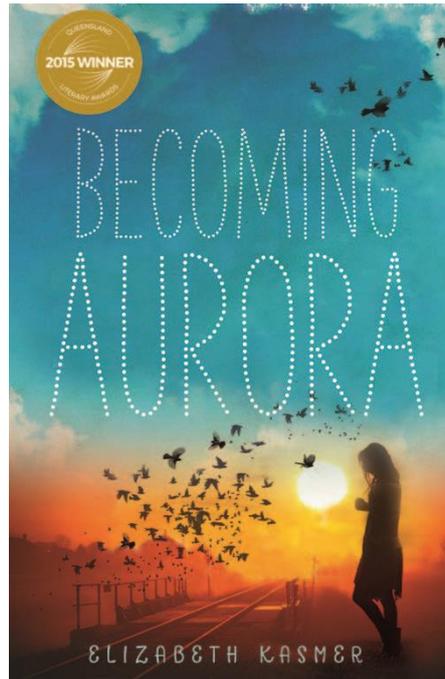


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BECOMING AURORA

Elizabeth Kasmer



Teachers' Notes

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

ISBN: 978 0 7022 5420 8 / AUS \$19.95

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SYNOPSIS

Following the death of her father, Rory finds herself in a gang that racially targets the migrant community in her hometown of Nambour.

Tonight we are wolves.

Our pack moves as one, past empty shop fronts and faded billboards.

Being the only perpetrator of the gang to be caught during an attack on a local Indian restaurant, Rory is sentenced to community service at St Mary's aged care facility, where she meets Jack.

Rory learns much from the recalcitrant Jack, who teaches her about life, death and resilience. In a journey of healing and self-discovery, she learns how to deal with her grief, let go of her guilt and finally become Aurora.

THEMES

Self-actualization and Identity:

- Rory discovers much about herself through her friendships with Jack and Essam

Interracial friendship:

- Through Jack's work with at-risk youth, Rory and Essam show the town that interracial friendships should be encouraged and accepted

Freedom:

- The migrant community value the freedom offered by living in Australia, even when victimised by locals

Grief:

- Rory struggles to deal with the death of her father, which impacts on her choices

Youth and Violence:

- Cam and the gang resort to violence as they fail to accept migrants and refugees into their community

WRITING STYLE

Becoming Aurora is told in first person, present tense. Set in the Queensland town of Nambour, it addresses the issue of racism as seen through the nationalistic acts of a local gang as it vilifies the migrants and refugees new to the community. As Rory struggles to process the loss of her father, she finds herself in a gang, further deteriorating her relationship with her mother. Elizabeth Kasmer's use of literary devices and description creates a vivid and relatable narrative. The symbolism of birds that both haunt and help Rory runs seamlessly throughout the text, and various threads of the narrative dovetail

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into this motif by its conclusion. *Becoming Aurora* would appeal to an adolescent audience.

STUDY NOTES

- How has the author directly drawn the reader into the text through the opening scene? Examine the use of figurative language, pace and description which makes the vandalism of the Curry House so vivid.
- Why does Rory grow ‘that much bigger’ when the members of the gang cheer and slap her on the back after she is reprimanded for vandalising the restaurant? What does this tell us about Rory’s character and the nature of gang membership?
- Discuss the relationship that Rory shares with Eddie. How are we able to see the real Rory through her interactions with her little brother?
- As you read *Becoming Aurora*, take note of the bird motif, in particular the willy-wagtails. How does this motif help to tie the threads of the narrative together?
- As part of her community service, Rory has to read to Mr Sanford – Jack. What were your first impressions of Jack? How did these change as you got to know him more? What role does Jack play in *Becoming Aurora*?
- Throughout the text, we are given glimpses of Rory’s dad through her narrative. Create a character profile of him that shows your understanding of the relationship he shared with those around him.
- Rory likens the folded origami birds that adorned her father’s coffin with her own tendency to fold things away neatly (p14). What does she mean by this?
- Examine the use of figurative language throughout the text. How do these contribute to the literary quality of the book? Examples include:
 - Tonight we are wolves p1
 - Our game is played by shadows p1
 - We dance like wild things at a celebration p2
 - He looks like an out-of-control spider p4
 - The air smells of decay, like the apple core I forgot about in the bottom of my bag p11
 - The heat hits me square in the face p13
 - Anger bubbles up from deep inside p26
 - He’s swallowed by the darkness p31
 - My heart knocking against the inside of my chest p38
 - The sun is swallowed by a wall of dark grey p39
 - Watching the sky spit out fat drops of rain p39
 - The force of the rain echoes like static from a TV as the storm rolls over us p39
 - A light rain filters through the sunlight and taps against the windowpane p40

