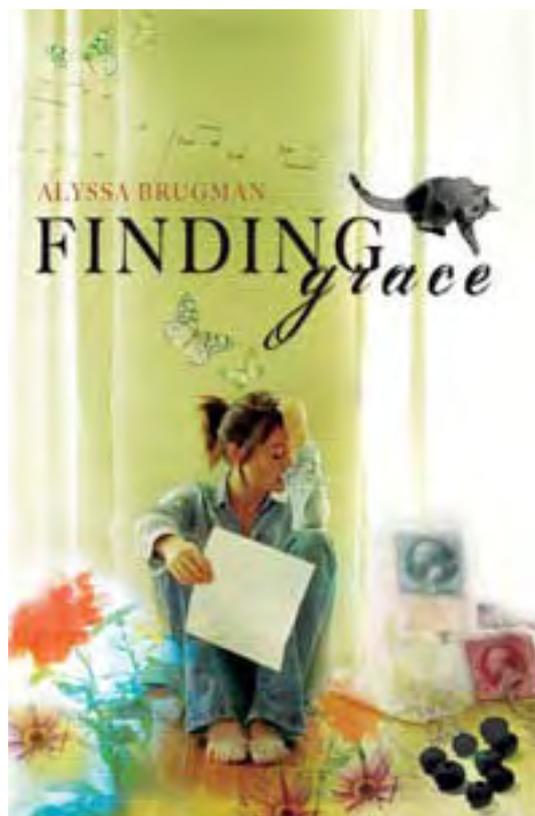


Teachers Notes
by Dr Robyn Ewing
Finding Grace
Alyssa Brugman
ISBN 9781741149326
Recommended for ages 13+

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INTRODUCTION

Finding Grace is written in a lively and engaging style from the perspective of new school leaver Rachel who becomes a live-in carer for brain injured Grace. Rachel comes to know herself through her learning to care for, accept and appreciate Grace for who she is. The novel could be read on a number of levels ranging from years 7 and 8 through to senior students. The age/stage/ability of the students will determine particular emphases. Students wishing to explore another's search for identity, worthwhile friendships and meaningful relationships will enjoy both the honesty and the humour of this novel, which has been shortlisted for the **2002 CBCA Book of the Year Award: Older Readers**.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alyssa Brugmann was born in Newcastle and currently lives in Sydney. A graduate in business from Newcastle University, Alyssa works in public relations. *Finding Grace* is her first novel.

Visit her author page at <http://www.allenandunwin.com/authors/apBrugman.asp>

BEFORE READING THE TEXT

1. Depending on the interests, abilities and stage of the particular group of students who are studying this novel, a number of areas could be explored before beginning to read it. This would enable students to bring their own ideas and knowledge to some of the experiences Rachel encounters after leaving school.

For example:

- Students could research the effects of brain injury and perhaps even visit a rehabilitation centre where brain injured people are cared for. Alternatively, they could listen to a talk from someone who cares for a brain-injured person.
- Music typical of the late seventies could be listened to and discussed. What defining features do the students identify?
- Students could engage in some community service at a local nursing home or hospital.

2. Careful consideration of the title of the book is interesting. Students could investigate other meanings of the word 'grace.' (Besides being a female name, grace also means 'undeserved gift or favour', elegance, dignity or style.)

3. Students could examine the design of the front cover. What does the illustration suggest? What does the prominent use of black convey? Is the woman depicted as wearing a mask?

GETTING INTO THE TEXT

- The novel opens with an end of school farewell assembly. Students could discuss Rachel's perspective from her seat on the stage and compare with their own experiences of such events. What are the hidden messages of such occasions?
- How does Rachel describe herself? What first impressions are created by her initial descriptions of herself? Do you agree that she is *quirky*?
- Do you agree with Rachel's opening statement that time heals most wounds and you get used to those that it doesn't (p.7)?
- There are a number of metaphors used in the first few pages. Students are described as 'birds flocking together', the school is compared with 'a big aviary'. Do you think these comparisons are effective?
- The key points in Mr Preston's speech should be considered. Is his speech motivating? What other advice should be given to school leavers?
- Rachel finds it difficult to answer questions about what she will do with her life. Why do you think adults commonly ask this question?
- *Light meals seem to be my lot in life* (p.13)? What is Rachel saying here?

PLOT

There are several different stories within stories embedded in this novel:

- Rachel's story is one of learning about life, coming to terms with who she is and exploring relationships after school;
- Grace's story after her accident contrasts markedly with the story of her life beforehand, which unfolds through her own notes and letters; and
- Mr Preston's story which is at once successful and tragic.

