

This is How We Change the Ending

VIKKI WAKEFIELD

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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

Nate McKee is not a hero. He feels powerless to change the circumstances that make him worry—his volatile dad, Dec; the smell of urine and mould in the room he shares with his younger brothers; the drugs Dec's growing in his bedroom.

For Nate, it's best to just keep his head down, stay out of things that don't concern him. YouthWorks, the local youth centre, might be the most solid thing in his life. But when an attack at the centre threatens its future, Nate realises that the only chance he has to change the ending is to take a stand.

This is How We Change the Ending is about the power and poetry of words. Nate escapes into his notebooks, capturing the fragments of his reality on the page. His words help him to clear his head and keep moving, moment by moment and, ultimately, it is his words that set him free.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vikki Wakefield writes realist fiction for young adults. Her work explores coming-of-age, family, class, relationships and the lives of contemporary teens. Her novels *All I Ever Wanted*, *Friday Brown*, *Inbetween Days* and *Ballad for a Mad Girl* have been shortlisted for numerous awards. Vikki lives in Adelaide, Australia.

BEFORE READING

1. Why do you think Vikki Wakefield has chosen to title this book *This is How We Change the Ending*? What do you imagine the ending might be, and why would she (or the protagonist) want to change it? Talk about moments in your life where you feel that the ending is already decided—how does this make you feel? Are there any personal endings that you would change if you could?
2. Read the prologue to the book aloud in class. What does it tell you about the story? What is the purpose of a prologue? Think about the characters we meet in this introduction and write down your first impressions of them. Who do you like/dislike? What is their relationship with each other? What kind of language do they use?

WHILE READING

1. There are many different types of conflict in the book—physical, emotional, external and internal. Find an example of each. Who is involved? What is at the heart of the conflict? How do they resolve it?
2. Nate says that he and Merrick are friends more because of 'proximity than personality' (p. 9). What does he mean by this? Do they care about each other? Find examples that support your answer.
3. 'I've decided sixteen is a nothing age.' (p. 21) Is this true? Write a response that shows why you agree or disagree with this statement.

- How is Macy (from YouthWorks) similar and different to Mr Reid? Who else cares about kids like Nate? Does the council? Why do the council want to shut the centre down? Do you agree with the idea that Nate and the other teens at YouthWorks are ungrateful?
- Can art be political? Is it enough to change the world, to change anything? If you could change something with your art, what would it be and how?

AFTER READING

CHARACTER

- Nate's classmates liken him to an armadillo. Why? Do you agree with his peers? What kind of animal do you think you'd be described as by someone else? Would you describe yourself differently?
- 'Three was okay. Five was borderline. Eight was dangerous.' (p. 3). Dec is an aggressive, volatile character whose behaviour makes those around him fearful. How would you describe Dec and Nate's relationship? What impact does Dec's presence have on the lives of those around him?
- 'Jake has a bump on his chest and Otis has a dent on his; Nance says they were joined once, but Jake broke away and took a piece of Otis with him.' (p. 9) This powerful, early image sets the tone for the dynamic between Jake and Otis. If they could, how do you think each of the twins would describe each other? Do they need each other to survive? Later in the book, there are moments where Jake becomes hostile and even aggressive towards Otis. Where do you think this aggression comes from?

STYLE AND STRUCTURE

- Think about the importance of place in the story. Nate spends most of his time either at home, at school or at YouthWorks. How is the narrative structured around each of these places? Think of a scene in each place that has a significant impact on the story. Could it happen somewhere else? How does Nate feel in each of these places? In many ways, he is on the brink of leaving each of them behind. Do you agree with this statement? Why? How do you think this makes him feel? Write about a time you had to leave a place that was important to you.
- 'My notebooks are like my own private well and my words are like stones: I drop them in the well so I don't have to carry them around.' (p. 15) Nate's notebooks are arguably his most important possession and yet, later, he says that he doesn't care about poetry. Is Nate a poet? What is Mr Reid trying to tell him when he talks to Nate about poetry and the great unknowns (p. 231)?

THEMES

Choices

- Tash makes a choice for Nate when she takes his words and uses them for her graffiti. Is she wrong to

do this? Why do you think she does? Is Tash right to think that petitions are passive and that true change can only come from a place of anger? Set up a classroom debate that argues for and against Tash's statement that 'disconnected people are the ones who effect change' (p. 209).

- Do you think Nate's mum chose to leave him behind? Why? Write about a time you've had to make a choice that you felt bad about. Why did you choose the way you did? How might you have chosen differently? Who was affected by your choice? If you were to relive the moment, would you choose the same thing?

Courage

- Merrick tells Nate that he'd rather 'swing and miss than duck and run any day' (p. 65). Do you agree with him? Is Merrick brave for stealing Tuwy's phone or stupid? Can you be both? Why?
- Why do you think Nance hasn't left Dec earlier? Is it because she lacks courage? Think about the moments after she leaves Nate at home and drives off with Otis and Jake. What do you think made her turn around and go back? Write the scene you imagine.

Power

- 'You're victims, he said. You think you're tough, but you're not. You're lost, and you're surrendering the only real weapon you have. Sure, you're pissed off that someone stole your iPhone or nicked your bike, but while you're fighting each other something else is being stolen and you don't even know it.' (p. 19) What is the 'only real weapon' that Mr Reid refers to? Who are they powerless against? Think of a time you felt that you had no control over a situation. Did you feel that you had any power? Where did it come from?
- Read pages 74 to 77. Who has the power in this scene? Why?

RESPONDING

- Mr Reid tells Nate that he transferred so that he could make a difference. Do you think that he's succeeded? Write a letter from Mr Reid to his ex-colleague describing his new job. How might he describe the students? Are there any interactions in the book that you can identify as moments where Mr Reid would feel that he'd succeeded? Why do you think this is so important to him?
- 'This is my chance to rewrite history.' (p. 59) Based on the text, can you identify five key moments that have shaped Nate's life? Why have you chosen these moments? Choose one and rewrite it to have a different outcome. How might your rewrite of Nate's past change his present? Is there a moment in your own life that you would rewrite if you could? What would you change? How might your life be different now? Would you lose anything important by changing your past? Would Nate?