THUNDERHEAD
Written by SOPHIE BEER

RECOMMENDED FOR: Ages 10–14 YEARS OLD (UPPER PRIMARY)

GENRE: Middle Fiction, illustrated novel, humorous

THEMES: friendship, adjusting to high school, adapting to changes, serious illness, music, D/deaf or hard of hearing community.

CURRICULUM LEARNING AREAS:

*   English: Literature, literacy and language
*   Music

NOTES WRITTEN BY: Jennifer Asha

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INTRODUCTION

"Helloooooooooooooo. Can anyone hear me? No? GOOD. That's the way I want it. I'm not writing this for anyone else but me. Here I am, shouting into the abyss. Well, I'm typing into the abyss. The abyss of the internet.", Pages 1-2.

Thunderhead is a post-modern hybrid text that is written as diary entries into a defunct blog. Going by their username, protagonist Thunderhead tells the story of their typical preteen struggles with friendships and negotiating the move to high school while also having to cope with serious illness via a medium quintessentially generation Millennial. Illustrations that represent photographs included in the web entries typify such online multimodal compositions.

Adding to the hybrid nature of the text, each chapter opens with a 'playlist' of songs that characterise the narrator's diverse music tastes and communicate their feelings as the story progresses. Snippets of phone messaging conversations between characters adds further contextualisation.

Beer's prose is rich with metaphor as Thunderhead strives to articulate their feelings about the changes they are undergoing due to growing up, experiencing serious illness and impending hearing loss. Sophisticated vocabulary and witty humour communicate weighty topics intelligently and thoughtfully.

These teachers' notes have been formulated with Year 6 in mind. However, the suggested activities could be adapted for different year levels. Careful teacher modelling and scaffolding activities could be made appropriate for younger students. Through the provision of student choice of representational mode, more extended research opportunities or through more sustained writing expectations, the activities could be made more challenging for older students or those needing extension.

PLOT SUMMARY

'When I listen to music it speaks to me, fills up my soul until I'm bursting with the rainbow-sprinkled, breathless, blush-red joy of being alive.'

Meet Thunderhead: awkward, music-obsessed and a magnet for bad luck. Their favourite things in life are listening to records and hanging out with their best (and only) friend Moonflower. But Thunderhead has a big secret. And when Moonflower moves schools, they're faced with the reality of surviving the wilderness of high school alone. Make new friends? NOTHANKYOUVERYMUCH. As two big life events approach, Thunderhead posts playlists and heartfelt diary entries as an outlet to try to make sense of their changing world, to try to calm the storm brewing in their brain and to try to find the courage to unfurl their heart.

Drawing on Sophie Beer's own experience of hearing loss, this indelible illustrated middle grade novel about music, disability, friendship and fandom is immediately engaging, utterly authentic and entirely unputdownable.

Q&A WITH SOPHIE BEER

What was your inspiration for this book?

'In 2016, I was diagnosed with the same type of tumour as Thunderhead: a nervous system tumour called an acoustic neuroma. As a result of the surgery to remove my unwelcome house guest, I lost half of my hearing. This ensuing hearing loss became one of the most devastating things I've ever been through. It was ironic; I had lived and breathed music since I was old enough to appreciate it, yet somehow developed a tumour that affected how I related to that very thing I adored. Music was how I connected to the world and made sense of it. Listening to CDs on my mum's stereo was one of my first memories. My friendship groups were always filled with fellow music-obsessives. I had worked as a music journalist, tried – and failed – to learn several instruments, had flown halfway across the world to see bands I loved, and had even met my (brain doctor!) husband through our shared passion for music. Then, two weeks before we were set to get married, with words from our favourite bands engraved upon our wedding rings, I was told I would lose half of this very ability that had so shaped my life in wondrous ways.

'I started thinking about how much worse this feeling would have been for a teenager to go through – astronomically worse, especially when music isn't just a part of your identity, it is your very identity. Although I still didn't have all of the pieces of the novel in place yet: that would happen in 2021, when I was tested to see if I had neurofibromatosis, the very condition that Thunderhead has. In the month between getting tested and awaiting my results, I wrote the first draft of what would become the book *Thunderhead*.

