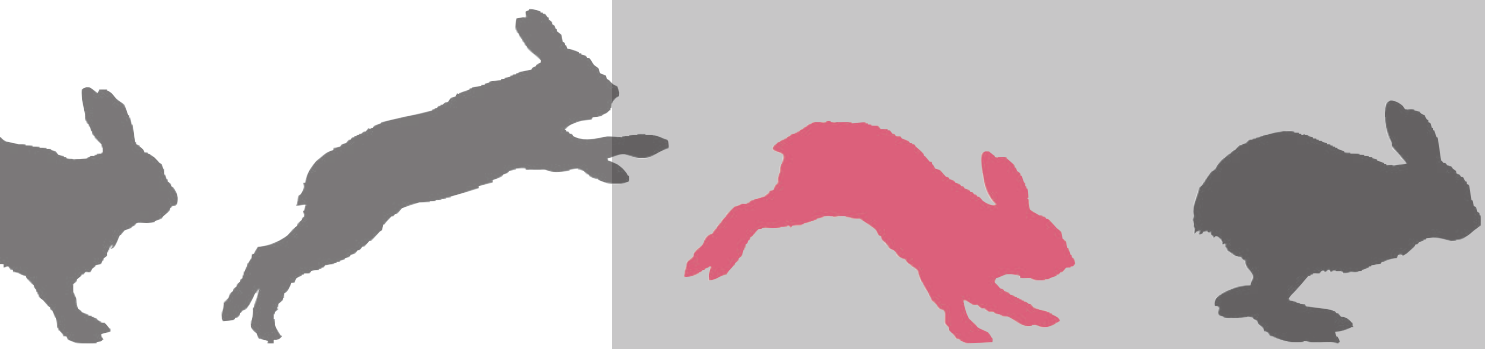


Bugs

TEACHERS' NOTES



INTRODUCTION

This novel is appropriate for students of at least 15 years of age. The following activities are designed for students working at curriculum levels 6, 7, and 8, in years 11, 12, and 13.

The novel covers two terms in the lives of three sixth formers in a mid North Island town that could be any small town in New Zealand.

The setting and the characters are real and authentic. The story is presented in the first person narrative with Bugs, the narrator, providing an intimate commentary on her life, interrupted only by dialogue she shares with the other characters. While Bugs presents her world with the cynicism of youth, her raw naivety and anxieties are evident to the reader. Her loyalty and emerging attraction to Jez, her rivalry with Stone Cold, and the expectations of family and school reflect issues that confront all teenagers.

The plot and its pace reflect the feeling of torpor that can pervade both small towns and life in the final years at high school.

However, as the adults frequently remind these young people, choices made at this point have consequences for the rest of their lives.

NARRATIVE POINT OF VIEW AND CHARACTERISATION

INTRODUCTION FOR STUDENTS

The narrator of this novel is the main character, Bugs. The other characters and the action are presented to the reader through her thoughts. This narrative technique is called interior monologue or stream of consciousness. It allows the reader to see a story from one character's point of view. In *Bugs*, however, there is a lot of dialogue, and the reader has opportunities to work out the other characters from the way they talk and the things they say, as well as from Bugs's opinions of them.

