

"So twisty and devious I couldn't stop turning the pages."

—Marie Rutkoski, author of *The Winner's Curse*

CHARLIE, PRESUMED DEAD

How far would you
go to uncover the truth?



ANNE HELTZEL

TEACHING NOTES BY LAURA GORDON

‘So twisty and devious I couldn’t stop turning the pages.’—Marie Rutkoski, author of *The Winner’s Curse*

‘A creepy, thrilling, tangled web of a book. I couldn’t put it down. Their mystery is everybody’s mystery at some point, whether we like it or not: Who is this person I’m dating and what are they hiding?’—David Iserson, author of *Firecracker*

‘Buckle in tight. *Charlie, Presumed Dead* is a mystery wrapped in a puzzle strapped in a roller coaster. This dark and twisty thrill ride kept me up late and kept me guessing.’—Fiona Paul, author of the *Eternal Rose* trilogy

SYNOPSIS

Aubrey and Lena are not friends. In fact, they have reason to be mortal enemies. They meet in Paris at the funeral of Charlie Price, the charming, wealthy boyfriend they didn't realise they shared. The girls agree they need to work together to find out exactly who Charlie Price was, as they start to suspect that they weren't the only secret he was keeping. Lena Whitney, well-travelled and independent, convinces the wholesome, intelligent Aubrey to head to London in search of answers. What they find are more questions, and for Aubrey, perhaps the location of her precious journal. This is enough to convince Lena to go with her to Mumbai where Aubrey reveals some secrets of her own. Unlike Lena, she is not searching in the hope they find Charlie alive, but instead confirming he is dead. Aubrey was involved in a hit-and-run that killed a man. Her journal has evidence of the accident and Charlie had that journal. Mumbai is also where Adam lives, and he is part of the secret that has the dramatic impact on Charlie. When Lena reveals her own secret, the suicide note Charlie left for his mother, their determination to find Charlie intensifies; his plan is working perfectly and the girls have no idea.

It is the trip to Kerala to find Anand, Charlie's dealer, which shifts what had been a desperate search for Charlie into a game of survival. Until this point in the narrative, the only real tension has been between the girls and their motives for pursuing Charlie. Then suddenly everything changes and the story becomes no longer a macabre adventure but a psychological thriller. The girls are drugged and robbed by Anand in an attempt to recover Charlie's drug debt. They flee India chasing their only lead, Charlie's half-brother Dane. It turns out that Dane is actually Dana, a lady-boy working in the bars of Bangkok, and he is not fond of his brother. Dana follows Charlie's orders, fearing retribution, and reveals to the girls that Charlie is not only alive, but planning to kill Lena. The tattoo of the lamb is confirmation of his intention. And this is confirmed by Charlie himself.

The chapters narrated by Charlie are chilling. Lena and Aubrey have no idea they are pawns in his sick game. While waiting to fly out of Bangkok they try and beat Charlie, but instead act exactly as he predicted. Wary of everyone around them, but refusing to give in to the terror Charlie has created for them, they try and enjoy their last few hours in the bustling city. Aubrey suggests they ask other travellers about their favourite Thai experience and the first one suggests they go to the beautiful floating markets. Then Aubrey spots Cha-Cha seemingly by accident and she agrees to take them to a Karaoke bar. Again Charlie's plan has worked spectacularly well, but the girls have no way of knowing this. They drink, sing, party and enjoy themselves until it is time to leave. Aubrey leaves the club to find a taxi, Lena agrees to follow her. But it is the last time they see each other. Desperate and terrified, Aubrey eventually stops searching and goes to the airport hoping to find Lena there. Instead

she is arrested, taken to prison and charged with the murder of Charlie Price and Lena Whitney, and the prime source of evidence has been provided to Thai authorities by Charlie's girlfriend, Cha Cha. Aubrey's only chance of escaping the hell hole that is the Thai prison is to plead insanity and return to an institution in the United States. Lena's only hope is to be found by Aubrey. The novel ends with readers believing Charlie's plan has worked.

