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***Girl Next Door*
by Alyssa Brugman**

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1. INTRODUCTION

See, what happened was, our lives were going really well. My mum got a promotion, I enrolled in an A-list school, and then my Dad had this great idea to start an empire. But now he's 'gone to the country'. What does that mean? Is it the same place they take old, sick dogs? Has he joined a cult? It's been two months now, and I still don't know what it means.

Declan, the boy next door, says that my dad's in hospital, but everyone's dying as far as Declan is concerned. Now there are strange people living in our spare rooms, and all my stuff is on the lawn. I've tried to raise it with my mum, but she talks to me as if I'm a four-year-old – when she talks to me at all, which is less and less lately. Hello! Can somebody please tell me what's going on?

Jenna-Belle's used to a comfortable life. Last year her parents bought a huge new house with a pool and cabana. Jenna-Belle and her brother Will go to exclusive private schools.

But now it's all gone wrong. Dad's disappeared – no-one will say where. Jenna-Belle's mum lies around the house: pregnant, silent, unmoving, unhelpful. They've had three garage sales and there's hardly any furniture left. Jenna's school has told her to leave because the unpaid fees are mounting up. The electricity's been turned off.

Now the sheriff's coming to repossess their house. Where do you go when you don't have a home? Jenna-Belle is about to find out.

Girl Next Door is highly topical, with interest rates, mortgage stress and an economic downturn seeing many Australian families in the same situation as Jenna-Belle's family.

2. PLOT SUMMARY

Narrated in first-person by Jenna-Belle, *Girl Next Door* relates how Jenna-Belle's family are 'tightening their belts'. They were doing very well – her parents had well-paid jobs in the city and the family bought a new, bigger house with a pool and decided to send their two children, Willem and Jenna-Belle, to a more exclusive private school.

But when Jenna-Belle's father's new business is unsuccessful and he becomes depressed and unable to find work, the family's fortunes change for the worse. Jenna-Belle's mother works longer hours in the city, the family have to start taking in boarders to help pay the mortgage, and they start to sell their possessions to make ends meet.

When the book opens, Jenna-Belle's mother is showing a new prospective tenant around the house. Jenna-Belle is unsure where her father is – all she's been told is that he's 'gone to the country'. Jenna-Belle has also recently learned that her mother is pregnant.

At school, Jenna-Belle is told by the deputy principal that she has to leave because her fees are unpaid. Her mother won't take calls from the school, so Jenna-Belle calls their new boarder, Bryce Cole. Bryce picks her up from school and takes her to the race track, where he invites Jenna-Belle to make a bet and tells her how the horse racing betting system works.

Through Jenna-Belle the reader continues to see the family's changing circumstances – after a third garage sale and a mounting pile of unpaid bills, the electricity is turned off and the family receives a notice of eviction: they have thirty days to repay their mortgage or vacate the house. As Jenna-Belle's brother, Willem, explains, because her parents bought the house when the market was at its peak, even if they sold it and gave the bank all the proceeds, they would still owe more than its current value. They can't move to a rental property because their credit is bad and they won't be accepted.

The pressures on Jenna-Belle's family are relentless as Jenna-Belle's friend Declan is rushed to hospital after collapsing, her mother miscarries the baby, and the house is broken into by men to whom Bryce Cole owes money.

Finally, after they are evicted by the sheriff, Jenna-Belle, her mother and Will must find out what happens to you when you are homeless. Their experiences make for a harrowing tale, but the humour of Jenna-Belle's voice, and her hope for the future, shine through. This is a tale of a losing your home and finding your family, with a hopeful ending and a protagonist who learns a great deal about life and human nature along the way.

3. AUTHOR'S INSPIRATION

Alyssa Brugman writes:

'I was listening to Radio National's "Life Matters" program and they were talking about homelessness. Richard was asking questions about things like drug dependence, or gambling addictions, or other types of vices in a way that indicated that he assumed, as did I, that these people had somehow, through their antisocial behaviour, brought this situation upon themselves. The guest said, "Oh no, I'm talking about people who simply have a mortgage that's bigger than they can afford."

'She started describing this tightrope where families borrowed to the very extent of their capacity – the McMansions, the car, the big televisions and furniture all bought on five years interest free, or credit cards being used to support other forms of debt. Of course, if one small unexpected expense should arise, for example the woman falling pregnant, then the whole situation unravels very quickly.

'The guest was talking about normal everyday suburban families living in their cars. Ordinary Australians who had never experienced poverty, who were completely unequipped to live beneath the poverty line, and who had no knowledge of the sorts of support services available to them because they had never needed to. These are also the sorts of people, I imagined, who wouldn't use them anyway, because they see those services as supporting a different class of person.