'It's my hope that anyone reading this novel who might have complicated feelings towards their body, their disability, or even their way of relating to the world, might see themselves in Thunderhead. In the words of Judee Sill, I hope your warm, human spirit is affirmed. (And if you're really nosy and curious, know that the last song I listened to with both of my ears, just like Thunderhead, was Joanna Newsom's 'Sawdust & Diamonds,' which, in my humble opinion, was an excellent decision.)'

What would you say are the main themes of this book?

- **Identity**: affixing your identity to what you like, e.g. music, sport, or a best friend. Crafting your own identity in online spaces (you can be anyone on the internet!). What happens when the axis of one's identity is radically shifted due to influences outside their control?
- **Disability**: the social and emotional impacts of deafness. The pressure disabled people feel to be an inspiration. The mixed feelings a disabled person may have towards their body and disability. The pride that can be found in disability.
- **Friendship**: how friendships can be outgrown, and how that relates to one's identity. The superficiality of some teen friendships. Fitting in and attempting to be part of the cool crowd.

- **Music**: how music is not the opposite of deafness, and how deafness is not the opposite of music. The identity formations that people can attach to bands. Fandom and community: how it can be a positive influence. Music snobbery and how it might alienate or bring you closer to fandom and community.
- **Medicine**: issues of accessibility when a patient lives a long way from hospitals. The impenetrability of the medical system. Doctors sometimes lack empathy and compassion, and how this can be alienating. Mental health impacts of a life-changing surgery.

What prompted you to write this book?

'I wrote this book to aid representation for D/deaf or hard of hearing people in Australian middle-grade literature, as well as those suffering from neurofibromatosis (NF2), acoustic neuromas, or even those going through the surreal experience of having a brain tumour. The grief of losing one's hearing as a music lover is a singular yet poignant situation which I struggled to find represented in media. More broadly, this book is for introverted middle-grade readers who are struggling socially or perhaps are scared when starting at a new school or having to meet new people. Even more broadly, it is for anyone who loves music.

'In a personal sense: I wrote it to work through my own experience of losing my hearing and being diagnosed with an acoustic neuroma. I searched and searched for a book, movie or song that would sum up how I felt and came up with nothing. I knew that I had to write a book for anyone else out there in the world who had experienced the same thing.

'I felt that the book should be based in high school given the emphasis music plays in self-expression and self-identity around that age. A big source of my writing inspiration was *Hating Alison Ashley* by Robin Klein and the way she wrote such a prickly yet empathetic character in Erica. Another was *High Fidelity* by Nick Hornby, for much the same reason as above, but also the central theme of the novel: 'It's not *what* you like, but *what you're like* that's important'. I wrote the book over five years, on the way learning about and interviewing people who had the same genetic condition as the protagonist in the novel, NF2. The majority of the novel came together in 2021 after I was (coincidentally!) tested for NF2 myself after a geneticist questioned why I had developed an acoustic neuroma at such a young age. This period between being tested and being given the results is probably reflected in the trepidation that threads through the novel.'

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

BEFORE READING

Please note that this novel and associated activities deal with serious topics related to life-changing illness and disability. Please take care when discussing these sensitive topics with

classes and take steps to create supportive classroom environments in which students feel comfortable choosing to share or choosing to remain silent.

- Stock the classroom library with books that tackle similar themes to *Thunderhead*. For example: *El Deafo* by Cece Bell, *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio, *Lenny's Book of Everything* by Karen Foxlee, *The Edge of Thirteen* by Nova Weetman, *Wonderstruck* by Bryan Selznick, *Exit Through the Gift Shop* by Maryam Master, *Boy* by Phil Cummings and Shane Devries, *Moonbird* by Joyce Dunbar and Jane Ray, and *Two Mates* by Melanie Prewett and Maggie Prewett. Share responses and observations. Compare and contrast the texts, looking for elements of each text that demonstrate the context in which they were written. AC9E6LE01 AC9E6LE02 AC9E6LY01

