



OMNIBUS BOOKS

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Teachers' Notes

Joyous & Moonbeam

Richard Yaxley

Teachers' notes by Madeline Holmes

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Introduction

Joyous & Moonbeam documents the unlikely friendship of Joyous, a 33-year-old disabled man who works all day making pin cushions, and Ashleigh, a troubled teen, that Joyous renames 'Moonbeam' on their first meeting. Joyous, true to his name, lives by a philosophy that celebrates all life has to offer, and his unwavering certainty has a profound effect on his new friend. The nuanced narrative is told through conversations, letters and journal entries, and each episode adds another layer until the story is complete. This is an important story that challenges traditional views of disability.

About the Author

Richard Yaxley is an author and educator based in Queensland. He writes novels, plays, poetry and educational texts. His most recent work, *Drink the Air*, won the Young Adult prize at the 2010 Queensland Premier's Literary Awards. *Joyous & Moonbeam* is his second young adult novel.

In 2011 Richard was awarded a Medal in the Order of Australia (OAM) for services to education, literature and performing arts. More information about Richard can be found at his blog: <http://richardwyaxley.wordpress.com/>

Reading the Text

Part One

Class discussion

Read the initial chapters together as a class and talk about your impressions. What do you think the story is about? How has the author set the scene? Here are some questions to prompt discussion:

- What do we learn about Joyous immediately?

- What does the 'voice' of Joyous' character tells us?
- How do you react to Joyous' character being called 'faggot'?
- Do you think a name makes a person or a person makes a name?
- How would you describe a relationship where one person tolerates the other?
- Who do you think Joyous is talking to?
- Do you agree with Joyous' father's philosophy?
- What do we learn about Ashleigh?
- How does she respond to Joyous and what does this tell us?
- What do you think of the storytelling device where information is withheld?
- Did you make assumptions before Mr Santorini's and Ashleigh's conversation?
- What clues are we given to uncover the truth of the story?

Group task

Think about how the author tells us Joyous has a disability. We are given clues: Joyous has an unusual speech pattern; his retelling of past events depicts a character called Sammy-K being unnecessarily cruel to him, and his processing of information is curious. But it is not until Mr Santorini says to Ashleigh that the people here are profoundly disabled that the reader is explicitly told of Joyous' disability. Up until this point, all the reader knows is that Joyous has certain peculiarities. How does labelling change our expectations?

Have a discussion about your interpretation of what it means to have a disability. Santorini says that we all carry disabilities of some sort (page 17). What do you make of this? Do you agree? Is this a good way of addressing stigmas attached to disability?

Your group has been tasked by the government to create a YouTube video that addresses negative ideas and viewpoints of disability in society. Be creative in your approach. Make sure you research your topic thoroughly.

Literary component

Begin a response blog to record your reading experience of *Joyous & Moonbeam*. This will prove useful when it comes to responding to the novel in essay form. As well as responding to the plot, make sure to pay attention to other elements like themes, references to other books, characterisation, the importance of setting, and tone. During your blogging process, come up with a question or discussion about the book for other students to interact with. Make sure you post at least two responses on other blogs in answer to other questions or ideas.

Part Two

Class discussion

- 1) Have a class discussion about the role of the author. Writers create characters and write stories from different perspectives. More often than not, writers will tell a story from the perspective of a character foreign to their own experiences. Have you ever read a book from a male point of view written by a female? Have you ever read a book from a black person's point of view written by a white person? Some questions for discussion:
 - How are writers able to give characters with which they have little in common realistic voices?
 - Do you think in such situations a writer has to be careful in his/her representation/interpretation?
 - Does the author of *Joyous & Moonbeam* have a responsibility to people with disabilities in his depiction of Joyous? Do writers have a public responsibility?
 - Can authors write what they want? Why or why not?
 - What is the role of the writer?

- 2) Characterisation is one of the most important elements of a story. The characters in *Joyous & Moonbeams* have very distinctive voices.
 - How has the author constructed memorable characters?
 - How is the reader given information about the characters?

- Why do you think the author has chosen to tell the story through conversations, letters and journal entries? How does this contribute to characterisation?
- How are Joyous' and Ashleigh's mothers different? We hear from Margaret directly but only from Ashleigh's mum through her daughter's experiences. Does this change the way we respond to these characters?
- Who do you sympathise with in this story? How has the author created sympathetic characters?

