

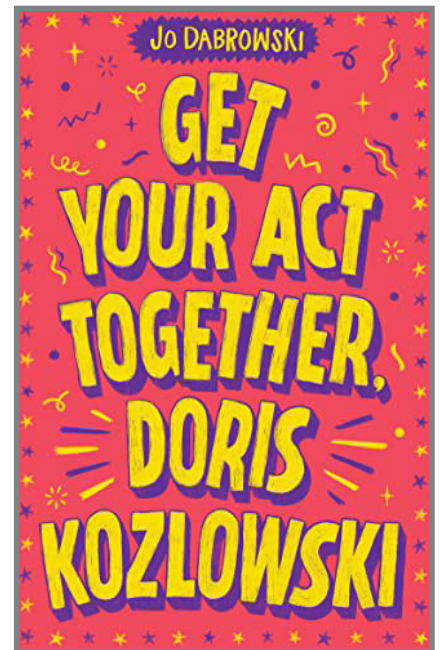
Get Your Act Together, Doris Kozlowski

AUTHOR
JO DABROWSKI

SCIS: 5453692

ISBN: 9781922848734

RECOMMENDED FOR: Upper Primary



SYNOPSIS

Doris Kozlowski's life is anything but normal. Her mum plays singing vegetables in TV commercials. Her little brother befriends pebbles and potatoes. And don't even get her started on her babcia.

But Doris is good at pretending to be just like everyone else, and she has a plan to get through Year Six: keep her head down, keep her family away from the school, and keep her best and only friend, the perfect Felicity.

So when Felicity ditches her for the popular girls before their first class even starts, Doris needs a new plan. She figures if she can win the talent show, Felicity will want to be friends again, and Doris can get her life back.

That is, if her babcia stops trying to 'help'. And if her mum avoids more embarrassing commercials. And if her brother manages to keep her secrets.

Who is she kidding? Doris is DOOMED.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jo Dabrowski's writing career started in advertising in Melbourne and continued across agencies here and in London. Jo and her husband now run a small creative agency from home in Melbourne, where they live with their two boys. Jo loves any sort of crafty activity and is also an avid theatre fan. In another life, she would definitely have played Ado Annie in Oklahoma or at the very least would have been cast as a dancing hay bale in the chorus.

STUDY NOTES

THEMES

Being Yourself

- Doris spends a lot of time trying to hide her 'real' self from her classmates. Why does Doris feel she needs to hide who she is? List a few reasons.
- Before Felicity became friends with the Perfects, Doris hid behind her friendship with Felicity. Why did Doris think Felicity was the best person to hide behind?
- If you were in Doris's class, how would you describe Doris? Do you think Doris is effective in hiding her true self from her classmates?
- Each of the characters is unique in their own way. Pick a character (excluding Doris) and list the qualities that make

them different from their classmates. Do any of the characters remind you of yourself or your friends at school?

- Re-read Chapter Nine, when Doris fails to convince Joey to keep her in his Act. Why does Joey think Doris would have found it easy to come up with an Act of her own?
- Why does Doris avoid coming up with a solo Act for the school talent show?
- Re-read Chapter 15, and in particular the dancing scene occurring from pp 135–137. How would you describe Doris in this scene? What parts of Doris’s personality are showing here? Why does Doris feel happy in this moment?
- Reflect on how this moment foreshadows Doris’s school talent show performance. Did you see this coming?
- For much of the book, Doris tries to hide the events of her life and her feelings from her dad. Re-read Chapter 24 and in particular Doris and Dad’s phone call on pp 213–217. What does Dad teach Doris about herself? What does Doris learn about Dad? In what ways are Doris and Dad similar?
- How would you say Doris has changed from the beginning to the end of the story? List a few ways she’s changed.
- What events helped change Doris’s view of herself? How did they do this?
- What does this book teach us about being ourselves?