- Ask students to name the different music genres they know and share their music preferences. Listen to lots of different examples of music across the genres and discuss the characteristic style, instruments, production techniques, etc. AC9AMU6E01

ENGLISH

LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND LITERACY

Conversation starters

Use the following prompts to initiate whole class or small group discussions that delve into students' understanding of the themes of the story, across the reading of the novel. Use different groupings for talk to encourage different types of sharing. Read more about the talk groupings mentioned in the following table at:

https://www.boringdon.plymouth.sch.uk/attachments/download.asp?file=1378&type=pdf

Read about how to support student lead discussions: https://voice21.org/how-to-develop-independent-student-discussion/

Conversation starter	Talk grouping
After reading Chapters 1- 5	
Does luck exist? What is it?	Trios
After reading Chapters 6-8	
What are the benefits and negative impacts of fandom?	Pairs
After reading Chapters 9-11	
What are your fears?	Nest
What helps you when you are fearful?	Pairs
After reading Chapters 12-16	

What are the impacts of not telling the truth on individuals and their circle of family and friends?	Onion
After reading Chapters 17-20	
What defines who you are? How is identity formed?	Fishbowl
After reading Chapters 21-24	
Talking about your problems is always helpful.	Transverse
After reading Chapters 25-28	
You shouldn't care what other people think of you. *Being yourself is more important than fitting in.*	Circle
After reading Chapters 29-32	
What are some things that you are looking forward to being able to experience in the future?	Trio
After reading Chapters 33-38	
What are the qualities of true friends?	Onion
After reading Chapters 39-42	
We can't ever really understand the truth as everyone's perception is different.	Fishbowl
After reading Chapters 43-45	
How has reading Thunderhead *changed your perceptions or made you think deeply about certain things?*	Transverse

AC9E6LA01 AC9E6LE01 AC9E6LY02

Metafictive devices

Explain metafictive devices to students so that they understand them as literary devices that make the reader aware that the text has been constructed using techniques that remind the reader-viewer that they are reading-viewing, rather than being lost in the story. Use other texts, for example, *Exit Through the Gift Shop* and *Wonder* to define some metafictive devices.

Create a list of these metafictive devices and make note of them when they are encountered through the reading of *Thunderhead,* for example:
- direct address to the reader/viewer (characters or narrator speaks directly to the reader) e.g. *Pg.7 To answer your burning question, no, Moonflower isn't actually her name.*
- use of multiple genres e.g. the playlist at the beginning of each chapter. *Pg. 212*, the inclusion of a text message string.

- typographical experimentation e.g. *Pg 7. OH MY BOWIE. I CAN UPLOAD PICTURES ON HERE? And I can CHANGE THE* **FONT***?!*
- multiple focalisation (multiple narrators or point of view of multiple characters is shared) e.g. *Pg. 318* Kayla writes on Thunderhead's blog.

Discuss the purpose and impact of the inclusions, considering how metafictive devices encourage a different response from readers compared to novels without metafictive devices, and how the metafictive devices included in *Thunderhead* indicate a modern-day context and may result in different interpretations of the story by readers of different ages.
AC9E6LY03 AC9E6LE03

Metaphors and similes

Metaphors and similes are used throughout *Thunderhead* as the protagonist wrangles with new experiences and attempts to describe them for themself and the blog readers. Use the metaphors in Chapters 1 & 2 to demonstrate the literary device and then create a list of metaphors as each chapter is read. Discuss how the metaphor or simile is constructed and how it creates a mental image or elicits an emotional response that is effective in communicating the themes of the story.

