

# PLEASE DON'T HUG ME

## KAY KERR

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Fiction

RECOMMENDED READING AGE: 14+

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### CURRICULUM GUIDE

*The following teaching guide has been designed to embrace shared curriculum values. Students are encouraged to communicate their understanding of a text through speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing.*

*The learning activities aim to encourage students to think critically, creatively and independently, to reflect on their learning, and connect it to audience, purpose and context. They aim to encompass a range of forms and include a focus on language, literature and literacy. Where appropriate, they include the integration of ICT and life skills.*

### SYNOPSIS

Erin misses her brother, Rudy. There are so many things she wishes that she could tell him—like the outburst she had at work over the poo incident. Or the way she failed her driving test the first time around when she took Cowgirl Glenda's instructions to drive straight over the roundabout too literally. Or the new job that's come with a new friend.

There's so much she'd like to discuss that she gets mad at Rudy for leaving and not being around to answer her questions. So Erin writes letters, every day, following the advice of her therapist, Dr Lim, who wants her to be better at being in her feelings.

Through letters to her absent brother, Erin tells the story of who she is in the world—her uncertainties, frustrations, friendships and passions—and the ways in which her experiences are shaped, but not defined, by her autism.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kay Kerr is a former journalist and community newspaper editor from Brisbane. She now lives on the Sunshine Coast with her husband and daughter, and works as a freelance writer. Kay was writing the first draft of *Please Don't Hug Me*, her first book, when she received her own autism-spectrum diagnosis.

### BEFORE READING

1. Brainstorm a list of stereotypes that exist around autistic people, and autistic girls in particular. Where do you think these stereotypes come from? Are they true? How might they be damaging to people with autism? Write about a time where you or someone close to you has been hurt or misunderstood because of an incorrect stereotype.
2. Think about a time when you've said something rude (or stood by and let someone else be rude) in order to fit in. Why do you think people do this? Does it make them bad people? Come up with a list of things that you might say or do differently if you found yourself in a similar situation in the future.
3. Consider the title of the book – *Please Don't Hug Me*. What do you think the title means? What kind of character do you think the book is about?

### WHILE READING

1. When Erin is recounting the events that led up to her losing her job she says, 'I wish this one customer had come in an hour later, or if ten other things were slightly different, then maybe I'd still have a job.' (p. 4) Have you ever felt like this? Describe an event in your life that set off a chain reaction that led to something big or unexpected happening. What would you have changed if you could?



- Erin makes up nicknames in order to remember people. What are some examples? Are they accurate nicknames? Are they nice? Do you think people would appreciate the names she comes up with for them?
- 'At Surf Zone, if you have blonde hair you work in the surf section and if you are brunette you work in street wear. That's not really a rule, it's just what happens.' (p. 10) What other social 'rules' dictate how and where you are able to move through the world? How do you learn them (and learn to fit in) if no one tells you? What are the consequences of breaking these unspoken rules?
- Erin sees Schoolies as a 'crash course in being a grown-up'. (p. 11) Do you agree? How do you think your life might change when you leave school? What are you looking forward to? What are you afraid of?
- How has Erin's family changed since Rudy's absence? What does Erin observe about the way they communicate now?
- How do families bring out the best and the worst in each other? What examples of this can you find in the book?
- How does Kay Kerr use humour in the story? How does humour help us get through tough times?
- Think about Erin's cringe list. What kind of things end up on it and why? What makes you feel ashamed or embarrassed? Erin holds onto her anxiety about the items on her list. Do you ever feel like you can't let go of something that's worrying you? In small groups, or with a partner, come up with a list of techniques that might help you move through this anxiety.

## AFTER READING

### CHARACTER

- What are your impressions of Rudy based on Erin's letters? Why doesn't he respond? How is he described by his family and friends? Keep a list of moments in the book where something about Rudy's absence is revealed.
- Erin is a 'compulsive truth-teller' (p. 15) when she's having an outburst. Is this a bad thing? What kind of truths does she tell in the book, and what impact do they have on the people she shares them with? Why do you think it's so hard for us to hear difficult truths sometimes? Write about a time when you avoided telling the truth to spare somebody's feelings. Was it the right thing to do?
- 'Shiny people don't experience things the same way as the rest of us.' (p. 38) Who are the 'shiny people' in the book? Why does Erin think that their experiences are different from hers? Is she right? What do you think one of the people she's referring to might say if she told them this?