THEMES

Deception:

Ultimately this is a novel about power and revenge. Charlie's intent and motivation lies in seeking retribution for the wrongs he perceives he has experienced. While he happily dates two girls simultaneously, creating a different version of himself for each relationship, when he discovers that Aubrey has in fact deceived him, he seems to lose all grip on reality. Even before Aubrey's affair with Adam had begun, Charlie refers to the anger and rage he feels, and the need to be in control and manipulate these women to repress his anger. But when the truth comes out about Adam and Aubrey, and she tries to end the relationship with Charlie, he snaps. He fakes a suicide note and his death, even stabbing himself in order to create a bloodied jacket, and then sits back and watches as his orchestrated plan unfolds. He has deceived these women into loving him, or the version of himself he has created for them, but he has also deceived those around him. He has stolen from Anand, blackmailed Dana and arranged the murder and arrest of Lena and Aubrey. This is a man who is deranged and psychotic and has manipulated everyone in his life to ensure his sinister plan has worked. Readers are left wondering what's in it for Charanya Buaran. Is she part of the game, or another pawn in Charlie's devious plan?

Identity:

The choice to create a version of himself specific to each relationship is indicative of Charlie's damaged sense of self. His funeral is full of people who loved and admired his charm and wit, yet in reality he was shallow, deranged and manipulative. The relationship with Lena and Aubrey was a game he was playing. He made the rules, kept score, took notes and decided when it had to end. Charlie's identity was fluid and shifted depending on where he was at the time and who he was with. In fact, it is the different versions of himself that alert Lena and Aubrey to the secrets he was keeping. Charlie is not the only one whose identity is changing; these women also start to see themselves differently once they are no longer bound by his charms. Aubrey has already had a glimpse of what kind of person she would be without Charlie, and her unlikely friendship with Lena has also shifted the way she sees herself. All three characters are examples of how one's identity can be determined by the people, places and problems they encounter.

WRITING STYLE

The text is the combination of the personal narrative of two nineteen-year-old women; Lena Whitney and Aubrey Boroughs. Initially it seems they are caught in a heartbreaking love triangle they have discovered after the sudden disappearance of their boyfriend Charlie Price. The chapters alternate between Lena and Aubrey, each offering their perspective as the narrative hurtles toward a terrifying conclusion. While the voices of these two are quite similar – despite the different motives each has – the real contrast is provided by the rare insights offered by Charlie himself. This intrusion, of the deceptive and vindictive Charlie Price into the mysterious narrative, suddenly adds an ominous atmosphere as readers are no longer part of the adventure, they are now helpless observers to the demise of the unsuspecting victims. Charlie reveals his intentions, to have Lena killed and Aubrey tormented in a fate worse than death, and the way he has manipulated all of the characters to ensure the plan is a success. Adam, Anand and Dana have all had a role to play, and out of fear and loathing toward Charlie they have done exactly as they were expected. But the worst is yet to come. The horror of his ultimate plan is realised by the readers before the characters themselves. Just as we are privy to the thoughts and emotional turmoil of the girls as they follow each other across the world, desperate to find answers, their planned demise is revealed to us through the pathological planning of Charlie. The calm, calculating manner this murderer maintains, even while referring to his overwhelming rage, is extremely disconcerting. Mirrored by the absolute panic and hysteria of Aubrey's final chapters and the desperation of Lena, Heltzel's readers can only sit and watch as these girls are led like lambs to the slaughter.

STUDY NOTES

The following learning activities can be undertaken in conjunction with a class reading of the novel, set as homework or study tasks, completed in small groups or individually and used for assessment as determined by the class room teacher. They are not designed to be prescriptive or chronological and intend to explore the themes and ideas of the text.

Characters:

Mood Board:

Students choose one of the three main characters in the text and collect a range of materials that represent elements of that character's personality, appearance, family, relationships etc. The materials may include colours, song lyrics, visuals, photographs, quotes from the text, quotes from outside the text, fabric etc. Students create an A3 collage of the materials and write a supporting explanation of the choices they have made. They need to reference their examples with evidence from the text and justify their choices.