All three stories become entwined as the novel unfolds but there is no traditional 'resolution'. Why?

Students could develop a story map to depict the important events in Grace's life as Rachel pieces together her story through Mr Preston, Grace's house, her clothes and possessions, the 'spooky' box and the other inhabitants in the street.

In addition, there are a number of 'cameos' which enrich the narrative as a whole. These include:

- Rachel's mother's story which is incomplete;
- The unpleasant neighbours who are responsible for the injury to Grace's cat;
- Herb and Bill
- Rachel's new friend, Hiro
- Mr Preston's brother Anthony.

THEMES

There are a number of significant themes in the novel. For example:

- Appreciating difference: there are many ways to be different and we must learn to respect every human being's right to dignity and respect. Animals also deserve to be treated with dignity.
- A search for identity. Rachel needs to find out who she is. She comes to accept herself as the story develops and sees herself less negatively.
- Friendship. This concept is explored through the different friendships that Rachel develops. Compare for example, the friendship between Rachel and Mr Preston with Rachel's relationship with Amanda or Kate or Hiro. How do the different friendships contribute to Rachel's growing sense of self worth? Mr Preston's devotion to Grace is also important.
- Learning to accept and embrace change in our lives.

As the novel is read, students could document important themes and record relevant page numbers or quotes that they feel contribute to the development of these themes.

CHARACTERISATION

Each character, both major and minor, is carefully drawn. Initially presented as caricatures, Brugman carefully develops them as individuals as the story unfolds. Students could choose one character to follow closely through

the story using a character profile. The selected character's physical features, attributes, important sayings or events with relevant page numbers could be recorded for sharing and discussion.

For example:

Rachel's mother Miriam

Attribute	Important Quote	Event	Refs
Enjoys celebrations	<i>She's having a good life.</i>	Impromptu theme nights. Lots of special days celebrated eg Lychee Day.	p.14 p. 35-36
Always there for Rachel when needed	<i>I'm here my precious it's all right.</i>	Didn't even finish her phone call when Rachel was upset.	Chs 29,30
colourful	<i>She bounced out the door in a bright blur of yellow.</i>		p.177
impetuous	<i>She never hesitates. She shows no fear or reticence.</i>		p.183
whimsical	Brodie's name means unusual beard		p.14, 178

How do the different characters reflect some of the novel's major themes?

- Rachel changes dramatically as the story develops. Students could map the events and experiences which help Rachel realise that she doesn't know everything. How *quirky* do students think she is later in the story? Is she, in Kate's words, *diabolically cerebral* (p.22)? Do you agree with Rachel's mother that Rachel has a *propensity to judge everyone* using her own standards (p.182)? Is this a failing?
- Beginning with Rachel's initial impressions of Grace, students could construct their own impressions of Grace as she was before the accident. This could include implications drawn from the way she has designed her home, the clothes in the wardrobe, the food Mr Preston tells Rachel that Grace likes. As the story unfolds,

implications about Grace's character can be drawn from the letters that Rachel finds in the spooky box and also from Mr Preston's accounts of Grace.

- Rachel's descriptions of Grace's sisters are amusing. Students could experiment with cartoon drawings of Rubber Gloves/Charity and Tight /Cat's Bum Mouth/Brioney (p.27). They could also develop character profiles based on the commentary each sister provides for Rachel.
- Similarly, students could reflect on the relationship between Mr Preston and Anthony. How does it compare with Rachel's relationship with her brother?
- Contrast Grace's sisters with Herb and Bill who are drawn sympathetically.
- How does the author suggest from the outset that Mr Preston's brother Anthony is to be treated with caution (p. 70-71)?

STYLE

- The novel is written in the first person. Why has the author chosen to write the story from Rachel's perspective? What effect does this create? Students could experiment with writing one of the events in the story from another character's perspective.
- Proverbs such as: *birds of a feather flock together; make hay while the sun shines; reap what you sow, there are plenty of fish in the sea* and idioms such as *easy peasy; ants in your pants, bright spark, absolute Neanderthal; nerd...* are frequently used. Students could discuss their meanings and make their own list of commonly used sayings and colloquial phrases. This could be particularly helpful for those students who are newly arrived in Australia with little or no English.
- Students could explore what makes the novel so humorous. The author's use of dialogue provides one example. See for example the interaction between Rachel and the neighbour on Rachel's first morning caring for Grace (p.39-41). This could be scripted as readers' theatre. How could Rachel's thoughts be represented in this script?

