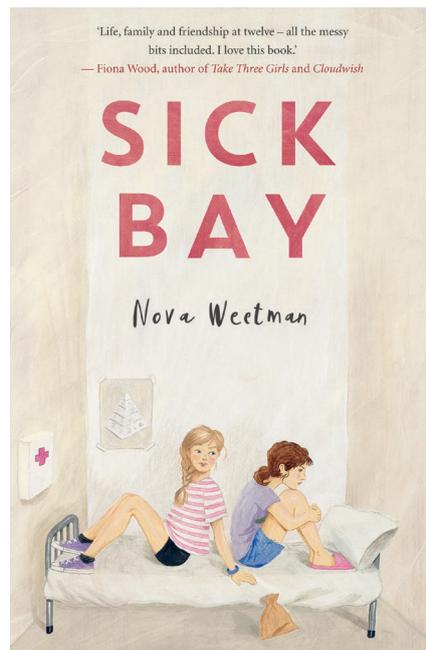


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SICK BAY

Nova Weetman



Teachers' Notes

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

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SYNOPSIS

When Meg's father dies, she starts wearing slippers to school and finds refuge in the Sick Bay. There, she meets Riley, a new girl who is already popular, but who is secretive about her type 1 diabetes. Although very different, these two girls eventually discover a friendship based on honesty and trust that helps them gain the courage to accept their situations and be themselves.

Sick Bay is a poignant, warm and tender story that gets to the very core of school-yard dynamics and the joy that comes with finding one's true *kindred spirit*.

THEMES

- Family
- Friendship
- Acceptance
- Identity
- Belonging
- Trust
- Grief
- Courage
- Diabetes

WRITING STYLE

Sick Bay is a dual narrative told through the first person perspectives of Meg and Riley. As such, readers are able to empathise with the girls' respective struggles and perspectives as they navigate their way through Year 6. Both Meg's and Riley's voices are honest and relatable, sharing insights into their friendship issues and situations at home. Nova Weetman's use of dialogue and description are exceptional, giving the text enormous audience appeal. *Anne of Green Gables* is cleverly interwoven into the narrative without overwhelming it, resulting in a literary text that is both endearing and compelling.

STUDY NOTES

- The first chapter introduces readers to Meg and her current best friend, The Bag. How does this evoke an instant sense of empathy with readers?
- Meg's best friend, Eleanora, 'ditched [her] and made friends with other girls' (p2). Has this ever happened to you? Why does reading about exclusion and friendship issues help us to navigate such experiences?

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- What do the opening paragraphs of *Sick Bay* reveal about Meg's character and her situation at home? Why is it important that readers feel a connection with a novel's protagonist/s?
- How is the setting of the Sick Bay a crucial element of the novel?
- What role does the office lady, Sarah, play in Meg's life?
- Meg wears slippers to school. Why has the author chosen to build this into the storyline? Why, when Peggy offers to buy her new shoes, does Meg decline? How does this help build tension?
- Meg and Riley both have very distinct 'voices'. Discuss the importance of 'voice' in narratives. How has the author achieved this through her language choices?
- Meg and Riley are asked to write speeches for the Year 6 Graduation dinner. Discuss the role of this pending event in the structure of *Sick Bay*.
- Create a character profile of Lina. How does the author use Lina to address friendship issues such as exclusion, peer pressure, power imbalance and trust? Why are characters such as Lina essential antagonists in contemporary fiction?
- Why do Meg and Riley have so much respect for Ms Barber? Which adult in your life do you hold such respect for? Why? Share in a reflection.
- Riley asserts that she has type 1 diabetes, commenting that 'people can be so judgemental' (p22) about type 2 diabetes. What does she mean?
- Describe the relationship between Riley and her mother. Why does Riley call her The Brain? How does this relationship grow and change throughout the course of the novel?
- Discuss the recurring theme that 'there's no such thing as normal' (p23). How does *Sick Bay* succeed in showing this?
- Why does Riley think of herself in two halves – the body bits that are tested and the body bits that aren't? Why is Riley so private about testing? Why doesn't she like people helping her with her testing?
- Discuss the role played by Dash in *Sick Bay*. Why are characters like this needed?
- Why does Dash describe Lina as being 'like an amoeba' (p29)? Why are people drawn to personalities like Lina?
- Peggy gives Meg a copy of *Anne of Green Gables*, which she reads over seventy times. Throughout the text, Meg uses references from *Anne of Green Gables*, liking it when people don't understand her references. As you read *Sick Bay*, take note of the quotes from the book that Meg uses. Consider viewing the movie version of *Anne of Green Gables* in order to compare Meg's character with Anne's, and to better understand Meg's references. How is *Sick Bay* similar to *Anne of Green Gables*?