Police Profile:

Given that two characters end up as victims and one as a suspect, according to the police, students can create a profile that the police would have compiled for each character. Use statements from people who knew them, list the facts that have been revealed about each one and organise them in a way that support their status as victim or suspect. Use these profiles to write a news report on the events. Think carefully about the language used to describe Lena, Aubrey and Charlie given the police view of the crimes. How would they be presented to the public? Which information would police focus on? Which information would a TV network or newspaper focus on to create interest in the story?

Stand on the Line/ One Minute Debate:

Use the following statements about the events in the novel or the characters for either of these learning activities. **Stand on the Line** involves students having to take a position showing to what extent they agree or disagree with a statement. One end of the line represents *Strongly Agree* while the other end of the line represents *Strongly Disagree*. Some students are asked to justify their position after each statement is read. **One Minute Debate** allows every student to briefly justify their stance on the side of the argument they have been given. Divide the class in half. One side agrees with the statement and the other side disagrees. Each student must present their own argument with their own evidence from the text. They may rebut an argument presented by the opposition if they choose. Every student only has one minute and the teacher can judge and score accordingly.

Adam was working with Charlie.

Lena is the only innocent victim in this text.

Charlie is a pathological liar.

Cha Cha is telling the truth.

Aubrey was the one who had the most to lose in this novel.

Charlie will eventually get caught.

Themes:

Experts:

Using the information provided above, as well as students' own perception of the text, the class is divided into groups to become experts on the theme they have been given. They need to complete the following table with as much detail as possible. The groups are then rearranged to include one student from each theme and the information is shared and compiled so each student has a complete table.

THEME	KEY EVENTS	CHARACTER	QUOTES	SYMBOLS
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		DEVELOPMENT		
Deception				
Relationships				
Identity				
Revenge				

Book Trailer:

Using one of the themes as a starting point or the basis for the pitch, small groups can design and create their own book trailer that would be screened to promote the book. There are various programs that can be used as the platform for this presentation. Students can decide which part of the narrative would be most relevant to promote for their theme and who might play the role of their characters. They would need a catch-phrase to summarise the book and find key quotes to emphasise. Music can also be used to great effect in book trailers.

Quote Bingo:

This is a simple, fun revision activity that students can make themselves. The table and quotes below are a sample. Provide each student with the following 'bingo' card and some numbered counters. Read out each quote and the students have to put the number of that quote into the box of the character the quote relates to. When they have a complete row they call out bingo and have to justify each of their allocations.

ANAND	CHARLIE	LENA	CHA CHA
XANDER	DR PAULSON	LENA'S FATHER	CHARLIE
AUBREY	LENA	DANA	AUBREY
ADAM	CHARLIE'S MOTHER	AUBREY	LENA

Sample Quotes:

'There's that stupid journal he lost. When I saw him a few months ago in our hotel room, it was all he could talk about.' (p61)

'You're branded. Like lambs to the slaughter.' (p214)

'I know nothing will make it go away except revenge.' (p122)

Motif and Symbols:**'Like lambs to the slaughter.'**

The overwhelming motif that is used in this narrative is the symbol of the innocent lamb. It is echoed throughout the narrative and even though the first time Charlie's hears the expression is when Aubrey says it, it becomes his catchphrase and defining mantra. The image of the sweet, innocent lamb being led to its death, completely unaware of what is to come, is the repeated metaphor of the text. The horror on Dana's face as she discovers it has been tattooed, like a marker for death, on the wrist of the unsuspecting Lena, reiterates the horror of Charlie's plan. And the way she came about having this tattoo is referred to

twice in the novel as Lena is questioned when and why she got the tattoo. She cannot remember. It seems it was another seemingly innocuous idea of Charlie's, and yet is a key part of his sinister intention.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION (by Anne Heltzel)

Although I have been lucky to experience joy-filled relationships throughout my life, my idea for *Charlie, Presumed Dead* sprang from a negative one. My first love, whom I fell for at seventeen and kept in touch with on and off for roughly ten years, came back into my life in a significant way when I was twenty-seven. At the time, he was in law school in North Carolina and I was working as an editor in New York City. We resumed our relationship, intending to give it a 'real' shot—we had always drifted apart because of distance. A few months later, I received an email from his law school girlfriend, of whom I was completely unaware. (She had suspected something was fishy and did a little detective work.) It was easy to find closure after that! I have always been interested in psychology and had already written two psychological thrillers by then. The complexity of John's lies fascinated me—how and why can one person betray another for so long? My musings prompted me to research pathological lying, and led me to dream up Charlie's character.