Navigating Friendships

- Doris’s friendship breakdown with Felicity comes as a huge shock to her. If the Perfects hadn’t made friends with Felicity, do you think Doris and Felicity would have continued to be best friends, or would they have grown apart? List a few reasons to support either argument.
- We see Doris increasingly treated unfairly by the Perfects, and particularly by Ivy. Can you describe some of the ways their behaviour towards Doris was unacceptable? Would you consider this to be bullying?
- Do you think Felicity and Doris’s other classmates should have stood up for Doris in these moments? Can you understand why they didn’t?
- Doris hasn’t always treated people nicely either. Describe some ways that Doris has treated her peers unkindly. What did you think about Doris in these moments?
- We learn that Doris was previously best friends with Ava. What happened to that friendship? Who was to blame for the friendship break-up? Do you think Doris has acted fairly towards Ava since?
- Re-read Chapters Nine and Ten and reflect on the following excerpt and questions.
 - ‘ . . . maybe Mrs Nankervis was right, maybe I can team up with someone. We don’t have to be friends, as long as we work well together. Maybe all I need to do is find someone that already has a good chance of winning and convince them they need me to help them come first. That’s not cheating—that’s teaming up!’ (pp 85–86)
 - What did you think of Doris’s strategy? How would you describe Doris in this scene?
 - Do you think Doris interpreted Mrs Nankervis’s advice in the way her teacher intended?
 - What did you think of Doris’s behaviour towards Gilbert in the rest of Chapters Nine and Ten? How did you feel about Gilbert in these chapters? Were you surprised at how Chapter Ten ended, or did you see this coming? Why/why not?
 - Would you want to be friends with Doris, based on what you know of her behaviour?
 - Think of the friends you had at the beginning of primary school and the friends you have now. Are they the same friends, or are they different? If they’re the same, has your friendship changed over time?
 - What is important to you in a friendship? Do you have different friends for different reasons?
 - Do you recognise any friendships of your own in this book?

Embarrassing families

- Doris is often embarrassed by her family! List a few reasons how/why Doris is embarrassed by Babcia and Mum.
- Do you think any of Doris’s classmates feel embarrassed by some of the things their families do too?
- Is it normal to feel embarrassed by your family?
- Doris’s dad is now in a relationship with her former teacher, Mr Wright. While Doris is not embarrassed about her dad being in another relationship, she is embarrassed by Dad being in a relationship with her teacher. How did Dad and Mr Wright’s relationship become known by Doris’s classmates? How was this embarrassing for Doris? What effect has this event had on Doris while she prepares for the Year Six talent show?
- What similarities does Ava’s family have with Doris’s? Does Ava appear to be embarrassed by her family in the same way as Doris? Why do you think that is?

- Doris wishes her family were different, and particularly that they behaved more like a ‘normal’ family would. How does a ‘normal’ family behave, in Doris’s view? Does Doris change her mind about this later? Why?
- Read the following excerpt from Chapter 23 and answer the related questions.

‘She’s speaking sloooooowly and LOUDLY. Babcia looks at me. She shakes her head and rolls her eyes. Lots of people talk like this to her—teachers, people in shops, other parents at school pick-ups. Even Felicity’s mum does it. They assume that because she has an accent and gets her words a bit muddled up, she doesn’t understand them. Most of the time, I feel embarrassed for Babcia—that people are treating her this way. And I kind of feel embarrassed for myself too. It’s just another thing that makes us different to all the other families at school. But other times, like now, it makes me angry.’ (p 198)

 - Doris’s principal has assumed that Babcia cannot speak English well enough to understand her. This can be a form of casual racism that is sometimes referred to as ‘linguistic discrimination’. While the principal and other people who do this to Babcia may not intend to be rude or cause harm, it may still have a harmful effect. How would you feel if you were Babcia in this moment?
 - Why does this experience make Doris feel embarrassed for herself? Can you understand why Doris feels this way?
 - Doris says that ‘even Felicity’s mum does it’. Why does Doris use the word ‘even’? What does this tell us about the way Doris views Felicity’s mum?
 - Do you think Doris would ever correct her principal and other people on behalf of Babcia? Why/why not?

CHAPTER ONE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Character

- List at least three things you have learned about Doris, Babcia, Howard and Mum from this chapter.
- What is Doris’s relationship like with Babcia?
- What is Doris’s relationship like with Mum?
- Does Howard seem to have a similar or different relationship with Babcia and Mum to the relationship Doris has with them?
- Did you enjoy meeting Doris in Chapter One? Does this chapter compel you to learn more about Doris? Why/why not?
- Consider this extract from the end of Chapter One:

‘There’s absolutely nothing about me that appears remotely unique or interesting. And that is exactly the look I’m going for. Because looking completely normal is very important when your family is anything but.’

