



Walker Books Classroom Ideas



You Don't Even Know

Sue Lawson
 ISBN: 9781922179715
 ARRP: \$18.95
 NZRRP: \$21.99
 September 2013

*Notes may be downloaded and printed for regular classroom use only.

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Outline:

Alex Hudson is a good guy. He plays water polo. He has a part-time job. He's doing okay at school. Then the thing that anchors Alex is ripped away and his life seems pointless. How can he make anyone else understand how he feels, when he doesn't even know?

Author/Illustrator Information:

Sue Lawson writes books for children and young adults. Her love for books began when she was a child on a farm in country Victoria where she spent her time reading, writing, listening to her father and grandfather's stories and avoiding working with the cattle. These days, she's added stationery shops to her football obsession and when not writing, teaches and runs workshops for young people and adults. Sue's novels include *Forget Me Not* and *Pan's Whisper*, which was short-listed for the Prime Minister's Literary Awards and winner of the 2012 Australian Family Therapists' Award for Children's Literature. Sue's website is www.suelawson.com.au

How to use these notes:

This story works on many levels. The suggested activities are therefore for a wide age and ability range. Please select accordingly.

These notes are for:

- Secondary years 8+
- Ages 14+

Key Learning Areas:

- English

Example of:

- Fiction

Themes/ Ideas:

- Grief
- Death
- Family
- Self-acceptance
- Forgiveness
 - Guilt
- Coming-of-age

National Curriculum Focus:*

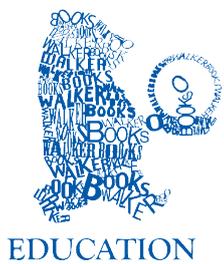
English
 Year 8
 ACELA1543
 ACELA1545
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 ACCEL1629
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 ACCEL1731
 ACCEL1732
 ACCEL1734
 ACCEL1736
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Year 9
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 ACCEL1633
 ACCEL1771
 ACCEL1634
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Year 10
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 ACCEL1813
 ACCEL1752
 ACCEL1756

*Key content descriptions have been identified from the Australian National Curriculum. However, this is not an exhaustive list of National Curriculum content able to be addressed through studying this text.



Walker Books Classroom Ideas

Sue Lawson on *You Don't Even Know*

As is always the case with my books, *You Don't Even Know* didn't spring from one idea, but from a variety that merged into Alex and Mackie. They have merged so completely now, I'm not even sure what was the original spark.

One of the major inspirations was Florence and the Machine's song "Hospital Beds". Wow, what a song! Her haunting voice and the lyrics just took me away someplace else, especially the line, "I did not choose you, you did not choose me."

About the same time I read articles and research about teen depression and started wondering what it would take to help a kid come back from the brink.

And the final piece of the puzzle came when I was musing over judgements people make about others and their circumstances, especially how some can assume wealth equals a good family life.



From there, I started imagining who was in the hospital beds and why. Mackie was easier to "nail" - in fact she came almost complete, though I had no intentions of her having a diary/scrapbook. She was going to be awake and talking - the two initially disliking each other then forming a friendship. Once I started piecing together Alex, that didn't feel right.

As always I made collages, maps and character profiles before I started writing. These are always a work in progress and keep developing while I am writing. They are a perfect jumping-off point for the story. The pictures of Alex gathered from all kinds of places, helped me understand him and his anguish.

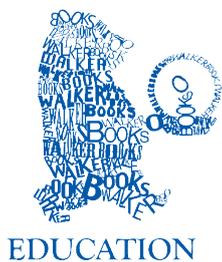
Alex's name took longer ... he was Luca, then Will, Angus, and finally Alex, and I only settled on that during the second rewrite. Mackie was a name I'd scrawled in a notebook years ago and the moment I started fleshing her out, I knew she was Mackie. I experiment with names and titles until they feel right, sometimes up until publication.

The hospital scenes were hard to write. I've spent a fair bit of time in a neurosurgery ward, having had four spinal tumours removed over 19 years, so at times it was almost autobiographical. I once had a nurse who called me Sunshine. She was my rock when I was drifting in and out of reality. I can still hear her voice. I also experienced that drifting in and out of consciousness that Alex experiences. Time, dreams and memories merge so that it's hard to differentiate which is which. I used to find the whole intern and registrar following the surgeon thing fascinating. My neurosurgeon was an incredibly skilled and compassionate man, like Mr Dobson, and while not him at all, has the same accessibility and understanding.

I think the hardest thing while writing the book was putting Alex and Mackie through the wringer. I do love my characters and, yep, I cried and laughed while I wrote it. At times I was so angry with Ethan and Dylan. Horrible pair. And that Wortho drove me nuts, too. I find those blustering, conceited people tough going. Having said that, I really try to empathise with them - understand why they behave as they which helps me soften the edges. Both were much harder going in the first draft - too hard. I've pared them back and added more depth to their characters. Having said that, I was so angry with Ethan, particularly.

And then there's Mia ... that broke my heart. It was one thing to plan that out, and another completely to write it once I knew Mia. Quite often while writing and editing the parts about her, I'd email a friend and say, "What the hell am I doing?" Her responses kept me going.

When I tell people how heart-wrenching it is to write a book like *You Don't Even Know*, they ask me why I do it. The reason - I have to. For me it's like taking the reader by the hand and leading them through this hell to the other side and leaving them feeling it will all be okay.



Walker Books Classroom Ideas

Discussion Questions and Activities

Before reading

Based on the title and cover, what do you think this story is about? How do you think it will begin/end? What kind of characters will be in this story and what challenges will they face? Revisit your answer to this question after finishing the novel and compare your initial expectations with your impression of the complete story.

