

Teachers' Notes

Stresshead

ALLAYNE WEBSTER

Teachers' Notes written by Madeline Holmes



OMNIBUS BOOKS

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INTRODUCTION

Being a sixteen year old girl can be hard, especially when a) you decide that the profession your entire family chose might not be for you , b) you boyfriend may not be your boyfriend for much longer, c) something's wrong with your mum and d) your best friend is in serious trouble.

This is a smart, funny and often serious story about finding your place in the scheme of things and surviving the very worst life throws at you.

THE AUTHOR

Allayne Webster was born in Adelaide, South Australia, but grew up in Kingston, South East (the home of the BIG lobster). Allayne completed her education at Kingston Community School. At school, Allayne was *always* writing. She was the secretary for the student body and she wrote articles that were published in the local newspaper and in some journals. When in high school, Allayne wrote a tragic romance novel her classmates loved to read, which is now stored safely where it will never see the light of day again. During her teens, Allayne loved to read novels by American author Judy Blume. After doing an apprenticeship (reading Judy's work!), Allayne knew she wanted to become an author. Allayne's other books are *Our Little Secret* and a book for younger readers, *Barnesy* (illustrated by Tom Jellett).

BEFORE READING THE TEXT

Have a general discussion about Australian fiction and what expectations we have when we read Australian authors and stories set in Australia. Do students feel that Australian fiction is easily identifiable with common themes and ideas or do they find that Australian fiction is comparable to American or English fiction and can't be so easily defined?

READING THE TEXT

Part One

Class discussion

Ask students to read just the opening chapter in class in order to have a group discussion about their first impressions. We're introduced to a host of characters, but at the centre is our protagonist, Dennie. The author puts us immediately into the action of the story and quickly establishes multiple connections to the book's title.

When thinking about what this chapter tells us, important elements to consider are narrative voice, characterisation, setting, pace and emerging themes. To start, centre the discussion on these questions:

- 1) How does this chapter set up the story?
- 2) What do we learn immediately about Dennie and, through her narration, her family and friends?

Research task

Dennie and her dad have an argument over Jack's choices and the value of a university degree. William thinks that attending university is a privilege that Australians should take advantage whereas Dennie and her mum, Monica, defend Jack's decision to take an apprenticeship believing that not everyone need gain a degree to be successful.

Your task is to present both sides of the debate in only 400 words. You'll need to research each argument to make sure that you have evidence to support your claim. Even if your particular viewpoint is aligned with only one side, make sure that each argument is sound.

Literary component

Keeping a response journal will prove valuable when it comes to written response activities. It will be particularly useful to create a character chart that shows the

relationships between characters and how these relationships change. Take note of who instigates the change or who is ultimately responsible for the change.

Record emerging themes and what you think *Stresshead* is essentially about. Also take notes of your impressions of Dennie as a narrator.

Part Two

Class discussion

In this age, it's more than likely that we know someone affected by cancer. Talk about how the different characters in the book react to Monica's news. Dennie is angry and understandably scared by her mother's decision to wait, but her friend Kat understands why Monica puts off the tests. Do students relate to a particular character's opinion? What do you think about Monica and Dennie's relationship?

Talk generally about how becoming diagnosed with cancer affects a person's lifestyle. People often don't know how to act around someone who is seriously ill. There are no rules to guide us. How well are we educated about cancer?

Research component

Clara makes the observation that advertisers promote unrealistic ideals. She believes that these supposed realities are unattainable fantasies that are harmful to society as people who are unable to achieve them will feel dissatisfaction with their lives.

Choose an advertisement on television that you think is a misrepresentation of reality – that is, an advertisement that is persuading an audience to buy into a lifestyle or family narrative or personal ideal, by suggesting that the product it is promoting enables great change.

When you deconstruct your chosen ad, think about all the elements that go into production. Who is your advertisement targeting? What is the story? What techniques are most relied on (language, music, sound effects, imagery, colour and lighting)? What kinds of actors have been chosen? Are there any recognisable stereotypes?

For more guidance, it would be useful to watch an episode of the ABC's *The Gruen Transfer*, a television segment that deconstructs ads.

Literary component

In *Stresshead* it is the characters and their relationships which are pivotal to the story. Dennie, in particular, as the voice of the story is extremely well defined for the reader. Building characters and making them layered and authentic is a challenge for any writer, and it is important this is done well, as we access stories through their characters. If you look at your character observations you've already made in your response journal, you will see that the author has already provided considerable information.