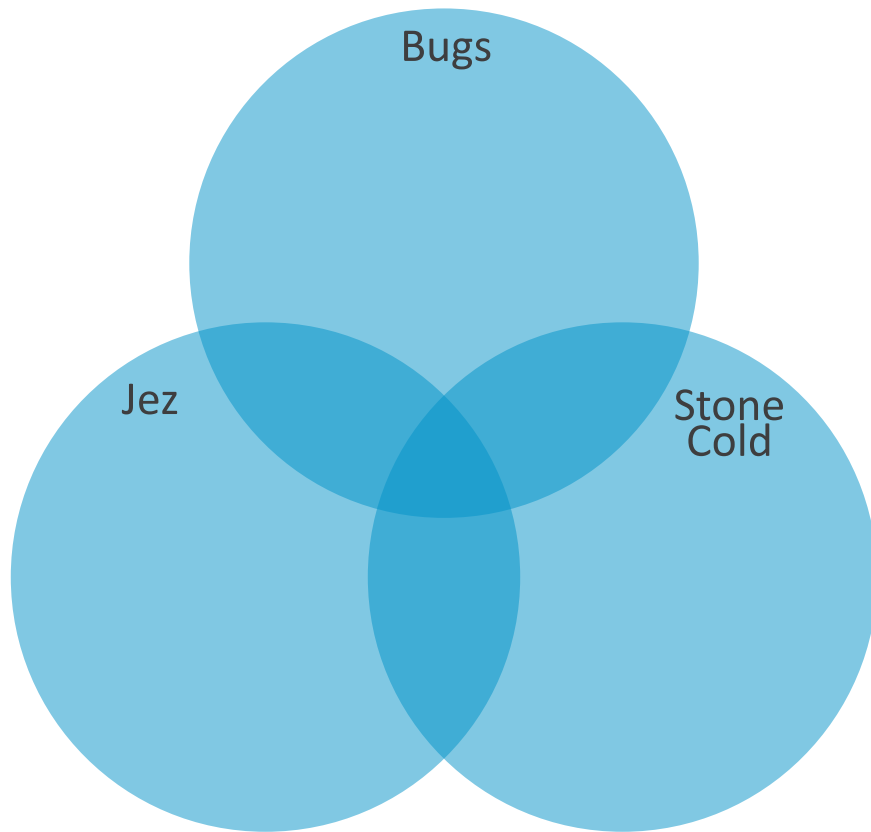
DISCUSSION

Have the students reread chapter 1. In small groups or as a class, have them consider Bugs's opinion of Stone Cold. Has she given Stone Cold a fair chance before judging her to be a bitch?

What factors influence Bugs's opinion of Stone Cold? How does the writer inform us about those factors?

ACTIVITIES

Have the students individually or in small groups create a Venn diagram with three overlapping circles. They can then use this template to record the information they have gleaned about each of the characters from chapter 1. Have them use the overlapping parts of the circles to record details of their lives that the characters have in common. For example, in the area of the diagram where all the circles overlap, they can record details that all three characters share (for example, they all live in the same town). There are areas to record what any two of the characters share (for example, Bugs and Stone Cold are both girls; Stone Cold and Jez both like marshmallows) and areas to record details that are particular to one character only.



Prompt the students to locate text where Bugs indicates:

- what she feels about Jez
- what she thinks about Stone Cold
- what she thinks about Shelley.

Encourage the students to analyse whether the writer relates this information directly or indirectly. Have them identify passages in the text where the reader has to infer or read between the lines to interpret Bugs's feelings.

SOCIAL ISSUES

Bugs is a novel that explores a variety of social issues, including education, social class, racism and prejudice, and loyalty. These issues are interconnected throughout the book, just as they are in real life.

ACTIVITIES

Have the students choose an issue to focus on as they read the text. In small groups, they can then discuss the following questions. Have them refer to specific parts of the text to support their ideas. After the discussion, students can write a paragraph outlining their conclusions and using quotations from the text to support their argument.

EDUCATION

In chapter 2, Bugs provides a commentary on two of her classes. Interspersed with her commentary, which tells us as much about Bugs as it does about her teachers, Bugs comments on the education system.