 - What does this extract tell us about Doris? What does it suggest about her storyline in this book?
 - If you’ve read the book, why is Doris so intent on not looking interesting or unique? How does this passage tie in with the broader storyline?
 - Doris says that nothing about her ‘appears remotely unique or interesting’. An important word here is ‘appears’. We only know how we think we look to other people, but we can never truly know how other people view us. How might Doris’s classmates view her? Do you think they’d agree that she is not unique or interesting? What might they see instead?
 - What might Doris consider to be ‘unique’ and ‘interesting’? Are these positive or negative traits in Doris’s eyes? Is this how you’d view these traits?
 - Doris also describes ‘looking completely normal’. The concept of appearing ‘normal’ is central to this book. But is there any such thing as ‘normal’? Perhaps you could write a reflective piece about this, or discuss it with your classmates.
 - From what you know of Doris in Chapter One, what do you think she means by ‘normal’?
 - If you’ve read the book, reflect on whether Doris’s concept of ‘normal’ changes over the course of the book.

Perspective

- This book is written from a first-person perspective. How does it make you feel about Doris? Do you relate to Doris in any way?
- Doris makes lots of quips. Do you find her funny? Did you finish Chapter One thinking you’d like to learn more about her?

- Can you find some parts of Chapter One that show Doris speaking more directly to the reader. What is the effect of these parts on you, as a reader?
- If the book was written from a third-person perspective, would you feel differently about Doris?

Family and heritage

- Study the extract below and answer the questions that follow.

‘Now, I don’t want you to get the wrong impression here—I like Babcia’s lunch options. But this isn’t a question of taste. It’s a question of smell. And that question is: do I want my lunchbox to smell like a small animal died in there? I jump up and follow her. She’s standing behind the counter arranging a selection of processed meats, jars of mustards and a large tub of lard. (Which is basically spreadable animal fat. I know, I don’t get it either.) I pull out a stool that’s tucked under the counter and sit down opposite her.

“Please can I have Vegemite? Just for today, Babcia. It’s my first day of Year Six!”

 - Doris is torn between enjoying the food her grandmother makes and wanting to deny that food in case it makes her stand out too much at school. Why do you think it is important for Doris to blend in on the first day of Year Six? Is this something you can relate to? How do you feel about starting a new school year?
 - If you read the full book, how does this moment tie in with Doris’s behaviour later on? Are there similar instances of Doris being semi-embarrassed by her cultural heritage and her family? Describe some of these instances.
 - Do you think someone at your school would feel the same way as Doris about their lunch?

ACTIVITIES

- Think of all the Acts that Doris tries to join for the talent show. Pick one of these Acts and write a journal entry as if you are the classmate(s) involved in this Act. For example, you could pick Joey Campanella, whose first aid Act Doris tried to be involved with in Chapters 18 and 19. In this journal entry, describe:
 - Your thoughts about Doris becoming involved in your Act.
 - What did you like and dislike about her suggestions for the Act?
 - What made you say ‘yes’ to her joining your Act (did you, in fact, say yes?).
 - What do you think of Doris as a classmate and/or friend?
 - What do you make of her behaviour at school so far this year?
 - Each character incorporated some inspiration from Doris in their final performance, so perhaps you could reflect on that too, using Chapter 30 for inspiration.
- Write a letter to yourself in ten years’ time, explaining what you want your older self to know and to remember from the age you are now. Here are a few writing prompts to help you:
 - A happy memory from this year.
 - A recent event you didn’t enjoy but which you’ve learned about yourself from.
 - Who your best friends are, and why you hope you’re still going to be friends with them in future.
 - Your hopes and dreams for ten years’ time (and beyond, if you’re a big-picture dreamer!)
 - What you want yourself to remember from being this age.
- Design a new front cover for the book. Study the current cover. Are there elements you’d keep the same from this cover, or would you change it all? You might like to consider changing the title of the book if you can come up with a title that you think better suits your cover!