'So I created a very North Shore middle class family with the big house, sending their children to the poshest private schools and having every overseas holiday imaginable and I took it all away from them.

'Two other themes are raised in the book.

'One is the distancing of immediate family. In generations gone by you would turn to your family, but in this more mobile, global life we live now it's common for families not to see each other for years at a time. I wanted to add this complexity to the tenuousness of this family's situation.

'Secondly I wanted to address Jenna-Belle's budding sexuality and her exposure to "raunch culture" and the whole Paris Hilton, Lindsay Lohan bratty girl phenomenon. While older generations are aghast at what they see (I am constantly horrified), I think teens themselves have quite a different view on sexuality, on feminism and sexual freedom. There seems to be a combination of chasteness, early marriage, fundamental/evangelical religiousness, exhibitionism, excess, and the mainstreaming of pornography.

'These things would seem to be at odds to me, and yet we have a whole generation of young people, growing and even thriving in this environment. I'm sure the baby boomers' parents were appalled by their behaviour too. And under the baby boomer's stewardship the planet is in a pretty bad way, so perhaps we shouldn't be so quick to damn the young people.

'With the current financial crisis, as well as social and political upheaval, now is a confusing and challenging time to be an adolescent, but it has always been confusing and challenging to be an adolescent. At any time of life we can find joy and contentment in our relationships and in learning to be satisfied with what we have – whatever that may be.

'That was what I was hoping to explore with this novel.'

4. THEMES

Themes in this novel include:

- Economic hardship: housing and mortgage stress; business failure; long work hours and the resultant stress on families
- Gambling addiction and its effects
- Homelessness and poverty
- Parental break-ups and the factors involved, such as infidelity, economic hardship, pregnancy and stress
- Different types of friendship
- Gender roles and expectations
- Consumerism and societal expectations
- Family relationships

5. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alyssa Brugman's young adult novels *Finding Grace*, *Walking Naked*, *Being Bindy* and *Solo* are distributed around the world and have been shortlisted for numerous awards in Australia and overseas. Alyssa has also written five novels for younger readers about a girl called Shelby and her pony, *Blue: For Sale or Swap*, *Beginner's Luck*, *Hot Potato*, *Hide & Seek* and *Greener Pastures*. This series has been shortlisted for a number of Children's Choice awards and was also selected for the 2007 'Books Alive' campaign. Alyssa recently published Book Two of the new Quentaris series, *The Equen Queen*. She lives in the Hunter Valley and is currently writing more novels for children and young adults.

Visit <http://www.alyssabrugman.com.au> for more information about Alyssa and her books.

6. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Writing style, language and structure

- *Girl Next Door* is written in the **first person**. As a reader we only hear about events and character through Jenna-Belle. Can we always believe what Jenna-Belle tells us? Is she a reliable narrator? How would the book have been different if it had been written from Willem's point of view, or Declan's?
- Why do you think the author chose to have Jenna-Belle narrate the story in the first person, and using **everyday speech**? What did Jenna-Belle's narrative voice tell you about the character – and how might the story have been different if it were told by a third-person omniscient narrator? Would elements of the story have been lost?
- Jenna-Belle's story is told in **present tense**. What effect does this create? For instance, does it add tension because the reader doesn't know what will happen next? Does it make you feel more involved in Jenna-Belle's story?
- There are many examples of **humour** in this novel. Find some examples in the text.
- Alyssa Brugman plays with the **chronology** and **structure** in *Girl Next Door*, especially in the first few chapters, when the story is interrupted by Jenna-Belle's flashbacks to parties with her friends, and the beginning of the chapter 'Embarrassing', when Jenna-Belle tells us the most embarrassing things that have happened to her. Why is the story structured this way? Is Jenna-Belle avoiding telling us what is happening to her family, or is this information necessary background which places their current situation in context?

Homelessness

- Alyssa has said that she was inspired to write *Girl Next Door* after hearing a radio program that challenged her ideas about how and why people become homeless. How did Jenna-Belle's perceptions of poverty change through her experiences? Has your perception of homelessness or poverty been challenged at all by *Girl Next Door*?
- Chapters 26 and 27 depict the experience of absolute homelessness. How do Jenna-Belle, her mother and brother cope with this terrifying experience? What else could they have done that might have helped them cope with the experience?
- **Activity:** Define the word 'homeless', find statistics on how many people are 'homeless' in Australia, and list some of the reasons people might become homeless. Write a newspaper article detailing your findings and using Jenna-Belle's story as an example to illustrate your research. (You can find statistics and fact sheets at: <http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au>) Is Jenna-Belle's story typical?
- **Activity:** Using the internet, imagine you have a friend who is about to lose their home. Find websites and services which offer help to people in that situation, and make an action plan for your friend based on their advice.

