



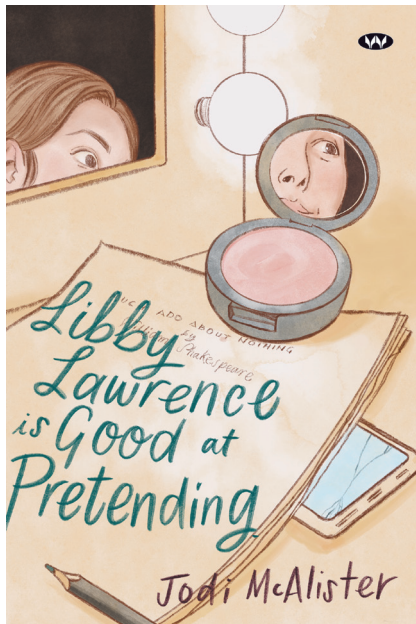
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TEACHERS' NOTES

Libby Lawrence is Good at Pretending

By Jodi McAlister

Notes prepared by Jodi McAlister © 2022



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1. Introduction to *Libby Lawrence is Good at Pretending*

Nineteen-year-old Libby Lawrence is good at pretending. Problem is, she's not entirely sure how to stop. Which is good for her role in the campus production of *Much Ado About Nothing* ... but poses problems in her personal life. Especially when the list of things she can't admit to, even to her best friend Ella, starts to build.

Losing her virginity to the too-charming director of her uni theatre group (just before he ran off with the group's money) is only the start. There's also an uncomfortable encounter with her broody on-stage love interest Roarke, and her crackling offstage chemistry with nerdy-but-sweet new director Will.

And while Libby is thrilled to finally be on the inside of the uni theatre group she reveres, there's a downside to being in on all the group chats, drama and backstage gossip. She must discover who she wants to be, who she wants to be with ... and how to stop pretending.

2. About the author

Jodi McAlister is an author of young adult fiction, as well as rom-coms for adults. Her YA paranormal romance *Valentine* trilogy (2017–19) is published by Penguin Teen Australia. Her first adult rom-com, *Here For The Right Reasons*, will be published by Simon & Schuster in 2022, with its sequel *Can I Steal You For A Second?* following in 2023. *Libby Lawrence is Good at Pretending* is her first contemporary romance for young adult audiences.

Jodi is also an academic. She is a Senior Lecturer in Writing, Literature and Culture at Deakin University, where she teaches literary studies and creative writing, and researches romantic love and popular culture. She has written two academic books, *The Consummate Virgin: Female Virginity Loss in Anglophone Popular Literatures* (Palgrave, 2020) and *New Adult Fiction* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

Jodi is based in Melbourne. Visit her at jodimcalister.com.au.



3. Inspiration behind the novel

I wrote the first draft of *Libby Lawrence is Good at Pretending* when I was about the same age as Libby is in the book. I was an undergrad at uni, just like her, and I was doing a bunch of amateur theatre, just like her. Libby isn't the same person as me, but her world is very similar to the world I was living in.

I've written a lot of books now, and this was both the easiest one and the hardest one. It was the hardest because it was the book which fundamentally taught me how to write. I've rewritten it from the ground up four times (while there are still snippets of that original draft in there, and I love it when a phrase that Libby-aged Jodi wrote pops up, I still had a lot to learn about being a writer). But it was the easiest because I was taking that age-old writing advice: to write what I know. If there's one thing I know, it's amateur theatre.

As will surprise no one who's ever met me, I was a drama kid. I did Speech & Drama eisteddfods from the age of eight onwards, but it was when I started doing plays with the youth troupe at my local community theatre that my love of it really took off. At the age of seventeen, I played Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*, a role which meant as much to me as Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* does to Libby. I started adapting classic novels for the stage (I'm still very proud of the version of *Dracula* I wrote, directed, produced and had a cameo role in!) and spent many years in my teens and twenties in and out of theatres.

Community theatre isn't without its problems and its politics. As you'll see in *Libby Lawrence is Good at Pretending*, these are very real (and can sometimes mirror the problems and politics we see in larger dramatic institutions, like Hollywood). But it's also the space where I really learned who I was and who I wasn't, and where key parts of my identity formed. The same is true for Libby – and I'm sure the same will be true for any theatre

kids who pick this book up.