- What is Bugs lamenting as she watches a group of year 8 students being led around the school? What do these students have that she has lost? Who does she blame for the loss?
- ‘... you know when you’re a little kid and they teach you to high jump with that scissor kick thing? And apart from the kids that run from the right even though they’re goofy and knock the pole down no matter the height, most of the kids are fine and clear it. Until it gets too high, and now everyone’s like that goofy kid. That’s when the teacher goes *Let me show you the Fosbury Flop* – and it’s like a magic trick: you can sail right over even if it seems way too high. That’s what they should be teaching us: how to clear the bar, not how high it is above our heads.’ (Chapter 2, page 22). In this quotation, the writer is using the high jump as a metaphor for the education system. Explain the issue that Bugs is addressing here. Who are the ‘us’ that Bugs is referring to? Consider whether you think that the writer shares Bugs’s opinion.
- ‘We go from class to class to be shaped and measured and made perfect, and each year a batch is released to be consumed by the world. ... What happened to the ones that didn’t meet the standard; the ones that just would not fit in the box?’ (Chapter 9, page 133). Do you agree or disagree with Bugs’s comparison between the education system and a factory? Why does this comparison relate particularly to Māori education?

SOCIAL CLASS

Throughout the novel, Bugs is constantly aware of, and comments on, the wealth of Stone Cold’s family compared to the limited resources of her own family and the poverty of Jez’s. The tourist activities in their small town and Nikki’s occupation provide additional opportunities for the writer to comment on social class.

- Consider whether Bugs is impressed by the possessions that wealth can buy or by some other attribute of wealth. List other attributes of wealth.
- Reread Trace’s monologue in chapter 11. Whiti Hereaka contrasts the lives of people who work in the hospitality industry with those who have the money to enjoy the leisure activities and services provided by the industry. Is the writer’s depiction of wealthy people fair or is it prejudiced?
- How is Nikki’s life limited by her social class?
- How does Nikki’s life influence her hopes for Bugs’s education?
- Is there a connection between Nikki’s concern for Bugs’s future and Bugs’s concern for Jez’s future?
- Bugs perceives Stone Cold as being naive because she is middle class. Is this a fair assessment of Stone Cold? What evidence in the novel supports your view?

RACISM AND PREJUDICE

Bugs’s persona is staunch and her staunchness is based on her understanding of what she calls the ‘real world’ or the ‘actual world’. Much of her anxiety for Jez is based on what she sees as his vulnerability.

- Jez owes much of his vulnerability to his lack of family support and limited opportunities, but we can infer that Jez’s chief vulnerability is that he is a young Māori male. Do you agree?
- In chapter 11, Mr Fox voices his prejudice against Nikki, blaming her and Bugs for what has happened. Are you familiar with similar comments made in casual conversations or through media such as talkback radio?

- Who is Mrs Lee warning Bugs about in chapter 13? Reading between the lines, what is the warning based on?
- Identify passages in the text where Bugs refers directly to racial prejudice.

LOYALTY

This is a story about loyalty – about Bugs’s loyalty to Jez, her recognition of her family’s loyalty to her and her loyalty to her family.

- Bugs is bound to Jez by their shared past and by a developing attraction to him. What other factors drive her loyalty towards him?
- Why does Bugs make no attempt to warn Stone Cold of the risks that Jez faces?
- How and when do Nikki and her extended family demonstrate their loyalty to Bugs?

QUESTIONS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

How well has the writer synthesised the social issues discussed in the book to create a realistic and interesting story?

How authentic are the characters in this story? Can you identify with them?

Do you agree that the choices we make as teenagers decide our future?

How does social class and/or education affect our future?

PLAY READINGS

Whiti Hereaka is a successful playwright, and her dialogue lends itself to play reading.

Have the students choose a passage of dialogue from the novel and rewrite it as a play. While the dialogue will remain the same, character descriptions and actions will need to be reworked as theatre directions. The students can then perform the play as a reading or as a performance piece.

Examples of passages that would work well in play format are:

- Chapter 9 (page 123) from *‘Today ...’ Mr Young shouts ... to ‘I got them, Sir. I got the potatoes.’* (page 129)
- Chapter 12 towards the end (page 190) from *I dial and wait for her to pick up* to the end of the chapter (page 192).
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Teachers’ notes written by Margaret Cahill