You learn about characters through the following factors:

- 1) The reactions of other characters – what they say and how they act
- 2) External elements – physical surroundings, education, background and physical appearance
- 3) Actions – what the character does/what they fail to do/what they choose to do
- 4) Dialogue – opinions and attitudes, and feelings and thoughts
- 5) Inner thoughts – mental analysis, interior monologue and stream of consciousness

Using these five factors as a guide, choose a character from *Stresshead* and breakdown their character in detail. Then, consider the following instructions and questions.

1. Sort the characters in *Stresshead* into three dimensional, two dimensional, and one dimensional characters (round, curved and flat types).
2. Identify the role of each character.
3. Consider if the writer meant for you fully understand the characters. That is, do you understand a particular character's motivations, actions and lifestyle and if not, do you think it is necessary?

4. Using direct references to the text make inferences about the characters: What is the character like? How does the character behave? What motivates the character? Does the character develop or change and how? What relationships does the character have and how do these change?
5. Select an important relationship in *Stresshead* and using examples in the text, analyse the relationship arc. Be specific when you describe what you learn from individual episodes in the text and then, overall, summarise what you learn about the characters and the development of the characters and the relationship from the novel.

Part Three

Class discussion

As the title suggests this novel is about the stresses we face daily and Dennie in particular is burdened by not only personal stresses but those confided to her by others.

Clara calls Dennie a drama queen saying she cares too much. In contrast, Clara's outlook is that if you care less about what people think and trust your judgment, you'll have a happier state of mind.

Talk about how students reacted to this conversation, and how the characters deal or don't deal with the stress they face. Are these realistic portrayals? Does one character cope better than another? Do you think we need a certain degree of stress to lead healthy lives?

Students could answer these questions verbally, alone or in pairs, or as a written task to be handed in. In some cases the questions may spoil the story, so you might like to hand them out only after everyone has finished the relevant chapters.

Task

Dennie intends to do some work experience during the holidays, and where initially she planned to work at her dad's firm, she later changes her mind meaning to try

something different. In order to secure a position, it's important to have a resume and cover letter to give to potential employers. Choose a potential job and prepare a resume and cover letter for your application.

You might not have any previous work experience but that's okay as an employer won't expect that all students will have had jobs. Here is a list of things you should include: your name, address, contact information, education, work/volunteer history, positive personal characteristics, skills and experience, and any other accomplishments you might have (awards, sports, activities).

A good cover letter will explain the reasons for your interest in the company and outline your most relevant skills or experiences. When you write your letter, make sure that you convey your interest and willingness to work.

Literary component

It's not always easy to uncover a novel's theme (or themes, as a story can have many) as it's not explicitly written out for you. You can discover the novel's themes by asking the following questions:

1. What is the novel really about?
2. What ideas are being explored in character attitudes and behaviours?
3. What do you think the author is trying to communicate through the story?

AFTER READING THE TEXT

Class discussion

Have a general discussion about reactions to the novel. Here are some guiding questions and discussion points to start student conversations:

- 1) How does the author subvert stereotypes? (E.g. the character of Richard.)
- 2) What did students think about Christopher's role and his admission of depression?
- 3) How important was Clara to the story?

- 4) What did Kat's storyline bring to the narrative?
- 5) What did students make of Dennie and Jack's relationship?
- 6) Discuss the relationship between Dennie and her sisters.
- 7) This is a story about relationships, especially troubled relationships with communication issues. Discuss.
- 8) Discuss the pressure on Dennie to follow in her family's footsteps and become a lawyer.
- 9) What is this story essentially about?

Literacy component: written response

1) Critical Response

Now that you've finished *Stresshead* and have completed your response journal, you have enough information through activities and class discussions to discuss the novel in depth in essay form. Choose one of the previous discussion questions and write 800 words using examples from the text to illustrate your point.

2) Creative Response

Dennie is the narrator of the story and it is her perspective and her reality that the reader has access to. You can choose an episode in *Stresshead* and rewrite it from the perspective of a different character or you might like to imagine a scene that takes place in between events in the novel that we don't witness. For example, what takes place at Dennie's house when she and Clara are out, or a scene at Jack's house with his family, or a conversation between Kat, her boyfriend and her mum.

WEBSITE

For more information about Allayne Webster and her books, go to www.allaynewbster.com/index.html