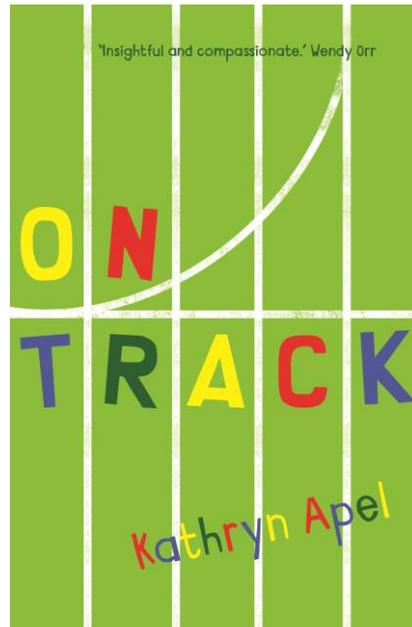


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# ON TRACK

## Kathryn Apel



### Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian  
in context with the Australian curriculum  
(English)

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**SYNOPSIS**

Even though brothers Toby and Shaun sometimes don't see eye-to-eye, they soon discover they have much more in common than they realise. Both have obstacles to overcome and both have much to learn about themselves in order to achieve their goals.

*On Track* is a verse novel for middle readers that explores the themes of resilience, courage and acceptance. It also shows the power of support, self-belief and determination.

**THEMES**

Differences:

- Toby is diagnosed with low muscle tone; he requires treatment from an occupational therapist.
- Once Toby understands his condition, he can begin to overcome some of its limitations.
- Those who are unaware of Toby's condition don't understand the obstacles he is facing.

Sporting Excellence:

- Setting goals, practising skills, and support from coaches helps people to achieve.
- Mental strategies help overcome sporting difficulties.

Courage and Resilience:

- It takes courage for Toby to overcome his difficulties and strive for his goals.
- Toby and Shaun show resilience in order to achieve their goals.
- Self-esteem improves with increasing confidence and support from others.

Relationships:

- Coaches share a special bond with their athletes.
- The relationship between Shaun and Toby develops into one of mutual respect and understanding.
- Successful relationships require empathy and support.

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## Jealousy:

- Initially, Toby and Shaun are jealous of one another; they don't fully understand what pressures the other faces until later into the text.

## Poetry:

- Figurative language and poetic devices are used throughout the text.

**WRITING STYLE**

*On Track* is a verse novel told in first person, present tense. It is a dual narrative; the poems are narrated by brothers Toby and Shaun, giving the reader insight into both boys' lives. The narrative is tangible, real and easily accessible. It is extremely powerful in conveying the emotions of Toby and Shaun as they overcome obstacles.

**STUDY NOTES**

- The first and second poems introduce readers to Toby and Shaun and their feelings of helplessness. How do these poems draw you immediately into the text? Have you ever felt like Toby or Shaun? Discuss.
- Discuss the formatting of the poems, particularly the choice of line breaks and position of words on the page. How do these choices add meaning to the poems?
- Why is Shaun jealous of Toby when he seems to struggle so much? How does the relationship between Shaun and Toby develop and change from the beginning to the end of the text?
- Discuss the relationship between Toby and his mother. How does this differ from Shaun's relationship with her?
- Explore the various poetic devices used throughout the text, discussing how they contribute to the narrative. Examples include:
  - Shape poetry, for instance –
    - Heart (p36)
    - Stairs (p96)
    - A figure running (p259)

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- Question mark (p282)
  - 'My legs drum a rhythm on the track ...' (p12)
  - 'I'm an elephant on stair work.' (p96)
  - 'We are an island in the fast-flowing river of life.' (p121)
  - '... the road is swallowed in the cloak of night.' (p165)
  - 'Ribbons of pain' (pp 241, 249)
  - 'Coach's watermelon grin splits *my* face ...' (p254)
- In the poem 'Snack on Track', Shaun says that sometimes he and Toby walk shoulder to shoulder, whilst at other times 'the road stretches between us' (p8). Find examples from the text to help illustrate what Shaun means.
- The boys' dad teases them a lot. Discuss their dad's character. Why is he like this? Is he really trying to be negative or is this his way of trying to be humorous?
- Discuss the ways in which both boys escape from their everyday lives, Toby by running and Shaun through reading. How do these activities help them to escape? What are they escaping from?
- After getting a D- on his Chinese assessment and finding running difficult, Toby writes that 'my best isn't good enough' (p17). Have you ever felt like Toby? Share your thoughts with a friend.
- Toby talks about dreading Sports Day because he comes last in everything. Shaun meanwhile loves Sports Day because he is a high achiever. Write a journal entry about your own Sports Day. Describe the atmosphere and your emotions on such days.
- What can you take from the poem on p36 that ends, 'The heart is one of the strongest muscles in the body and you're all heart!' How does this relate to Toby's character?
- Reread the first stanza of the poem 'No Bludge' starting on p52. What makes this description so effective?