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- Why does Riley immediately assume that she won't be allowed to go to Lina's party? What is Riley worried might happen at the party? Are those fears justified? Discuss.
- How does Meg feel when Riley calls her Slipper Girl? Why is it upsetting to Meg that Lina and the other girls call her this too?
- Tessa and Elle '[slipped] into silence' (p36) when Lina speaks. Discuss the importance of balance and feeling equal within tight friendship groups.
- When Meg's washing machine and dryer break down, she says 'A bit like Mum really' (p39). Explain what Meg means by this.
- Meg has a favourite shirt with the character Gummy on it. Later in the text, Riley wears an old Granger shirt of Jenna's which prompts Riley to want to see Meg. How does this show that the girls may well be 'kindred spirits' after all?
- What is the significance of the name of Peggy's laundromat, 'The Lost Sock'? How important is Peggy to Meg and her mother?
- When Riley's endocrinologist, Eda, tells Riley 'to take ownership over' (p63) her body, Riley replies, 'I want to... *But Mum won't let me*' (p63). Write a reflection of a time you have felt like Riley.
- When Lina comes into Sick Bay with a bloody nose, she calls Meg Slipper Girl, but Riley doesn't say much at the time. How does this make Meg feel? Why doesn't Riley defend Meg?
- On p83, Riley feels sad when having the line changed. Why does she feel like this at this particular part of the story?
- Describe the relationship between Riley and her sister, Jenna. How does this compare to the relationship you have with your sibling/s? Discuss.
- When Riley's parents allow her to go to Lina's party, she says 'I have to take my small victories where I can' (p92). Discuss the importance of compromise.
- Discuss the scene on p92 in which Riley criticises her mother for seeing Riley's life as a series of Venn diagrams. What does Riley mean when she says diabetes is 'not who I am' (p92/93)?
- In pairs, recreate the scene from pages 94-107 in which Meg and Riley run into each other at the supermarket. Why does Meg say that Riley is 'obviously not a kindred spirit' (p96)?
- Explain why Riley and Meg envy one another.
- What prompts Meg to start seeing Riley in a different light from Lina and Tessa?
- Why does Meg like her overgrown garden? How important is the outdoors to her? Why?