- When Rachel is conversing with someone her inner thoughts are sometimes written in italics. When do you think the author has chosen to do this? Why? These feelings are often a much stronger comment than what she has actually verbalised to her listener.
- Alyssa Brugman employs metaphor in a powerful and, at the same time, often humorous way. Students could list some of the metaphors used and discuss their effect. Consider, for example, the suggestion that the concrete school environment parallels an *elementary form of discipline* or that women are like builders and can renovate their choice of partner to suit their needs/tastes (p.51-2).
- Do you think the use of Grace's letters is an effective way of telling her story? How does it alter our opinion about Grace?

SYMBOL

Students could reflect on the use of symbols in the novel.

What do the following symbols imply?

- The use of animals and birds to describe characters eg Rachel's description of herself as *just a plain old sparrow* (p.18) contrasted with Kate's description of her (p.22). Rachel describes her friend Amanda as a *rosella* (p.50).
- Rachel's first impression of Grace as *Snow White* (p.29).
- The references to *The Wizard of Oz*.
- The use of the weather to describe emotions e.g. what does rain or bright sunshine symbolise in the novel? Is the analogy of depression as 'inside an enormous black rain cloud' effective (p.173)?
- The initial description of Grace's garden as somewhat overgrown, Rachel's decision to weed the garden, the subsequent growth of the plants in the garden during Rachel's time with Grace.

GENERAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Return to the principles in Mr Preston's opening speech:
never miss an opportunity...take a chance;
 don't settle for mediocrity. Find a dream and pursue it; and
have fun (p.11).

Do you think Rachel made good decisions? What about Grace? Did she miss some important opportunities? Did Mr Preston? Do you agree that luck is not an important ingredient in an individual's life? Students could each consider one of the main character's decisions and decide how each measure up to these principles.

- Rachel talks candidly of learning to appreciate her mother's wisdom. Students may enjoy discussing their perceptions of their parents' advice. Do they find it hard to listen? Is it because, like Rachel at the beginning of the novel, they are confident they know it all?
- What did Kate mean by *community sector*? How *community sector* (p.21) do you think Rachel was? How *community sector* should we be?
- Do you agree that there's not enough *spontaneous tap dancing* these days?
- Rachel's perceptions of Amanda and Kate's relationships with their boyfriends are far from positive. Is there a reason why she perceives these so negatively?
- What happened to Grace and Yvonne's friendship? What can you do when friendships go wrong if you don't want to lose them?
- Rachel's mother can't answer her question about the meaning of life (p.176). Can you?
- Do you agree with Mr Preston that there is still a mindset in our society about being single? Especially a single woman?
- Return to the title and the alternative meanings of the word 'grace'. What are some of the layers of meaning conveyed by the title? It would seem that Grace had many dignified or cultured tastes before her accident. What about afterwards? Has Rachel indeed found more grace through this experience? Why? Do you think that Rachel's care of Grace actually reaches her? What evidence from the text do you have for this opinion?
- Is Grace returning to a more conscious level of life? How do you know? Is the analogy with Snow White appropriate?
- *When there is nothing there is always music* (p.204). Having read *Finding Grace*, what do you think this means?

EXTENSION IDEAS

- Consider the following quote:

I wonder how much we change and adapt according to our environment?

Who would I be if I were not here? What if I had stayed at home?

What would I be doing now? Has taking this job changed my destiny? (p.121).

We often resort to hindsight or *What if* imagining. Students could write about a personal experience that has left them considering whether they should have chosen a different alternative.

- Students could watch the film *Sliding Doors* which also considers these important questions. Thinking about Rachel and her thoughts about Ruth's dramatic turn of events in her life, students could discuss how much say they think we have in creating our own destiny?
- There are many tragi-comic incidents related in Rachel's humorous banter (e.g. taking Grace to the movies, the incident with Prickles and the subsequent detective visit next door, the supermarket...) Students could enact these in small groups with someone relating the story and others miming.
- Some of the other important conversations in the novel could be scripted for readers' theatre. Examples include: Mr Preston's explanation about his love for Grace; Hiro and Grace's first date.
- Students could research Darwin's theory of evolution. In particular they could examine the tenet *the survival of the fittest*.
- Students could debate free will vs predestination.
- Was the 'spooky box' a good idea? Students could assemble their own 'spooky box'. What kinds of things would they put in it? Why?
- Students could examine some of the lyrics of the songs referred to in the novel eg. *Never be the same*, *Somewhere over the Rainbow*, *Walking in the Rain*.

FURTHER READING

Almond, D. *Heaven Eyes*.

Austen, J. *Emma*.

Disher, G. *The Bamboo Flute*.

Disher, G. *From your friend, Louis Deane*

Southall, I. *Let the Balloon go*.

Wrightson, P. *I won the racecourse*.

RELATED FILMS

Rain Main

Sliding doors