Examples in early chapters:
- *That's the vast, uncaring vacuum of space eating up my worries. Pg. 2*
- *Moonflower up and left me, like a sad, out-of-date chicken thigh tossed into the rubbish. Pg. 9*
- *…in the wilderness that is our high school. Pg. 10*
- *I groaned like a dying marmoset. Pg. 15*
- *Abyss of the Internet. P.g. 17*
- *My luck stinks worse than a dead fish's head roasting in the sun in the back of a car for two weeks. Pg.19*
- *I'm trying out these words, rolling them around on my tongue like a lozenge to see if I like the taste. Pg. 25*

AC9E6LA08 AC9E6LE04

Display the list so that it functions as stimulus for students' writing. Ask students to create diary entries that allow them to respond to each chapter of the book and/or the discussions had throughout the reading. Encourage students to create their own metaphors to describe their interpretations or of the ideas that arise as a result of reading or engaging in conversations.
AC9E6LE05 AC9E6LE01

List poems

Lists is a text type included throughout *Thunderhead*. Conduct a close reading of the different lists included in the book and discuss their purpose and structure. For example:

- The playlists at the beginning of each chapter.
- The list of 'facts about me', pg. 4
- 'List of One All-Suffering Thunderhead's Bad Luck', pg. 19
- 'Woe and Trouble and Torment Caused by Two Extremely Rude Tumours onto One All-Suffering Thunderhead', Pg. 66
- 'Daily Examples that Lead One All-Suffering Thunderhead to Believe they Have a Nemesis', Pg. 109
- 'Thunderhead's Gratitude Journal aka the Unexpected Upsides of Having Brain Tumours', Pg. 117
- 'A Playlist for the End of My Hearing', that is added to on Pgs. 196, 207, 223, 253, 286, 300, 308, 355, 368

Discuss how the use of lists helps to characterise Thunderhead. Draw students' attention to the way the negative tone of the lists changes to a positive tone across the story as Thunderhead's frame of mind changes and they slowly come to terms with their impending hearing loss.

AC9E6LY01 AC9E6LE03

Model and jointly construct list poems in response to particular chapters or issues and emotions that are raised during the reading of *Thunderhead.* Use a teacher-constructed list poem such as the following to model the structure and use of metaphor or adjectives that indicate a colour/sight, taste, smell, sound and texture. For example:
Jealousy
Jealousy is brown
Jealousy is rotten grapes
Jealousy is dog's breath
Jealousy is crashing waves
Jealousy is gravel

Students could be encouraged to add clip art, stock images or their own illustrations to their list poem. Additionally or alternatively, students could compose or source a soundscape or soundtrack to set their poem to.

AC9E6LE05 AC9E6LY06 AC9AMU6C01

Neologisms

Neologisms are newly coined terms, sometimes using two words to create new ones. On page 156 Thunderhead explains how they thought they were creating a neologism using lyrics from a song but later discovered it to be an existing word.

Investigate other neologisms and use them as stimulus for a discussion about the dynamic nature of language and how new words are always being added to used and recorded language. Use the Macquarie Dictionary site to assist with your investigation:

https://www.macquariedictionary.com.au/new-words-to-consider-for-the-macquarie-dictionary/ Record any examples from *Thunderhead* as you are reading through the book.

'Mondegreen' is an example of neologism, a term coined in the 1950s meaning misheard or misunderstood song lyrics. Ask students to share any lyrics they have misheard and create a collection of humorous mondegreens. You might like to use the collection on this site to get you started: https://www.uh.edu/~mbarber/mondegreens.html
AC9E6LY02 AC9E6LA01

Vocabulary

Thunderhead is written using a wide range of sophisticated vocabulary. Conduct word studies across the reading of the text.

- Compound words – two words joined together to create a new word with different meaning compared to the individual words, for example Moonflower and Thunderhead.
  Pg 153 *sunlit*
  Pg 159 *heartfelt, overtime, somewhere, outside, something, inside, afternoon,*
  Pg 162 *bathroom, sometimes*
- Etymology and affixes – research the history of certain words. Use https://www.etymonline.com/ to investigate the origins of interesting words across the chapters. Look closely at the prefixes and affixes of different words to notice words that are unpaired, words that have a prefix or suffix that imply the word has an antonym. Investigate whether the word is unpaired because its antonym has fallen out of popular use or if the word's etymology means its origins are in another language.
  For example, *overwhelmed* is an old word, while, its antonym 'underwhelmed' was coined in the 1950s, however we don't say 'whelmed'.
  Pg 91 *nowadays* is a contraction of words from Middle English meaning 'during the day'. 'Thenaday' has fallen out of use.
  Pg 91 *excruciating*. Ex- meaning 'out, out of, thoroughly' and -cruciate meaning, literally 'crucify', obsolete word meaning 'tormented'.
  Pg 160 *mutable* origins in Latin, 14th century. Antonym 'immutable'.
- Sophisticated language – list the authorial vocabulary used by Beer to characterise Thunderhead as an intelligent person. Investigate meanings and have a go at using new words in sentences or paragraphs in response to the chapters read. To extend students, ask them to consider the way Thunderhead reviews music and use a range of sophisticated vocabulary to review pieces of music or the book.
  Pg. 164 *sentient, luxuriously*
  Pg 168 *ethereal, continuum, conspiring*
  Pg 168 *musings*
  Pg 170 *assassination*
  Pg 172 *beleaguered*

