

Aster's Good, Right Things by Kate Gordon

TEACHERS' RESOURCES

RECOMMENDED FOR

Upper Primary and Lower Secondary

Recommended for 9 years and over

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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 diversity;
- To explore the use and power of metaphor

In Health classes:

- To discuss mental health issues affecting young people and the importance of resilience

KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- Responding to literature
- Examining literature
- Literacy - Interpreting, analysing, evaluating

THEMES

- Mental Health, including Anxiety And Depression
- Friendship
- Parental Separation
- Fostering and Parental Neglect
- Diversity and Gender Norms
- Growth, Change and Identity

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BLURB

Aster attends a school for gifted kids, but she doesn't think she's special at all. If she was, her mother wouldn't have left.

Each day Aster must do a good, right thing—a challenge she sets herself to make someone else's life better. Nobody can know about her 'things', because then they won't count. And if she doesn't do them, she's sure everything will go wrong.

Then she meets Xavier. He has his own kind of special missions to make life better.

When they do these missions together, Aster feels free, but if she stops doing her good, right things will everything fall apart?

THEMES & DISCUSSION

THEMES

- Mental health
- Labelling
- Abandonment
- Family
- Parental Separation
- Fostering
- Friendship
- Identity
- Childhood/
childishness
- Growth/change
- Resilience
- Communication
Codes

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

NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Why do you think the author used Aster as the narrator? How do you think the story may have changed if she'd decide to use alternating points-of-view?

ACTIVITY: Retell the moment that Xavier and Aster first meet from Xavier's perspective. How does this change the narrative flow and the reader's interpretation of the story?

METAPHOR

Aster refers to her anxiety as 'noise' and Xavier refers to his depression as 'the black dog.' Why do the characters use these metaphors to talk about mental illness?

ACTIVITY: Brainstorm metaphors for mental illness individually. As a class, discuss why we use metaphorical language to talk about mental illness, and if there is still a stigma around discussing mental health.

STRUCTURE

Each chapter begins with Aster's description of the 'good, right thing' that she has done that day. Often this is a prolepsis, or 'flash-forward'. Why do you think the author chose to do this?

ACTIVITY: Write your own journal entry, which begins with the 'good, right thing' you did that day. Try to build tension by hinting at what is going to happen before it does.

Some chapters do not begin with a 'good, right thing'—notably when Aster is having a 'hiding day' or in the final chapters of the novel. What effect does breaking the consistent structure of the novel have?

THEMES & DISCUSSION

CHARACTERISATION

Aster's favourite ice cream is vanilla yoghurt at the start of the novel, but by the end of the novel she's adding a scoop of rainbow to her order. What does this represent about her character to you? Is there other imagery that demonstrates Aster's character development?

Aster often mentions her school's *Healthy Bodies, Healthy Minds* policy. She adheres to the rules, but her father doesn't think they should be that strict. What does this represent about each character, and their relationship to one another?

ACTIVITY: Write about an experience with food, or your favourite food. Think about how this food relates to your identity—does it represent a part of your identity or is it in contrast with it?

Xavier has a colourful dress sense that defies gender norms; he wears everything from Snow White to pirate pajamas. How does clothing contribute to his characterisation?

ACTIVITY: Think about a character from a book, television show, or film. Describe what they would typically wear, then describe them wearing something completely opposite. Discuss why the character seems different, and how we use clothing to express our identity.

SYMBOLISM

Aster and her Dad use flowers as a code to help her communicate when speaking becomes too much; they help her to express her feelings when she's unable to find the right words. What other codes do we use to talk about our feelings? Do these codes—for example, colour—have different meanings in other cultures?

Aster doesn't discuss the meaning of the 'aster' flower in the novel; do you think this is significant? Do you think the symbolism of the aster flower represents Aster's character? Why or why not?

Before the closing chapter of the novel, there is a drawing of a dandelion. What does the dandelion symbolise and what do you think it represents about the conclusion of the novel?

ACTIVITY: Research the meaning of a flower that is not mentioned in the book. Draw the flower and write up your research. Present it as a poster.

What do you think Hollyhock/Daenerys represents in the novel?

ACTIVITY: A rabbit crossing your path can symbolise a positive change in your life. When Aster crosses paths with Hollyhock/Daenerys, she meets Xavier. Find an example in another book, television show, or film where animal symbolism is used.

THEMES & DISCUSSION

MENTAL HEALTH

Aster finally gets to try meditation with her Dad in the last chapter of the novel. Discuss the benefits of meditation and mindfulness as a class.

ACTIVITY: Use the ‘Smiling Mind’ app (iOS/Android) to try a guided meditation. Get students to rate or write down how they are feeling before the activity. After the meditation, discuss as a group (or write individually if this is more comfortable for your students) how you feel now, in comparison to before.