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- The grey edge of the sky is only just lifting p55
 - The sand is like warm shoes p87
 - A wave rushes up and ... wraps itself around my ankles p87
 - Dust falls through the low beam of light stretched across the floor p90
 - Her face is a road map of worry p156
 - Jealousy plucks at my chest and my mouth tastes like metal p168
 - Jack waves them away as if he's swatting a demented fly p171
 - It feels like someone's tied a rubber band round my chest p173
 - The giant brown snake that is the Brisbane River rolls and slithers, its scales glistening in the sun p197
 - I recognise the first fingers of shock wrapping their tentacles around him p203
- Discuss Rory's changing attitudes towards the Southern Cross tattoo that she and the gang have on their bodies. Why does Rory begin to despise it?
 - How important is the setting to *Becoming Aurora*? How does the town of Nambour almost become like a character in its own way?
 - When Rory sleeps, the birds come swirling into her dreams. As you read *Becoming Aurora*, track the motif of the birds and how they contribute to Rory's healing.
 - Why do you think Rory's mum is so distant from her daughter? What can we as readers infer?
 - Re-read the description of the storm on p40. What language features makes this writing so descriptive and authentic? Try using similar techniques in your own writing.
 - Why does Jack think that the wildness in young boxers is a sign that they are 'trying to outrun their past' (p59)? How does boxing help them to process their anger?
 - Why does Rory remind Jack of a willy-wagtail? View footage of willy-wagtails on YouTube to gain more insight.
 - Write a reflection using the inscription from Jack's lighter as stimulus: *Everything happens for a reason.*
 - Discuss Jack's comment that we all make bad decisions, however that 'shouldn't define who we are' (p114).
 - How does the author interweave Rory's father's love for art with Rory finding her identity?
 - In what ways is *Becoming Aurora* a book about freedom?
 - Why is Rory surprised that Jack changed his last name? Why does she say that 'my name is part of my story. It's part of who I am' (p149)? How is your name part of your story?
 - Discuss Jack's advice that 'sometimes you need to know when to let things go and move on' (p151).

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- What does Essam mean when he says, ‘Jack is a great coach. I just wish he was a better friend’ (p172)?
- Why does Rory become jealous that her space with Jack has been invaded by the people who crowd into Jack’s room?
- On p186, Rory picks up a pencil and sketches Jack. Using the description of Jack from this page and from throughout the novel, draw your own sketch of Jack.
- How does Elizabeth Kasmer use the burial tree motif to help Rory come to terms with her father’s death?
- Why is Rory dismayed about the reaction of the other people on the train who do nothing to stop the incident with the African guard but whose mouths ‘hang open like the mouths of those zombies’ (p26)? Write a reflection that shares your reactions to the gang’s outlook on migrants, such as when they laugh at the footage of the guard, or their decision to attack the young boy. What comment is the author making about racist sentiment in the Australian community?
- Using the theme of racism evident in *Becoming Aurora*, write an editorial or letter to the editor that shares your feelings about racism towards migrants in Australia.
- Discuss the way in which the motif of the hunter and the prey is evident throughout *Becoming Aurora*.
- Write a chapter of *Becoming Aurora* from Cam’s point of view.
- In the role of Rory, write a letter to your dad telling him about Jack, Essam and your visit to the art gallery to see the painting of *Aurora*.
- Write a newspaper article about Seraphine and her *Freedom* painting.
- How did Rory finally become Aurora? What comment about the importance of identity is the author making in *Becoming Aurora*?

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

This story was inspired by a 2012 news report of a racist attack on an Indian Restaurant in West End, Brisbane. A gang of teenagers threw plates and chairs, and yelled at the owners and staff of the restaurant they should all ‘go back to India.’ Two of the teenagers were charged and ordered to appear in Brisbane Children’s Court and I found myself thinking ‘What if?’

As I was falling asleep one night, the image came to me of a teenager reading to an elderly man in a nursing home. Immediately I knew the teenager was there because they had been sentenced to community service after taking part in a racist attack on an Indian restaurant.

Then after strolling the corridors of the Queensland Art Gallery I stopped by the gallery shop to purchase a postcard of the painting *Aurora* (by Burne-Jones) for

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my niece, also named Aurora. On the train ride home, it was clear that the main character of this novel was going to be named Aurora and she had been named by her father (an artist) after this particular painting.

In 2014, I was awarded a Residential Fellowship at Varuna (the National Writers House) where I got to spend two weeks with four other established writers to write, read and think. Here I met fellow YA writer Demet Divaroren. Demet and I had many discussions about racism and Demet's experiences of being a Turkish born migrant and a Muslim living in modern day Australia. These things all helped with writing *Becoming Aurora*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Kasmer has been an exchange student, a donor attendant, a receptionist, a carpark attendant, security shredder and a primary school teacher. She has a BA in Humanities majoring in Philosophy, Literature and Studies in Western Traditions. She has always loved books, frequenting her local library as a child. She was enthralled by CS Lewis, embarrassed by Judy Blume, delighted in Roald Dahl, discovered the secret to 'Life, the Universe and Everything' and giggled along with Sue Townsend's dorky and adorable Adrian Mole aged 13 and $\frac{3}{4}$. She currently lives on the Sunshine Coast with her husband, three mini ninjas (cleverly disguised as boys), a dog and a snake. *Becoming Aurora* is her first novel. elizabethkasmer.com