Economic climate and financial hardship

- **Research activity:** Unfortunately, this novel is very relevant because of the current economic crisis. Research what the last significant Depression was like, especially in terms of unemployment and bank seizure of private houses. You could begin at www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au and follow the link to The Great Depression: www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/greatdepression/index.htm

What similarities and differences can you find between 1929–1932 and 2008? Were people's expectations different between the two eras?

- **Comparison texts – books:** Read *The Harp in the South* by Ruth Park, about a family living in a slum in Sydney after World War II, *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck, about families forced by drought and poverty to leave their homes during the Great Depression in America; or *The Long Walk* by Kerry Greenwood, set in Victoria during the Great Depression. Write an essay comparing how poverty is portrayed in *Girl Next Door* and one of these books.
- **Comparison texts – film:** Compare the values and attitude to sudden financial poverty in the novel with the opening three scenes of the black-and-white film version of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.
- **Oral activity:** In pairs, pretend one of you is a news reporter interviewing members of Jenna-Belle's family about their experience of homelessness. The other person can choose to be Jenna-Belle, her mum, her dad or Willem to answer the interviewer's questions.
- **Activity:** Is life more challenging for today's teenagers, or just different? Interview someone from a different generation (a parent or grandparent, for instance) and find out what issues affected them when they were a teenager. What did they spend their pocket money on? What couldn't they afford that they really wanted? Where did they go on holidays? How many clothes did they own? What world issues did they worry about? Write a report comparing their experiences with your own.
- **Activity:** (1) Look at the real estate pages of your local newspaper and see what the average cost of a house is in your area. (2) Visit the website of one of the major banks and try out a free 'loan repayments calculator' (most banks will have one) – add in the average cost of a house in your area (e.g. \$500,000) and add the interest rate (e.g. 7.25%) and the length of the loan (e.g. 25 years). How much would the monthly repayments be? How much interest would you be paying on the loan over 25 years? What does this tell you about the 'mortgage stress' experienced by Jenna-Belle's family and many other families in Australia?
- **Class activity:** In groups, debate whether it is better to rent a home or buy a home. Give reasons for your choice.
- *Girl Next Door* is highly topical because of the world financial crisis. Do you think people's reading tastes change in 'hard times'? Do people want to read about other people who are also experiencing problems, or do they want to read 'escapist' or 'comforting' books? For instance, discuss the list of books and opinions presented at <http://www.slate.com/id/2201710/>.

Characterisation

- Is Jenna-Belle a likeable character – and is she meant to be? Did your reaction to her affect your sympathy for her as the book progressed? Why do you think the author might have chosen to portray Jenna-Belle as she has?
- ‘If I wasn’t so mature and chic I would definitely want to play a game of smugglers, or vampires, or something like that.’ (p. 7). Is there a disconnect between the way Jenna-Belle describes herself and what she reveals through her narration? Do you think Jenna-Belle is unaware of the space between how mature she feels she is and how mature she wants others to believe she is – or is she playing with the idea (and the audience) deliberately? Why might the author have chosen to create this effect?
- ‘Mum thought you could buy self-esteem.’ (p. 11) What do you think of Jenna-Belle’s mother’s attitude to self-esteem? Why do you think Jenna-Belle’s mother might not have offered support or communication when Jenna-Belle felt she most needed it (for instance, p. 21, p. 198)? Which characters in the book do you think actually have the worst self-esteem – and is this surprising?
- Jenna-Belle encounters many new and difficult experiences throughout the novel and along the way slowly gains a broader view of the world and greater empathy for others, including strangers and those she depends upon. Do you think such drastic events are necessary to develop empathy for other people? Do you need to sometimes step ‘out of your comfort zone’ in order to change your views?
- How do you view Bryce Cole throughout the book: for instance, after Chapter 3 ‘Punting’, after Chapter 8 ‘Ghosts’ when he buys the family Chinese food, after Chapter 9 ‘Hypo’ when he takes Declan to hospital, after Chapter 11 ‘Wolves at the Door’ when we learn of his debts, after Chapters 16 and 17 when he takes them to stay at an expensive hotel, and after Chapter 24 ‘Barbs’ when we meet Bryce’s mother. Is Bryce a ‘bad’ character, or just flawed? What is his function in the story? Does it change?
- What was your opinion of Jenna-Belle’s father? Did your opinion change by the end of the novel? Why? Did Jenna-Belle’s opinion of him change?

