

The Unexpected Mess of It All

AUTHOR

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RECOMMENDED FOR: Lower to Mid Secondary
(Drug and Alcohol References)

SYNOPSIS

Jamila Dakhoul wants to escape her life. Forget everything.

Forget that her only friends are strangers on the internet.

Forget that she's stuck in a caravan after a fire destroyed her family's house.

Forget that Year 12 is a brutal hellhole where bullying is an Olympic sport.

Forget Billy Radcliffe once and for all.

But as Jamila tries to untangle the messy threads of her life on a weekend away with her family, it becomes clear that she can't outrun her past, no matter how hard she tries . . .

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gabrielle Tozer is an award-winning author and freelance writer based in regional New South Wales. She is the author of seven books, including *Can't Say It Went to Plan*, *Remind Me How This Ends*, *Melody Trumpet*, *Peas and Quiet*, *Faking It* and *The Intern*, which won the 2015 State Library of Victoria's Gold Inky Award.

Gabrielle's nonfiction piece 'Lessons in Growing Up' was recently featured in the *Teacher, Teacher Anthology*, edited by Megan Daley, while her short story 'The Feeling from Over Here' was in the award-winning *Begin, End, Begin: A #LoveOzYA Anthology*. Gabrielle loves sharing her passion for storytelling and creativity with readers and aspiring writers, and has appeared at numerous events, including the Sydney Writers' Festival, the Somerset Festival of Literature, StoryFest Out West and the Children's Book Council of Australia's national conference.

The Unexpected Mess of It All is Gabrielle's latest young adult novel, and she is currently collaborating on a trio of picture books with award-winning illustrator Sophie Beer.

Say hello at gabrielletozer.com.

THEMES

- Families
- Resilience
- Belonging

STUDY NOTES**BEFORE READING**

- Consider the title. 'Mess' is a word that has come to express a multitude of meanings. In small groups or pairs, brainstorm as many meanings as possible, using whichever method is preferred.
 - In some places, it can have different connotations altogether from those students who already know. For example, check out the various meanings of 'mess' in the Southern states of the US.
- As a class, brainstorm the ideas that are suggested by the cover art. You may like to consider:
 - Genre
 - Themes
 - Characters
 - Setting.
- Create an anchor chart with relevant literary terms and their definitions with examples. Terms to include:
 - Trope
 - Foil
 - Bildungsroman
 - Black humour
 - Rom-com/romantic comedy
 - Figurative language: metaphors, similes, personification, hyperbole, idioms, etc.
- Use the following discussion questions to begin exploring the themes of the novel (with an awareness of possible triggers):
 - Have students had the experience of a big upheaval in their family life, such as a change in their family circumstances or their living arrangements?
 - Have there been other family changes about which they had no say? How did they feel?
 - How did they overcome any resentment or sadness about parental decisions?
 - What coping strategies did they use?

WHILE READING**Setting**

- The narrative takes place in a small town and the caravan park. What descriptive elements strike readers?
- How does the author create the sense of these as distinctive places?
- What mental images are formed?
- Do any readers identify with any aspects?
- Using descriptions from the narrative, have students create an artwork or a map of the caravan park with significant locations, eg. the reception, amenities block, amphitheatre, waterfall, tent/camp, Billy's cabin, etc.

Narrative devices

- The author has used first-person perspective that often feels like we're reading a diary or watching a vlog. Chapters are often quite short, and the whole story unfolds across the course of six days. Why do you think the author, Gabrielle Tozer, has chosen this structure?
 - What are the benefits and disadvantages of first-person perspective?
 - How does this impact or help create mood/tone/purpose?
- Black humour is used extensively throughout *The Unexpected Mess of It All*.
 - Why do people use black humour?
 - Why is this type of humour often used in tense situations?
 - Think about which characters use black humour the most in the novel. What does this tell readers about them?