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- In the poem 'What gives?' on p63, Shaun describes the emotional state his mum is in: 'I saw tears washing her eyes and heard the snuffle of a nose stuffed with sadness.' How would Shaun feel to see his mum like this, without knowing why she's sad? Why does it take so long for Shaun to discover what is going on with Toby? How would the text be different if he found this out much earlier? Discuss the importance of structure and tension in narratives.
- Shaun likes to challenge himself, both on the sporting field and in the classroom. One way in which he does this is by completing the visiting author's acrostic challenge – each line must begin and end with the same letter. Track the 'Tobybot' acrostic poems that Shaun writes. How does each poem reflect the storyline? Try writing your own series of acrostic poems about a sibling that reflects your relationship with them.
- Discuss the role that Coach Lawrie plays in Toby's life. Reflect on a person in your own life who has mentored and encouraged you.
- Annotate the poem entitled 'Muscle Memory' (p95), identifying the variety of poetic devices used such as imagery, alliteration, repetition, onomatopoeia and shape.
- The simplicity of Toby's poem 'Smile' on p107 shows the importance of having someone believe in you. Who makes you smile and believe in yourself? Do you make others smile and believe in themselves? Discuss.
- Poems such as 'Gazelle' on p108 show how different the boys' mum and dad are. How does this poem illustrate their differing personalities and parenting styles?
- Toby is anxious about attending the athletics camp. Why is he feeling like this? Write a reflection of a time you have felt anxious about a camp.
- How is city life different from the boys' country life? How do the poems show these differences? Find examples to support your views.

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- Discuss the way in which the poem 'Hurdles' (p134) reveals both literal and metaphoric hurdles for Toby.
- Examine the imagery used in 'Dragonfly' (p136) as Shaun describes Didi's high jumping technique.
- How does Toby's confidence improve throughout the text? What factors contribute to his growth?
- Shaun uses a visualisation strategy to help him reach his goals. Try this strategy for yourself.
- What does Coach Dave mean when he says, 'You never know what you can do until you're pushed to the limit' (p153)?
- Discuss the symbolism behind the boys getting their hair cut before Sports Day.
- How does hitting Tiggy with the discus change Shaun's approach to Sports Day?
- Why does Toby want to savour 'the pain that comes from winning' (p256)?
- Reread Shaun's poem entitled 'Success' (p294). How does he define success? How would you define success? Write a journal entry to explore this idea.
- How do Shaun's failures help him to succeed?
- Involve your PE teacher in this unit, using coaching strategies and self-esteem models to help students set and achieve goals. How can these strategies be used in areas outside of the sporting field to help with confidence and self-belief?
- Invite a poet in for an author visit with your class.

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**AUTHOR MOTIVATION**

I have fantastic memories of an athletics group we were involved with when my boys were younger. I have a huge appreciation for the teacher who gave so much of her time, energy and passion to work with kids and encourage them to do their best and *be* their best on the sporting field. Throughout the pages of *On Track*, I hear echoes of her words and philosophies, and I hope I've managed to capture the heart that she brought to the track-and-field kids she worked with and inspired.

One of the hardest things to accept in life is how to be comfortable in our own skin. So often we look at others and judge *ourselves* harshly. They seem to have it good, and we want to be more like them – not realising that on the inside, they're often as uncertain as we are. When we accept that our skin is the perfect fit for *us*, we can appreciate ourselves and others – and more fully appreciate and enjoy life.

Kids aren't all the same – and they shouldn't all be treated the same. They learn in different ways. They process things differently. Effort and ability can't be measured the same way for all kids. Perhaps the only thing that *is* the same is that all kids have hearts and hurts. I wrote *On Track* for kids like Toby and Shaun who just want others to understand their perspectives and accept them for who they are. Which means I wrote it for *all* kids.

At first, *On Track* was only about Toby's story. You can read more about Toby in a character study I wrote about him on my blog (<https://katswhiskers.wordpress.com/2015/02/10/introducing-a-character-toby>). But it was one of my wonderful writing critique buddies who helped me see that this wasn't just Toby's story, but Shaun's story too. And so it grew ...

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Kathryn Apel is a born-and-bred farm girl who's scared of cows. She lives with her husband and two sons, amongst the gum trees, cattle and kangaroos, on a Queensland grazing property. There are also guinea pigs – and a Jack Russell that dotes on all the cuteness. *On Track* is Kathryn's fourth book and second verse novel, following the release of *Bully on the Bus* in 2014 to much acclaim. Kathryn teaches part-time and conducts author talks at schools and festivals.

You can visit her online at [www.katswhiskers.wordpress.com](http://www.katswhiskers.wordpress.com)