4. Style

Libby Lawrence is Good at Pretending is written largely in third-person past tense. Specifically, it's limited third person, which means we see things through the eyes of one character rather than all of them – that character being, unsurprisingly, Libby. However, there are four interludes, scattered throughout the book. These are also in third-person past tense, but they're from the perspectives of Roarke, Ella, Will and Nightingale respectively, and help the reader to gain a broader perspective on the world of Uni Rep.

(These four interludes also conveniently divide the book into five acts. If you've ever studied Shakespeare, you'll know his plays are usually divided into five acts – including *Much Ado About Nothing*, the play Uni Rep put on over the course of the novel.)

You might notice that this book involves a lot of dialogue. We see a lot of what Libby is thinking, of course, but a lot of the action is actually interaction – her talking with other people. This also mirrors the form of a play script, where you have very limited description on the page. What an actor has to go off is dialogue, and what they do is interpret it to put together their performance. As Libby grows and develops over the course of the novel, the way she interprets the world and the people around it changes too. She's good at pretending – but she's also good at applying the skills she learns through acting to real life!

5. Discussion questions

Friendship

Libby and Ella

- Libby's friendship with Ella is the most important relationship in her life. Why does she find it so difficult to tell her things?
- There are also several instances where Ella doesn't tell Libby something, or doesn't tell her until later. What's the barrier for Ella? Is it the same as for Libby?
- What are the good and bad parts of Libby and Ella's friendship?

Romantic relationships

Libby and Will

- Libby's friendship and eventual relationship with Will develops slowly over the course of the book. What do they get out of their relationship with each other? How is it different to other relationships in their life?
- Will realises he's attracted to Libby before she realises she's attracted to him, but makes a decision not to do anything about it. Why does he do this?
- Why does Will insist that Libby actively communicate to him that she wants to start a relationship, and say no when she attempts to kiss him?

Libby and Roarke

- Libby and Roarke develop a complicated relationship over the course of the novel. How would you describe it? How does it change and develop?
- Do you think Libby and Roarke will stay friends after the end of the book? Why/why not?

Ella and Roarke

- Do you think Ella and Roarke will get back together? Why/why not?

University culture

- Several problems with the culture of Uni Rep develop over the course of the novel. What are they and who causes them?
- What needs to happen at Uni Rep for them to become a safer, healthier space?

Theatre

- Many of the characters in the book, including Libby, love theatre – in particular, performance. What's the appeal?
- How is it different for different characters?

6. Activities

- In groups, decide what play Uni Rep should put on next. Who from the novel should play which role? Who should direct? Who should design? Think about the whole production team, not just the cast.
- There are several interludes throughout the book from perspectives other than Libby's. Write an interlude from another character's perspective (you might like to choose Ned, Genevieve, Michael, Annalise, Rashmi, Heidi – there's a long list!). Where in the book would it go? What would it reveal?
- Repeat the same activity as above, but this time you might also choose to write from the perspective of one of the characters who already has an interlude in the novel (Roarke, Ella, Will, Nightingale), but it should take place at a different point than their original interlude.
- Read or watch an adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing* and create a similarities and differences list for each character and the actor who plays them – eg. what do Libby and Beatrice have in common? What is different?
- Will has to step into Nightingale's shoes very quickly and put together a vision for the Uni Rep production of *Much Ado About Nothing* (he ultimately goes with a 1920s theme, which Ella realises through sets and costumes). Imagine you're a director in the same position. Pick a play, and describe your vision for it. How does your vision match up with the themes of the play?
- In pairs or groups, read, rehearse and perform a scene from *Much Ado About Nothing* and then write a journal entry about your experience. What did you learn from the process of putting on that performance? Why do characters like Libby, Roarke and Ned like performing so much? Are you with them, or are you more of a Will – ie. you prefer to be the brains behind the operation rather on stage? Or are you an Ella – ie. you want to design it? If you were to join Uni Rep, where would you fit?

7. Key curriculum links

Learning Area, English Year 7–10

‘These texts explore themes of interpersonal relationships and ethical dilemmas within real-world and fictional settings and represent a variety of perspectives.’ (ACARA)

General capabilities

Ethical Understanding

‘In the Australian Curriculum: English, students develop ethical understanding as they study the social, moral and ethical positions and dilemmas presented in a range of texts. They explore how ethical principles affect the behaviour and judgement of imagined characters in texts and the real-life experiences of those involved in similar issues and events.’ (ACARA)

Critical and Creative Thinking

‘English ... In discussion, students develop critical thinking as they share personal responses and express preferences for specific texts, state and justify their points of view and respond to the views of others.’ (ACARA)