INDIGENOUS HISTORIES AND CULTURE

Indigo Micheal tells Flynn to ‘go back to where he came from.’ Aster responds in the following way:

...His dad is Tommeginer, so Flynn’s blood is more Australian than Indigo’s or the blood of most of us at the strange little school. And I wanted to say that. I wanted to tell Indigo that Flynn Blumenthal comes from this land. He comes from it like a tree that’s been growing for hundreds of thousands of years. He comes from here like the rock that’s buried deepest beneath your chair and this classroom and this school and our town. I didn’t say any of that. But I saw he was sad, and I gave him a smile.

Do you think Indigo’s view represents attitudes we have in today’s society? Do you think Aster should have spoken up about her view? Flynn’s responds by rolling his eyes and saying “It’s all good”; Discuss why you think he responded in this way.

ACTIVITY: Research the history and culture of the Tommeginer people. Choose one aspect, such as food, language, cultural activities, or place, to present to the class. If your group finds it difficult to find information, discuss why this might be.

IDENTITY & COMING OF AGE

In the opening chapter, it becomes clear that Aster idolises Esme—the 15-year-old girl who works at the ice cream shop. Identify words or phrases that show this. Why do you think Aster admires Esme so much?

ACTIVITY: Write about a person you admire.

Aster worries about being perceived as ‘childish.’ Identify a scene or quote that illustrates her concern. Do you shy away from doing things because they are ‘childish’? Discuss whether you worry about other people’s perception of you.

ACTIVITY: Write about yourself from the perspective of someone else. What might they think about you based on the way you dress or what you do?

KEY QUOTES

“I can’t let go of them – the *good, right things*, especially—because if I do ... I’ll turn into a cloud and I’ll float away, and a storm will come and blow me to nothing.” (p.6)

“Indigo isn’t good at being quiet. Sometimes, I wonder if she has *noise* inside her, too, like I do and she’s just worse at hiding it. Worse at keeping it inside. Or better at letting it out.” (p.20)

“I don’t know what words I’d use about myself, if I had the choice. I only know all the words that other people use. Or don’t use. I only know the spaces that are left behind, when people use no words about me at all.” (p.22)

“I tell myself I’m doing them because I’m a good person, but ... I do them because they’ve become like knocking on wood or not stepping on cracks. If I don’t do a nice thing, every day, without expecting something in return, everything will come crashing down like a tree house in a hurricane and all that will be left is dust. I can’t tell anybody about the *good, right things*. Because they might think it means there’s something wrong with me. They might even try and stop me and then the storm will come, and everything will fall apart.” (p.32–33)

“Even them. Even famous people. Even the Spice Girls. Everyone is hiding something.” (p.86)

“Sometimes, I stare in the small mirror in my room and I say the stormy words out loud and it hurts, to hear them be spoken—*unlovable, crazy, weirdo, ghost*. No wonder she left you. Who would stay with a girl like you?—but sometimes it also helps a bit, to let the words out. Like vinegar out of a bottle.” (p.88–89)

“He was the kind of boy who made you feel like your weirdness wasn’t so weird and your childishness wasn’t so childish, and you might be okay, just exactly as you were.” (p.128)

“On hiding days, the noise in my head has reached a crescendo and every millimetre of my skull is stuffed with little biting creatures and a big, scary enemy army of words and they break out of my skull and begin their march through the rest of my body. They take over my lungs and make my breath race. They take over my stomach and make it churn. They take over even my fingertips and make them vibrate and tremble.” (p.87)

“Dad knows what this is like—to find the world too terrifying sometimes. Dad calls his feeling ‘the blues.’ I call mine ‘noise.’ It’s not sadness. Or numbness, like Dad says he feels sometimes. It begins as a kind of creeping dread and a kind of mushrooming and a kind of tsunami of too much.” (p.88)

KEY QUOTES

“Some days are okay. Some days are too much. Some days there’s a reason. Some days there isn’t. I don’t know why I feel okay; I don’t know why I feel bad.” (p. 92)

“Maybe because when you feel depressed it’s like there’s a big black dog sitting in the corner of your room and he won’t go away. Today was like that. The dog really didn’t want to go” (p.120)

“I wanted to tell Indigo that Flynn Blumenthal comes from this land. He comes from it like a tree that’s been growing for hundreds of thousands of years. He comes from here like the rock that’s buried deepest beneath your chair and this classroom and this school and our town.” (p.126)

“I think there’s no such thing as childish, really ... “I think we’re all just kids, always. No matter how old we get. Some of us are just better at hiding it. And I think ... the longer you can stay true to it and ... not hide it ... the truer you are a person.” (p.133)

“You and I, and you’re dad ... We’re like flowers, I guess. We grow together, in a big field, all together ... Individually, we’re vibrant and wonderful, but ... put us together and we’re even better. Even stronger.” (p.141)

“And please don’t ask me if it’s childish, to dance and play the kazoo. Because maybe it is, but we only have a few precious, short years left to be in any way childish, Aster.” (p.144)

“I danced a bit. And it was the first time I felt ... free, in a long time ... and like a child, in the best way of being a child.” (p.147)