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- Meg tries to find memories of her dad wherever she can – in a postcard, in the pruned lemon tree, in the old record player. Where would you find memories of your loved ones?
- How does the light fuse shorting out symbolise the state that Meg's mother is in?
- How did you feel upon discovering that Meg's mum also uses a paper bag to help with panic attacks. Why does Meg pretend to have panic attacks of her own?
- On p122, Meg shares more with Riley than she has shared with anyone. How does this help Meg? How does this help their friendship to grow?
- Why, when Meg realises that Riley is waiting for her, does she say 'there's a surge in my chest ... and, without my permission, my mouth curls into a giant smile' (p127)? Why does Meg feel that getting nicknamed 'Sick Bay Girl' by Riley is a "code for friendship" (p129)?
- Before finishing the novel, write a draft of Meg's speech. What do you think she really wants to say? What would you say if you had the chance to speak at your graduation?
- How do Meg and Riley help one another overcome their obstacles and look to the future?
- In the role of Riley, write a recount of Lina's party. Why does it upset you that the girls don't come out of the pool with you?
- Why does Meg like that her favourite page of *Anne of Green Gables* 'needs repair' (p160)?
- At what point did you realise that Eleanora and Elle were the same person? How has the author used Elle to demonstrate the power of people like Lina?
- How does Nova Weetman use names in *Sick Bay* to explore the themes of identity, acceptance and belonging?
- When Meg cries at Peggy's laundromat, she says that 'This is Riley's fault. She started scratching at the edges and unpicked my scabs and now I'm oozing in public' (p189). What does Meg mean by this? Is it really Riley's fault? Discuss.
- What is the significance of Meg's mum weeding the garden? Why does Meg say 'I miss Dad...But I miss Mum more' (p195)?
- What makes Riley finally realise that her friends don't really care about her as true friends should? What does she learn about friendship during the course of the novel?
- What catalyses Tina's decision to begin relinquishing responsibility to Riley? How does this help the relationship between Riley and her mum to be rebuilt?
- Why is Meg so reluctant to share her emotions? Why, when she finally succumbs, does she describe her feelings as 'an avalanche, no a tidal wave, no a volcano' (p235)? How does her sobbing help her to begin the

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process of healing? What does this tell us about the importance of sharing and processing our feelings?

- Discuss the symbolism of the ‘The Bag’ being put into the drawer of Dad’s side table.
- Why does Dash tell Riley that Meg’s quotes are from *Anne of Green Gables*?
- Why does Riley call Meg ‘Meg with a “g”’ (p251)? How would you describe ‘Meg with a “g”’? How is she different from ‘Slipper Girl’?
- Why does Meg choose to wear her slippers to graduation?
- How does the Sick Bay help Riley learn who she really is?
- Re-read Meg’s speech on p262-264. What does this reveal about the essence of true friendship?
- What is the significance of Meg fixing the Healthy Eating Pyramid poster in the Sick Bay before leaving primary school forever?
- Write a chapter of *Sick Bay* from Dash’s perspective.
- Create a graphic organiser that shows the different relationships that Riley shares with each of her parents. Give examples from the text to help support your ideas.
- Map the main plot points of *Sick Bay* on a story graph, showing how the author creates tension throughout the text.
- With older students, compare *Sick Bay* with the movie *Mean Girls*.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Every school has a sick bay. It’s a place most kids visit at least once in their schooling life, and a place that some kids spend a lot of time in. I’m interested in the idea of unlikely friendships, especially those that happen in private between children who wouldn’t normally interact. I had the idea of setting a book in Sick Bay many years ago, but it wasn’t until I spent time with my daughter’s best friend, who is type 1 diabetic, that the characters started to form. My daughter’s friend has always been very frank with me about her diabetes, and we talked at length about the lack of books that represented this part of her life. Once I’d made the decision to make Riley diabetic, she developed quickly as a character, based largely on anecdotes and stories that my daughter’s friend told me. Meg is the perfect opposition to Riley because she is a character who doesn’t have to be in Sick Bay but chooses to be. Meg hides out in Sick Bay, using it as a place to retreat from her peers. This book is about friendship and the point in a young person’s life when they have to make a decision about who they really are.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nova Weetman lives in Melbourne with her partner and two children. She has written for film and TV, including the children’s series *Backyard Science*, *H2O* and *Pixel Pinkie*. Nova has written three middle-grade books in the Choose

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Your Own Ever After series, and three young adult novels, including *Everything is Changed*, a 2017 CBCA Notable Book. Her middle-grade novel *The Secrets We Keep* was shortlisted for the Readings Children's Book Prize, the Speech Pathology of Australia Book of the Year Awards and the ABIA Awards, and was a 2017 CBCA Notable Book, winner of the KROC Award for Best Fiction for Years 7–9 and Honour Book in the 2018 KOALA Awards. Her second book in this series, *The Secrets We Share* was a 2018 CBCA Notable Book.

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