AC9E6LA01 AC9E6LA08 AC9E6LY09

Pathetic fallacy and personification

On pg 175 Thunderhead talks about pathetic fallacy, but Beer uses this poetic technique, ascription of emotion to inanimate objects, on pg 2. *'Uncaring blank vacuum of space.'* and *'Biscuits that taste like cardboard and watery sympathy'* foreshadowing the concept included in Chapter 23.

On pgs 175-176 Beer uses personification, *'Bad things never have the manners of bowing politely and introducing themselves so you can grit your teeth and get yourself ready….'*
These two techniques are ways that Beer communicates the emotional storyline and infuses the book with lyricism in line with the themes of the book. After defining these literary techniques, ask students to locate examples of them in texts such as *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud* by William Wordsworth.

After looking closely at examples, encourage students to experiment with using pathetic fallacy and personification in their own writing in response to ideas and issues covered in *Thunderhead.* The lyrics of 'The Circle Game' by Joni Mitchell https://www.jonimitchell.com/music/song.cfm?id=39, a favourite of Thunderhead's, could be used as a stimulus for students to write their own poem/song about the rites of passage at different ages, using poetic techniques. Ask students to share their song/poems with the class.

AC9E6LY07 AC9E6LY06 AC9E6LY03 AC9E6LE04 AC9E6LA08

ASSESSMENT

Create a multimodal self-portrait using PowerPoint or similar software that includes visual and verbal representations of the following prompts set to an audio track of student's favourite music:

- Things that made you happy at different stages of your life and new things to be happy about/things you are looking forward to in the future.
- The type of friend you were in the past and the type of friend you are now.
- Favourite people and why they make you feel good.
- Favourite music and why you like it.
- Other favourite hobbies or interests that are important to your identity.

Collect students' writing/composing samples and assess them for use of the literary features learned about during the activities. Use or adapt the following rubric to assist with assessment of writing/composing.

Feature	Working towards	Achieving	Working beyond
Metafictive devices	A few metafictive devices used overtly	A range of metafictive devices used in a way that attempts to match the theme and context of the writing.	A wide range of metafictive devices used in a way that is highly appropriate for the theme and context of the writing.
Metaphors and similes	An attempt to include metaphor or simile.	Inclusion of metaphor and simile.	Creative use of metaphor and simile.
Vocabulary	Sophisticated vocabulary attempted	Sophisticated vocabulary included	Sophisticated vocabulary included effectively
Pathetic fallacy and personification	Attempt at including pathetic fallacy or personification	Inclusion of pathetic fallacy and personification.	Pathetic fallacy and personification included in a sophisticated way that enhances the meaning of the writing/composition.

MUSIC

Exploring and responding AC9AMU6E01

Explore ways that the elements of music are combined in music across cultures, times, places and/or other contexts.

Developing practices and skills AC9AMU6D01

Develop listening/aural skills and skills for manipulating elements of music to achieve expressive effects when composing, singing and playing instruments.

Creating and making AC9AMU6C01

Manipulate elements of music and use compositional devices to communicate ideas, perspectives and/or meaning when composing and practising music for performance, and notate, document and/or record the music they compose.

- Choose a range of music from Thunderhead's playlists to listen to as a class. Model and jointly write a review of some pieces incorporating aspects of language learned through the English activities.