Cultural and gender roles, values and beliefs

- What did you think of Jenna-Belle’s frustration with the different roles she thought boys and girls were expected to play? (E.g., p. 128, p. 203 and pp. 241–242). Do you agree with Jenna-Belle that gender roles can be unfair? Can you think of instances where Jenna-Belle might have made Declan ‘feel bad so casually’ (p. 241)?
- ‘Is thumb-wrestling macho? I thought it was a unisex sport, like equestrian, except much cheaper.’ (p. 15) Discuss.
- What effects does Jenna-Belle’s mother’s pregnancy have on the family – for instance, her mother’s job prospects and the family’s finances?
- Is Declan’s mother happy? Why or why not?

- Jenna-Belle refers to the 'pineapple on everybody's heads' (e.g. p. 48, p. 52, p. 152, p. 174, p. 200, p. 231). What do you think is at the core of this idea? How do you think it contributed to the way Jenna-Belle and her family cope with their situation – and how might it have contributed to the situation arising in the first place?
- Jenna-Belle's immediate family seem distant from their extended family. How might the novel have been different had Jenna-Belle's family situation been different? Do you think her family situation is common today? Is it different from, say, your great-grandparents' generation? Consider the author's statement (above) about 'the distancing of immediate family'.
- As the story progresses, Jenna-Belle acknowledges how her appreciation of simple pleasures and experiences has changed, for example, pp. 81–82. What do you think the future holds for Jenna-Belle? If her parents had not separated and experienced financial difficulties, where do you think Jenna-Belle would have been in five or ten years' time? Has *Girl Next Door* made you question your attitude to ideas such as destiny, privilege or class?
- Discuss the various settings of the book, especially Jenna-Belle's house. How did the settings affect the story and the characters? Have you read other books where characters live in a house like Jenna-Belle's? Can architecture affect how people interact? For instance, consider that each member of Jenna-Belle's family almost has a separate wing of the house to live in, which means that they interact very little. How will living in a single cottage change the family dynamic?

Activity: Draw a floorplan/blueprint for a house design that you think (1) gives family members a private, quiet space when they need it; and (2) allows and encourages family members to interact. Where would you put the bedrooms, kitchen and living areas in your ideal house?

- Is *Girl Next Door* a uniquely Australian story, or do you think it would be relevant to readers in other countries?
- Can you give examples of ways in which concepts such as pride and respect inform what happens in *Girl Next Door* – between married couples; friends; parents and children; males versus females; school peers; people from different neighbourhoods and socio-economic groups?
- Jenna-Belle says she'd like to have 'an adult deal with the adult things' (p. 22) Are adults portrayed sympathetically in the book? Did you find them more or less realistic than in other novels? More or less reliable? Compare Jenna-Belle's attitude towards her parents and other adults in her life at the beginning of the book and at the end.

Creative writing tasks

- Write the next chapter of the book, as if you are Jenna-Belle and the family has been living at Wombat Crossing for a month. What has changed? How would Jenna-Belle reflect on her experiences? How would she feel about her family now?
- Choose an event in the book and write about it from another character's perspective.

Motifs and symbols

- *Girl Next Door* is different to most books in its *lack* of objects that act as symbols. Discuss why this might be so.
- **The green shopping bag** (see pp. 141, 146 and 158): What does the green shopping bag represent for Jenna-Belle (e.g. it holds her only remaining possessions) and in general (e.g. as an item that most Australian families have in the cupboard, an item which is both cheap and disposable)? Contrast against Jenna-Belle's statement on p. 148: 'It's time for me to get a handbag. It's worth the nuisance of carrying around a handbag just so I can rummage through it to avoid conspicuously ignoring people.'
- **'Knick-knacks'**: Compare Jenna-Belle's description of the 'knick-knacks' sold in the garage sale ('I had no idea just how much stuff we had until we started putting it out on the lawn for people to pore over' p. 37 and following) with the description of Declan's mother's 'knick-knacky domestic devices' (pp. 47–48). What do the number of knick-knacks say about the two families and how they wish to be perceived?
- **The roof space**: What does the roof space signify for Jenna-Belle? Consider pp. 3–4 and p. 241 regarding 'the possibility of treasure' in large houses versus caravans; p. 44 re what is *actually* in the roof space; and Jenna-Belle using the roof space for 'building a fort' (pp. 133–134).
- **Horse racing**: Compare the images you might have of the horse racing industry (women dressed up in expensive hats and dresses for the races; Melbourne Cup parties with celebrities, etc) with the way Jenna-Belle describes being at the race track (pp. 25–36, 70–71, 158–159). Does the difference between these points of view also have a bearing on issues that the book raises concerning consumerism and society's expectations of wealth and status?
- **Waiting**: Find some examples of characters waiting for or upon one another in *Girl Next Door*, and consider who is most in control of each situation. How does it vary? What does this say about power, whether personal, professional or institutional, and can you think of examples in the wider world? (If you are stuck, try reading the following pages, and then look for further examples: p. 14, p. 66, pp 90–94, pp 174–177, p. 178, p. 192.)