

TEACHER NOTES

***The Toilet Kid* by Pat Flynn**
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SYNOPSIS

A companion novel to Pat Flynn's award-winning book *The Tuckshop Kid*, *The Toilet Kid* continues to examine the link between self-perception, body-image and eating patterns. The story is told by Matthew, whose life has improved since *The Tuckshop Kid*. He is now healthier and feels better about himself and his relationships with others. But when his friend, Kayla, develops an eating disorder, it tests this important bond as well as Matthew's fragile relationship with food.

Although tackling serious issues, *The Toilet Kid* uses humour and the voice of a likable young man to tell this story of friendship, food addiction and finding oneself.

THEMES

Eating disorders: There are a range of healthy and unhealthy eating patterns displayed in the book. Matthew is recovering from being a chronic overeater (p.12), and in general now displays a healthy outlook when it comes to food. But at times, such as when he is feeling bad about himself or under stress, he finds it hard not to eat excessively (p.25).

Although not stated as such, Kayla suffers from anorexia nervosa which is triggered by her father's almost fatal heart attack (p.27). She goes from loving food to being controlled by it. Most of the time she eats very little, but on occasion she consumes large quantities (p.47) and purges. Some of the warning signs include (p.37) losing weight quickly, wearing baggy clothes and going to the toilet often.

Relationships: Kayla's relationship with her parents is strained. Her mum and dad are fighting with each other about Mr Berry's unhealthy weight, and Mrs Berry is a perfectionist who demands the best from her daughter (p.41). Without overtly asking for his help, Kayla tries to reach out to Matthew but in her eyes he betrays her by looking in her diary (p.75). She becomes more insular but eventually reconnects with Matthew again (p.107).

Matthew is hurt when Kayla rejects him. One thing that helps him get through this hard time is a close bond with his mum and his renewed friendship with Withers.

Self-Perception: Kayla feels like she has to be perfect (p.9). She hides her problems from those close to her (p.97), which makes her feel even worse. She believes she is fat, even though she's underweight (p.84).

Even though Matthew has lost weight and is healthier than he used to be, he still feels uncomfortable about his size. He continually pokes fun at himself and he is very hurt when he comes across a page in Kayla's diary that seems to call him fat (p.71, p.103).

Mental Illness: Kayla admits to Matthew that an ‘inner voice’ has been controlling her actions (p.97). ‘Does that make me a fruitcake?’ she asks. Matthew acknowledges his own battle with his thoughts on page 102.

WRITING STYLE

The style of writing in *The Toilet Kid* is realistic fiction with some use of comedy. It is a first-person story told by 13-year-old Matthew. Humorous chapter headings use wordplay to introduce the content of that chapter.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

This is what Pat Flynn says about his motivation for writing *The Toilet Kid*:

I'm interested in the things that drive and motivate us to act the way we do. Sometimes these drives are healthy, sometimes not. The Tuckshop Kid is about a boy who struggles to control the amount of food he eats, and I decided to explore the flip side of this – a girl who uses a lack of food to gain some control over her life. It was a topic I took on somewhat reluctantly but the story kept nagging at my brain, asking to be written. Although I researched carefully, because it is a book for 10–14 year-olds I don't go into too much detail about eating disorders. The story is told through Matthew and what he experiences of his friend's struggle.

The Toilet Kid is about how we face problems. When we keep them to ourselves and let them get the better of us our problems multiply. But when we reach out to others, get the right advice and fight as hard as we can, most of the time we can find our way through a dark but short tunnel and out into the light.

AUTHOR / ILLUSTRATOR BACKGROUND

Pat Flynn grew up running around an old dairy farm in Queensland before moving to the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra on a tennis scholarship. After playing and coaching on the professional circuit he became a teacher, where his observations of young people – their interests and stories – led to him writing a series about a teenage skateboarder called Alex Jackson.

Pat now writes full-time and lives on the Sunshine Coast. *To the Light* was shortlisted for the 2006 CBCA Book Awards, and *The Tuckshop Kid* received an Honour Book prize in the 2007 Awards, as well as being shortlisted for the QLD Premier's Award. Flynn's YA novel *The Line Formation* was released in America in 2008 (titled *Out of his League*), making the PSLA top forty list of 2009.

Pat likes to start the day with a surf and end it walking along the beach with his wife and son. He also enjoys the occasional game of tennis. His latest books include *The Adventures of Danny 3: Snowidea* and *The Adventures of Danny 3: Treeified*.

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Tom Jellett was born in Manly, New South Wales, and lived in Brisbane before his family moved to Adelaide. After graduating from the University of South Australia in 1995 with a Bachelor of Design (Illustration) he worked as a freelance illustrator. He also illustrated *The Tuckshop Kid*.

STUDY NOTES

- Use magazine/television images to provoke a discussion on what is portrayed as 'normal' by the media when it comes to body type. Do these images provoke unhealthy thoughts amongst some young people when it comes to food and body image? What are some solutions?
- As a class, discuss what constitutes a healthy approach to eating, including a balanced diet (e.g. food group pyramid). Ask students to keep a diary of what they eat in a week. Graph the class's food intake and discuss the findings.
- Pair students and have them trace around each other's bodies on butcher's paper. Based on the discussions about food and body image, have them fill in the centre of their body outline with pictures and words about healthy food and body image.
- Design, grow and care for a class fruit and vegetable garden. Develop a healthy-eating promotion campaign and have the students either sell the produce at a school market, to the tuckshop or to other classes. Visit Stephanie Alexander's Kitchen Garden (www.kitchenfoundation.org.au) for more ideas.
- Plan a 'healthy eating' class lunch. Design a menu, write a shopping list, invite a friend or family member, prepare the meal and enjoy.
- Kayla feels betrayed by Matthew when he looks in her diary without her permission (p.75). Students can recall a time they felt betrayed by a family member or friend. They could produce a recount, a mind-map or a short roleplay about this event.
- Students could list as many mental illnesses as they know. Discuss the signs shown by Kayla. What did Matthew try to do to help a friend? Are there any other ways in which he could have helped his friend? Working in small groups, give students a different problem/scenario for them to discuss. Ask each group to identify the signs and the different ways they might approach helping the friend/family member. Round robin these ideas so that each group has a chance to contribute. Discuss as a class at the end.
- Ask students to think about what it might feel like when your thoughts are telling you to do unhealthy thing? Ask students to write a recipe poem like Matthew and Kayla do in the book (p. 57, 59-60).
- Use wordplay to add to the chapter headings in *The Toilet Kid*. Students can also come up with their own list, such as: *Subjects I Hate at School*.