This incident of betrayal, though, sparked only the novel's initial concept. The story quickly took on a life of its own after that. (It is not at all autobiographical beyond my limited experience with a two-faced boyfriend!) I had long wanted to write a story that wove in the landscapes of the countries I was lucky to live in or otherwise explore. I have a profound emotional connection to Mumbai in particular. Delving into memories of my neighborhood and life there was one of my favorite parts of crafting the story. Each of the cities Lena and Aubrey explore is lovely and unique. I wanted to give Aubrey especially a chance to see the world—she's a small-town girl with limited life experience. I wanted to show readers, via Aubrey, how exposure to different cultures can alter a person's perspectives.

Of course, this was also a cautionary tale. I meant to examine the way impulsivity and even the most innocent of choices can change a person's life forever. I wanted to demonstrate that letting oneself be controlled by a person or a relationship is a mistake. We must choose whom we love carefully, we must maintain a strong sense of self, and we must trust ourselves to be brave in the face of adversity.

Another enormous inspiration—something that fascinated me while writing—was the idea that friendship can spring from the unlikeliest of scenarios. I loved the idea of something good and healthy resulting from something damaging, and that the girls could overcome their more selfish feelings in order to recognize one another's inherent value.

Writing Tasks:

- Write one of the newspaper articles reporting on the details of the hit-and-run accident Aubrey was involved in. Write the journal entry she might have written after she discovered the article.
- Select one of the characters who plays a role in Charlie's deception, either knowingly or unknowingly. Choose any point in the narrative and write a chapter from their perspective about the two girls, the character's own relationship with Charlie and what they think might happen.
- Consider the experience of one of the girls' parents. It might be at the end of the novel when they girls have gone missing, or during the novel as they have been fed another round of lies about what they are really doing. Include their relationship with their daughter, some history of her behaviour and their impression of Charlie.
- Write the news report that could have been published after the two girls are reported missing.
- Write the medical report Dr Paulson submits after interviewing Aubrey in prison.
- Select any character from the narrative and write one more chapter. It may take place immediately after the last sequence of events, or you may allow a time lapse.

About Laura Gordon

Laura Gordon is an experienced secondary English teacher. She currently teaches years 7–12 at St Joseph's College, Geelong, where she has taught for the past 10 years. She shares her passion for books and reading by creating engaging curriculum and learning activities for the classroom.



ANNE HELTZEL was born in Ohio, attended the University of Notre Dame, and earned her MFA from The New School. She is currently an editor at a New York City publishing house, and is the author of *Circle Nine* and *The Ruining* (which is published under the pseudonym Anna Collomore). She lives in Brooklyn.

In Paris, family and friends gather to mourn the passing of Charlie Price, presumed dead after a horrific accident. At the funeral, his two girlfriends—Lena and Aubrey—uncover their boyfriend's shocking betrayal. Charlie led a double life, and they are the casualties.

Over the course of a week, the girls embark on a mind-bending search for answers. Is Charlie still alive? What else was he hiding? As a trail of Charlie's deceptions carries them across Europe and Asia, the girls' deepening friendship sustains them. The truth is within their grasp—but when they each discover that the other has been harboring secrets of her own, will their own lies destroy them?

Charlie, Presumed Dead is a compelling psychological thriller that will keep readers guessing beyond the final page.

Recommended for middle and senior secondary

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37–39 Langridge St, Collingwood, Victoria 3066
Phone: +61 3 9486 0288 Fax +61 3 9486 0244
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