- Share your responses to music, favourite songs and pieces that have been important to you through different times in your life. Allow students opportunities to do the same.

- Learn the lyrics of chosen songs together as a class. Recite or sing along to the songs to encourage appreciation of music and to develop a positive classroom atmosphere.

- Allow students the opportunity to experiment with different formal and informal instruments and music editing software. Encourage students to experiment with techniques noticed during close listening to music from Thunderhead's playlists.

- As a class, devise your iconic playlist of songs that affirm your heart and help you to not feel lonely, as inspired by Thunderhead's *Playlist For the End of my Hearing*.

- Host a traditional or silent disco at the end of the unit, to celebrate and enjoy different types of music.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SOPHIE BEER is an award-winning author/illustrator living in Brisbane. She rejoices in creating bright, funny books that centre equality, inclusion and kindness. Her books including *Love Makes a Family* have been printed all over the world in many languages and have sold close to one million copies. As an illustrator, she has worked with the likes of Disney, Google, *The Guardian* and *The Boston Globe*. As a writer, her work has appeared in *Frankie* magazine and *The Big Issue*. When she's not illustrating and writing, she thinks a lot about plants, animals, music, books, equality and Aldi choc-chip biscuits. In 2016, Sophie was diagnosed with and underwent surgery for an acoustic neuroma, a brain tumour that affects balance, the facial nerve and hearing, and she is subsequently hard of hearing. *Thunderhead*, her first novel, was inspired by this transformative event.

www.sophie-beer.com

ABOUT THE WRITER OF THE NOTES

Jennifer Asha is a lover of children's literature. Picture books are her absolute favourite. When she is not immersed in a good book, Jennifer is an academic at the Australian Catholic University where she enjoys sharing her passion for literature, language and literacy with her Initial Teacher Education students. Jennifer is also an experienced primary school teacher who has taught in the classroom and in the library, across all grades. Jennifer has conducted classroom-based research and published articles and books that encourage teachers to teach literacy and language using rich literature resources. Her areas of special interest include the teaching of grammar, multimodal texts and visual literacy. In her spare time Sophie loves to spend time with her two children and long-suffering husband, read and drink cocktails with her book club, sail, ocean-swim, travel, cook, garden and sleep.

CORRESPONDING LITERATURE

(In alphabetical order of authors)

El Deafo by Cece Bell

Wonder by R.J. Palacio
https://www.penguin.com.au/books/wonder-9780552565974

Lenny's Book of Everything by Karen Foxlee
https://www.allenandunwin.com/browse/book/Karen-Foxlee-Lenny's-Book-of-Everything-9781760528706

The Edge of Thirteen by Nova Weetman
https://www.uqp.com.au/books/the-edge-of-thirteen

Wonderstruck by Bryan Selznick
https://shop.scholastic.com.au/Product/8065589/Wonderstruck

Exit Through the Gift Shop by Maryam Master
https://www.panmacmillan.com.au/9781760983512/

Boy by Phil Cummings and Shane Devries
https://resource.scholastic.com.au/resourcefiles/8495028_65542.pdf

Moonbird by Joyce Dunbar and Jane Ray

Two Mates by Melanie Prewett and Maggie Prewett
https://magabala.com.au/products/two-mates?srsltid=AfmBOorpcL3RSNILs-XaVTaJZoPLn6qZMxsLUGDy8iBFnmSuDo46Iki5

ONLINE LINKS IN FULL

Metafictive devices: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10026780/

'The Circle Game' by Joni Mitchell: https://www.jonimitchell.com/music/song.cfm?id=39

Etymonline: https://www.etymonline.com/

Collection of mondegreens: https://www.uh.edu/~mbarber/mondegreens.html

Macquarie Dictionary: https://www.macquariedictionary.com.au/new-words-to-consider-for-the-macquarie-dictionary/

Talk groupings:
https://www.boringdon.plymouth.sch.uk/attachments/download.asp?file=1378&type=pdf

How to support student lead discussions: https://voice21.org/how-to-develop-independent-student-discussion/

List poems: https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/learning/list-poem