### STYLE & STRUCTURE

- Please Don't Hug Me* is written as a series of letters to Erin's absent brother, Rudy. Why do you think the author has chosen this format for the book? Does the one-sided nature of the letter writing shape the way you see the characters in the story? How might Erin's letters change if she knew that the person on the other end was actually reading them? What similarities and differences might be found between Erin's letters to Rudy and the blog she starts towards the end of the book?
- Kay Kerr reveals that Rudy is dead towards the end of the book. Why do you think she withholds this information at the beginning? Are you surprised when you discover that he's dead? Make a list of moments earlier in the novel where the author signposts, or leaves clues to, the explanation for Rudy's absence.

### THEMES

#### Friendship

- Dee has 'mostly been a good friend since she transferred from Sydney and sat next to me in Miss Bell's grade three class right at the front'. (p. 22) Do you think she's a good friend? Is Erin a good friend to her? Find examples of their friendship. Even good friends can behave badly towards each other. What examples can you find of this? How do they navigate their friendship when one of them has behaved badly to the other? How would you apologise to your best friend if you had upset them?
- How do friendships change during high school? Why do you think this happens? Is it a good thing or a bad thing?
- How is Erin's friendship with Aggie different from her friendship with Dee? She describes their friendship as making her feel 'light in a way that I haven't [felt] for a long time'. (p. 245) Does this make their friendship better? How does Erin's friendship with Aggie help her to accept the things that are important to her?

#### Grief

- How does each of the characters grieve for Rudy? How does the tone of Erin's letters to Rudy change as the book progresses? What does this tell you about her grief? What do you think Rudy's other family and his friends would say to him in a letter?
- Grief is a complicated emotion and can make us feel guilty for being happy, or angry, when we feel that we should be feeling sad. What examples can you find of this in Erin's letters to Rudy? How does she describe the way she misses him, or the feelings she has about his absence?
- 'Dee is treating me like I'm made of glass. She is doing her best, and she is doing enough. I just wish things were different and she didn't feel like she had to do that.' (p. 185) In what way do you think that Erin wishes things were different? Do you

find it difficult to know what to say when someone is grieving? What would you say to Erin in this situation?

### Living with a disability

1. 'You've never felt your senses screaming as the world becomes too loud, too bright, too strong, too close.' (p. 4) Have you ever felt like this? What insight does this early description provide into how Erin experiences the world? Think about a regular school day—what moments might be made harder if you needed to navigate this kind of sensory overload? How would it change the shape of your day?
2. Do you think our schools and workplaces allow for everyone's needs, or are people punished and penalised if their needs don't fit the 'average' environment? What examples can you find in the book where Erin's ability to do her job (or her schoolwork) is hampered by inflexible spaces or rules? What examples can you think of outside of the book? What are some ways that we could change our workplaces and schools that would make them more accessible for everyone?
3. *Please Don't Hug Me* is an own-voices novel. What does this mean? Why are own-voices stories important, and how might a story differ depending on the lived experience of the author? Does the author's own experience of autism change the way you perceive the story she has written?

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### RESPONDING

1. Erin's grief and isolation are amplified in the silence of her unanswered letters. Write a response to one of several of her letters from the voice of one of the other characters in the book. Maybe Rudy is able to respond, just once, or Dee has found a letter and is writing a reply. What would you say? What would you want Erin to know?
2. Erin sets up 'Autie Girl' as a place to share her writing and to connect with people online. If you were going to start a blog what would you call it? Who would it be for? Write a blog post and a short blurb that you could use for your own blog. Think about what you are trying to say, and what you want to achieve with your writing. How does our writing change depending on who we are writing for?
3. Look up the 'social model of disability' and 'person first language' on the internet. Make some notes on what you learn. Does the information fit with your experiences of disability, inclusion and accessibility or is it new information? If it's new, reflect on how this changes your perception of disability, and how it might change your language or actions in the future. Share your thoughts with the class.
4. Stories are driven by what the characters in them want. What does Erin want? Does this change over the course of the book? What obstacles does she face? How does what she wants drive the narrative?