- Below are some examples of this device from the book. What techniques have been used?
 - The compost worms at the school farm have more social capital than I do. (p 21)
 - I sink lower in my seat and pray for a spaceship to crash into the school and abduct me. (p 29)
 - His so-called friends have the combined emotional intelligence of a flea, and that's mean to fleas. (p 47)
 - For the five hundredth time, I would rather be locked in the girls' toilets overnight than spend one more second at your house. (p 52)

Language

- Jamila's vlog channel is called 'Jam and Scream'. Why has she chosen this name?
 - What figure of speech has she referenced, and why do you think she's made this choice?
 - Consider what this tells us about Jamila, both in terms of the original expression and how she's changed it.
 - This device is often used in marketing or advertising, can students suggest other examples?
 - If the class were going to use this technique for their own hypothetical platform, what would they call their channels?
- There are many examples of figurative language throughout *The Unexpected Mess of It All*, many of which give us an insight into what Jamila is thinking and feeling about the events of the story. Using the table below, which includes some quotes as a starting point, collect examples from the text and identify which technique (eg. simile, metaphor, personification, etc.) has been used.

Characters

- Create a character web to show the connections between the primary and secondary characters.
- Create character profiles for Jamila, Billy and at least one other character. Using the acronym S.T.E.A.L., look for examples of what/how each character:
 - Speaks—What does the character say? How do they say it? What is their tone? Their word choice?
 - Thinks (including their values, attitudes and beliefs)—What does the character think? What do we learn from their thoughts and ideas? What do they value? What attitude do they have towards different things? What do they believe in?
 - Effects they have on others—What is this character's effect on others? How do they interact with other characters?
 - Acts—What does this character do? How do they behave? What can we learn from their actions?
 - Looks—What does this character look like? What can we learn from how they present themselves to others?
 - Include quotes and key words from the novel, and any other important information.
 - Explore the conflicts each character faces and their overall role in the narrative, as well as their traits. Use quotes or examples.
- Return to the definition of a 'foil character'.
 - Can students suggest who fits this definition? For example, Matt and Billy or Daph and Margot.
 - Use a graphic organiser such as a Venn diagram to compare and contrast at least one character and their foil.
 - How does the addition of a foil help to flesh out the (main) character, add to the story arc, and propel the narrative forward?
- As a class, discuss all the factors that are impacting Jamila's mental health; eg. living in the caravan, loss of their home and possessions or her apprehension about 'what next'.
 - How do these shape the narrative? Consider the cause-and-effect principle here.
 - The perspective of the novel is from Jamila's perspective, how might her mental health affect how she views the events of the novel?

AFTER READING

- Consider the below dialogue between Jamila and Billy, which clearly demonstrates her feelings about the school and students.
 - 'The hallways are like a zoo full of wild animals. Everyone's fighting to survive.'
 - 'You make it sound like a nature documentary.'
 - 'There are predators. And there's prey.' I groan.
- How do the two characters differ in their perceptions of Hamill Bay High and its students?

- Why does Jamila feel so reluctant to create the Year 12 graduation video?
- Can students relate to either Jamila or Billy's point of view?
- What systems and support are in place to help students cope with not only academic pressures, but social ones?
- Dealing with loss and grief is a huge challenge for many people. For Jamila, the loss of the family farm and most of her possessions is the most obvious, although she clearly feels grief for other parts of her life, such as the loss of her friendship with Billy.
 - How did Jamila feel when she realised she was wearing Grace's discarded t-shirt? How was this complicated by how Billy's parents came to give it to her?
 - There are many variables as to how any person might cope with loss. In small groups, research available support for a situation students may encounter (eg. loss of a home, unemployment, end of a significant friendship, death, abandonment, divorce, etc.).
- What familiar YA trope/s has the author employed in *The Unexpected Mess of It All*?
 - Why do authors use tropes?
 - Which tropes have been adhered to and which have been played with?
- Select one event or day from the novel and rewrite it from the point of view of Billy.
 - How might this alternative perspective be reflected in language choices?
 - What might Billy notice that Jamila didn't, given the differences in their personality, interests and relationships? And what might he have not noticed that Jamila did?
 - What insight does the reader gain into Billy that may not have been revealed or noticed by Jamila until later in the novel?
- Recreate the major, public events of the novel as a series of social media posts (or storyboard for a TikTok) by a classmate of Jamila and Billy's.
 - How might they see these events differently to Jamila and Billy?
 - What gets left out of social media posts?
 - How might they sensationalise these events or put their own interpretation on them? It might be helpful to discuss Student X's posts and their impact here.
- Use 'What if . . . ?' as a starting point for a writing piece. For example: what if Billy's audition had been successful; what if Jamila's video had been created with care and creativity; what if Margot had enjoyed the camping experience?

AUTHOR OF NOTES

SUE WARREN AND JEMMA MYORS