“I know she’s wild. And I know she’s sometimes mean, and I know she’s lots of words but she’s none of those words either because she’s a person and a person isn’t a word.” (p. 176)

“Maybe it was the opposite of a *good, right thing*, not talking to Mum. But sometimes, perhaps, *not doing the good, right thing* is actually the *right thing* to do. If it protects your heart.” (p.179)

“And from now on, these are the things that I’ll do—things that feel good and things that feel right. For other people, still, but also myself.” (p.182)

“The silence was a flower, growing through the cracks.” (p. 187)

KEY CHARACTER GUIDE

ASTER

- Protagonist and narrator
- 11-years-old
- Aster describes herself as a 'wilting flower', with 'sticky-out limbs' and 'pale brown hair'.
- Her dad calls her his 'Petal,' because she is named after the Aster flower.
- She has been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder.
- She writes her thoughts in a brown notebook.

XAVIER ATKINS

- Xavier lives in the house next to Albatross School.
- He is homeschooled.
- He is extremely vivacious, but only on his good days.
- He has been diagnosed with clinical depression.
- His mother's name is Iris.

INDIGO MICHAEL

- Indigo attends the Albatross School with Aster.
- She is educationally-delayed and experiences difficulties controlling her emotions.
- She usually receives 'teachable moments' for her behaviour at school.
- The town gossips about her mother and her absent father.
- She is eventually removed from her mother's care due to neglect and fostered by Aunt Noni.

FLYNN BLUMENTHAL

- Flynn is a popular, cheerful student at Aster's school.
- Aster thinks he is 'destined to run the country.'
- He is of Aboriginal descent; his father is Tommeginer.
- Aster longs to be noticed by Flynn and dreams of them becoming best friends.
- Annaliese is his best friend; at one point Aster wonders if they'll get married someday.

ANNALIESE

- Annaliese also attends the Albatross School and is a talented singer.
- She is best friends with Flynn Blumenthal.
- Aster thought that Annaliese was just a popular girl, but when Annaliese comforts her after Indigo goes missing she realises that she is a genuinely caring person.

ESME RODGERS

- Esme is 15-years-old and works at the ice cream store.
- She has brightly coloured hair that often changes colour—sometimes blue, sometimes green.
- Esme gets a lot of attention from boys but is heart broken when they leave.
- She usually gets Aster's order wrong but Aster doesn't tell her, as that counts as a 'good, right thing.'
- Aster really wants to become friends with Esme.

KEY CHARACTER GUIDE

ASTER'S DAD

- Aster's dad was left to raise Aster alone, after her mum, Ivy, left them.
- He once dreamed of being a musician.
- He is a school principal at another local school.
- He connects with Aster through books.
- He also has the 'blues.'

AUNT NONI

- Peony Vogel is called 'Noni' by Aster because she wasn't able to say Peony.
- Aunt Noni is the younger sister of Aster's mother, Ivy.
- She is a children's book author and a trained social worker, as well as a sometimes-foster parent.
- She loves children but doesn't have any of her own.
- While it is never clearly expressed, it is subtly implied that she may be gay.
- Noni is extremely bright and bold and she tries to encourage Aster to be like that as well.
- Noni worries about her niece's timid nature.
- Aster hangs out with her Aunt Noni on Saturdays and when her dad is not home.
- Indigo comes to stay with Aunt Noni for a while, when she's taken away from her mum.

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

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 Heartsong of Wonder Quinn* (UQP), a picture book called *Bird on a Wire* (Hardie Grant), and the first three books in her junior fiction series *Juno Jones* (Yellow Brick Books).

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 technique, has marvellous adventures with Tiger, and she writes.



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 is considered an #ownvoices novel because the author shares the experience of having an anxiety disorder with the protagonist.

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

FURTHER READING & RESOURCES

#OWNVOICES NOVELS ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

Insignificant Events in the Life of a Cactus by Dusti Bowling; Sterling Publishing 2019

Eliza and Her Monsters by Francesca Zappia; HarperCollins Publishers 2019

Chasing the Milky Way by Erin E. Moulton; Philomel, Penguin Group 2014

OCDaniel by Wesley King; Simon & Schuster 2017

Interview with the author: <https://bit.ly/2FVoEQX>

After Zero by Christina Collins; Sourcebooks 2019

Interview with the author: <https://bit.ly/3jmBfex>

Some Kind of Happiness by Claire Legrand; Simon & Schuster 2017

Stanley Will Probably Be Fine by Sally J. Pla, Illustrated by Steve Wolfhard; HarperCollins 2019

Good Enough by Jen Petro-Roy; Feiwel & Friends, Macmillan US 2019

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.

Making Space in Kids' Literature for Mental Health Issues

<https://bit.ly/2EE04ng>

Anxiety in Children - BeyondBlue

<https://bit.ly/3gI5LxS>

Anxiety in kids and teens - Kids Helpline

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