grade fantasy about family, depression and the power of imagination.



The Science of Breakable Things by Tae Keller

- Contemporary middle-grade about a girl using the scientific process to “save” her mother from depression.



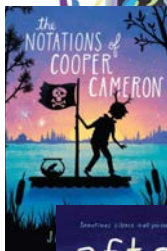
Forget Me Not by Ellie Terry

- Contemporary middle-grade verse novel about an astronomy loving girl with Tourette Syndrome.



Five Things About Ava Andrews by Margaret Dilloway

- Contemporary middle-grade about a girl with invisible disabilities who takes improv classes.



The Notations of Cooper Cameron by Jane O'Reilly

- Contemporary middle-grade about a boy with OCD as he navigates grief.



After Zero by Christina Collins

- Contemporary middle-grade about a boy with selective mutism.
- Interview with the author: <https://bit.ly/3jmBfex>

OTHER RESOURCES

Smiling Mind

Not-for-profit with programs that specifically support youth mental health.
<https://www.smilingmind.com.au/> or app available on iOS and Google Play.

Like You Podcast

A kid's weekly mindfulness podcast that uses breathing, affirmations, music, and imagination to explore feelings, relieve anxiety, encourage self-esteem, and grow empathy.

<https://bit.ly/31d0dJU>

Not Alone - A Beyond Blue podcast

<https://bit.ly/3d2ZoFK>

Beyond Blue - Anxiety and depression in young people: What you need to know
Information Booklet

<https://bit.ly/3DcJrYs>

Kids' Helpline

1800 55 1800, Web chat, Email: counsellor@kidshelpline.com.au