Group task

In pairs, choose an episode in the novel to dramatise. How you do this is up to you. You might like to consider a scene from a stage play, a scene from a radio play, a scene from a film or a scene from a musical. Your task is to re-imagine the episode so it suits your chosen medium. You must use what is in the text but your interpretation can include material that is not explicitly written as well as what you imagine happens before or after your chosen scene.

Literacy component

- 1) Respond to Joyous and Ashleigh's different viewpoints. Where Joyous believes everything has a silver lining, Ashleigh argues that everything good always stops. Is either perspective realistic?
- 2) Remember to continue to update your blog.

Part Three

Class discussion

- 1) Have a discussion about Ashleigh's character. She refers to a lesson on *To Kill a Mockingbird* when her English teacher says you need to understand a character's history to understand his or her motivations.
 - Now that we have been given Ashleigh's history, are her motivations clear?

- Do you understand why she started the fire?
- What does she say about the connection between fire and love?
- What does her friendship with Joyous mean to Ashleigh?
- Why does Ashleigh deliberately try to hurt her family?
- Would you call her a selfish character?
- Have Ashleigh's choices damaged her future?
- Can you recall why Joyous gave her the name Moonbeam? Is it appropriate?

2) Have a discussion about relationships in the story:

- What does the novel say about relationships?
- What are the important relationships in the story?
- How would you describe Ashleigh and Joyous' relationship?
- Would you describe Margaret and Sammy-K's relationship as abusive? Why/why not?
- How does Margaret cope or rationalise her life with Sammy-K?
- Why has the change in Ashleigh and her father's relationship had such a big impact on her?

Group task

In her letter to her son, Margaret says that for her the die is cast (page 78). She feels that her situation in life is irrevocable. Have a brief class discussion about how you respond to this pessimistic viewpoint.

In teams of three you will argue for or against the statement: Nothing is set in stone. Be clear and persuasive in your argument and make sure to define all your important terms.

Literary component

- 1) Consider the way the author sets the scene in the story. Though we are not told explicitly when the story is set, we are given pieces of information

throughout the story that allow us to identify the time. Write a blog post about the importance of setting and discuss how the author places us in a timeframe.

- 2) Margaret attributes part of her downfall to what she calls 'The Weight'. She describes Sammy K's trial with 'The Fear'. Write a blog post on what you think is Ashleigh's personal enemy.

After Reading the Text

Class discussion: final thoughts

Have a conversation about your reading experience of *Joyous & Moonbeam*. Here are some questions to consider:

What did you think of the novel's conclusion?

What do you imagine Ashleigh's future will hold?

What is the role of religion in the story?

What do you make of Margaret's revelations? Do you think they will change Joyous' outlook on life?

Is Joyous defined by what he believed his father's philosophy to be or is he his own person?

Do you think Margaret should have revealed the truth to Joyous?

What does the novel say about trust?

Why does Margaret want independence for her son?

What does she mean by independence?

Do you think Joyous can have the independence his mother wishes for him?

Is Margaret a good mother?

What does the novel say about change?

What are the novel's key themes?

What does the kingdom tree mean to Joyous?

What do you think of Ashleigh's parents in this story? Are they sympathetic people?

Is it important to know about the author's background in relation to the novel?

Literature component

Choose one of the following questions or topics to respond to. Make sure you refer closely to the novel.

- Joyous, the only character living with a disability, is the happiest person in the novel.
- Did all of Sammy-K's actions bring negative reactions?
- Every cloud has a silver lining.
- Every character carries a disability.
- How are metaphors used in the novel?
- Who benefited more from Ashleigh and Joyous' relationship?
- How does the story challenge traditional views on disability?

Extension Activities

- 1) Write an opinion piece about people living with disability in Australia and tie it to your reading of the novel.
- 2) Write a short story that begins with the line 'speaking has no rubbing out'.
- 3) Joyous was told he was named in tribute to his father's philosophy. Write a blog post about the extent to which children are influenced by their parents' world views.
- 4) Ashleigh recalls a lesson on basic human rights: food, water and shelter. To this list she adds love. Write a blog post on what you consider to be the most important human right.
- 5) Look at the way the author uses dialogue to create realistic characters. Create a two-person conversation about a topic of your choosing.
- 6) Ashleigh describes the rituals she and her father had on their holiday and recalls how meaningful they were to her. Think about the rituals in your own life. Reflect in a blog post on what rituals mean to people and why they hold such importance.