After reading (Spoilers ahead!)

The book begins with a quote by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: "A torn jacket is soon mended, but hard words bruise the heart of a child." Why do you think Sue Lawson chose to include this quote in the novel? How does it set the mood for the story that follows it?

All stories are built on problems or conflicts. What are the problems or conflicts in this story? How are they resolved?

In small groups, decide on five important turning points in the story. Find a key quote to support each of your examples. Share them with the rest of the class.

You Don't Even Know is narrated by Alex as he is recovering in hospital and is interspersed with a series of flashbacks. Why do you think Sue Lawson used this technique rather than telling the story in chronological order? How do you think the story would be different if it were told chronologically?

Write a character assessment for Alex, Mackie, Mia, Dylan and Ethan. What are the key traits for each character? What purpose does each one serve in the story?

What are the themes of this novel? Write a statement of belief for each theme, then assess how *You Don't Even Know*'s treatment of these themes makes you feel.

This story is written in the first-person perspective. Everything the reader knows about the story and the characters is from Alex's description. Is there a possibility that Alex isn't always entirely honest? How does this idea change the way readers can interpret the book? Have a class discussion or debate about Alex's integrity as a storyteller with one side arguing that he is honest most/all of the time during the story and the other side arguing the opposite.

What is the significance of the title *You Don't Even Know*? Does it have more than one meaning?

As a class discussion activity, pose a number of "what if" questions to the class and discuss how this would have changed the story and their perceptions of the characters. What if ...

- Alex had thrown himself in front of the bus on purpose?
- The CPR Alex performed on Mia was successful and she had survived?
- Mackie woke from her coma and was able to have a conversation with Alex?

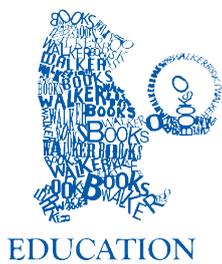
Maslow described belonging as a basic human need, but we can work to exclude people just as much as to include them (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow's_hierarchy_of_needs). Discuss how this statement and the idea of belonging applies to Alex and his family. Why is belonging a basic human need? What are the dangers of not feeling like you belong in a certain place or with a certain group of people? How can this need be used to manipulate people?

Alex has a strained relationship with his family which often leads to confrontation. Create a diagram that illustrates the relationships between family members. Write the name of each member of Alex's family in different places on a sheet of paper. Draw a line between each name and write a short description of the relationship between those two characters. As a private activity, create a similar diagram for your own family and contrast and compare your family to Alex's.

Alex gets to know Mackie through reading her scrapbook. How does the scrapbook represent Mackie as a person? The tone of the scrapbook changes as Alex reads through it. How do these changes reflect Mackie's frame of mind at the time she wrote it?

Read Mackie's chapters in order, without reading Alex's chapters. What sort of person is she? How does her lifestyle differ to Alex? Which of these two characters has the better life? Why do you think so?

Discuss the techniques Sue Lawson uses to tell Mackie's story. Which did you find the most effective? What are some other techniques that could have been used to tell Mackie's story seeing as though she remains in a coma until her death?



Walker Books Classroom Ideas

Rewrite a key scene from another character's perspective. Use your knowledge of that character you have gained from reading the book to gauge how they would act in that situation. How does looking through the other character's eyes change your perception of the scene?

Sue Lawson uses collages to build and get to know her characters. These collages can be made from drawing, photographs and words sourced from anywhere. Create a collage of one of the characters from *You Don't Even Know*. Compare your collage with another student who chose the same character. How did your interpretation of the character lead you to make different choices when creating the collage? Another collage activity is to build the collage first out of random images, then study the collage and write a character profile based on it. This could be used as a creative writing tool/story starter.

Have a class debate about Mia's death. Read the following statements to the class and designate an area of the classroom to each. Students can then stand in the area that corresponds to the statement they agree with (or students with different ideas can create a new area). Let each student explain their reasons and try to persuade other students to agree with them. Students can change their mind and move around the room based on how persuasive an argument is.

- Alex was at fault for Mia's death because he was responsible for looking after her. He knew Ethan wouldn't bother to keep an eye on her.
- Ethan was responsible for Mia's death because he didn't close the pool gate that his friends had opened.
- Alex's parents are responsible for Mia's death because they should never have left her in the care of two teenage boys.
- Nobody is responsible for Mia's death; accidents happen and are often unavoidable.

Choose a key scene from the book and adapt it into a script. What information is given to you in the book and what information do you need to make up to create this script? Is there anything in the scene that you would change from the novel to make it work better as a script/play? Use this script to perform a short play based on the scene.

The Kübler-Ross model, commonly known as the five stages of grief, are the five stages that a person who is dying or has experienced the death of a loved one can go through. These stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. The Kübler-Ross model states that not all of these stages will occur in every case and they are not always experienced chronologically. Does Alex go through these five stages? Identify key scenes in the book where he displays signs of experiencing some or all of the five stages.

Write another chapter to add to the end of *You Don't Even Know*. You could explore how Alex's relationship with his mother changes after the revelation at the end of the book, how Alex's relationship with his father or Ethan changes when he returns home or several months/years in the future, how Alex's parents deal with the knowledge that Ethan's friends left the pool gate open and Ethan cleared his friends' rubbish rather than helping Mia, etc.

As the character of Paul, write a report on Alex's progress by the end of the novel.

Write a book review on *You Don't Even Know*. What did you like/dislike about it and why? Who would you recommend this book to? Is it similar to any other books you have read?

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