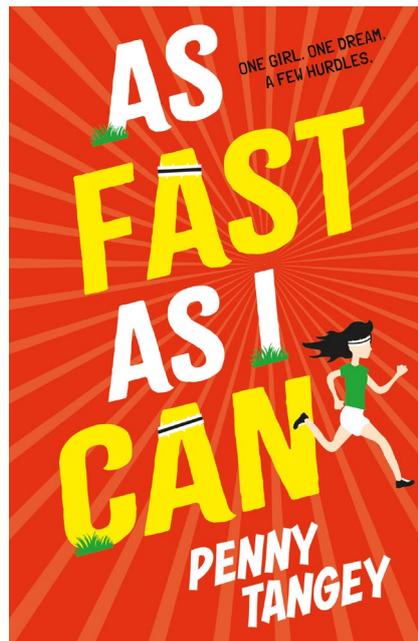


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AS FAST AS I CAN

Penny Tangey



Teachers' Notes

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

ISBN: 978 0 7022 6281 4/ AUS \$16.99

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SYNOPSIS

Best friends Vivian and Olivia dream of becoming Olympic medallists, but while Olivia is a natural athlete, Vivian struggles to find a sport she is good at. Undeterred and inspired by the notion that with hard work she can achieve anything, Viv finally discovers her talent for cross country running. She is confronted, however, with a challenge beyond her control when a family illness is uncovered, jeopardising her goals and her happiness.

Told with honesty, candour and subtle humour, *As Fast As I Can* is a relatable novel that shares the importance of resilience, friendship and acceptance.

THEMES

- Resilience
- Perseverance
- Friendship
- Olympic Games
- Sport
- Acceptance
- Values

WRITING STYLE

As Fast As I Can is told in first person, present tense. Vivian's distinct voice is very honest and quite naïve, lending the text a perfectly nuanced balance of humour and reality. Told in two parts, the narrative is well paced and accessible to a range of readers, making it an ideal class text for shared reading and analysis. Penny Tangey's use of dialogue, figurative language and themes gives the text a literary quality that is both relatable and tangible for middle readers.

STUDY NOTES

- Discuss the cover of the book. The title, image and blurb all work to draw the reader directly into the narrative. Make predictions about the text based on the cover.
- What do the opening paragraphs of *As Fast As I Can* reveal about Viv's character? Discuss how the author manages to pull the reader into the text.
- It is important that readers feel a connection with the protagonist and that they genuinely care what happens to them. How has the author achieved this? Discuss your perceptions of Viv's character with a friend. How

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would you describe her? Use examples from the text to support your thinking.

- Viv thinks that her family doesn't believe in her. Have you ever felt like this? Share with a friend.
- Viv believes 'you can achieve anything you want if you work hard enough' (p. 5). In what ways does she prove this to be true? How do the obstacles she encounters challenge this mantra? How does she manage such challenges?
- How does Viv's father view sport? Why does he want Noah to play football? What advice does he give Viv about sport, especially team sports?
- Why, when she realises that her mum doesn't believe in her Olympic dream, does Viv cry herself to sleep?
- Why does Viv give up soccer after only one game? Why does she think she is no good at running because she comes second to Olivia? What advice would you give Viv about enjoying sport?
- In what ways is *As Fast As I Can* about values such as 'sportsmanship' and team work? What was your reaction when Viv says she doesn't 'have time for values' (p. 19)?
- Write a recount of a sports day you have participated in at your school. Describe the atmosphere, activities and the way you felt when participating.
- Why does Liza win the 'Best Sportsperson' award? Why does Olivia find this difficult to accept? What does this tell us about winning versus values?
- What are the values of Wallaby Flat Primary School? How do they compare with your school's values?
- Why does Noah say, 'You don't win silver, you lose gold' (p. 50)? How would you respond to this if you were Viv?
- What assumptions are made about characters such as Liza and Olivia in *As Fast As I Can*? Why is making assumptions dangerous?
- Viv's mother comments that 'feelings don't always make a lot of sense' (p. 56). How does Olivia's reaction to Liza joining their group show this?
- Why does Olivia say that 'Team Olivian' is 'getting a bit old now' (p. 75)? Does Viv agree? Discuss.
- How does Susie Maroney inspire Viv? Discuss the impact that positive and negative thoughts can have on success.
- Like Viv's Year 5 class, research the Olympic Games. Create a timeline for the classroom of the Games' history, including important political and social impacts such as the salute given at the 1968 Mexico Olympics (p. 93).
- Why doesn't Olivia want to be an Olympian anymore? Do you respect her decision? Why?

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- Discuss/view Olympic Games footage to generate discussion about the role of the Olympics in modern society.
- Why does the author give Viv long QT syndrome? Discuss the need for tension and complications in successful narratives.
- How do characters such as Olivia and Noah grow and change throughout the text? Show your thinking visually.
- In the role of Viv, write a journal entry upon discovering that you can no longer compete at the state championships. How have you dealt with disappointments in your own life?
- In what ways is *As Fast As I Can* about acceptance and courage?
- How is Viv's mental health affected by her diagnosis? Why are her parents so concerned for her wellbeing? What advice would you give Viv in this situation?
- Discuss the marathon metaphor used throughout *As Fast As I Can*.
- Why, upon receiving her regional winner's trophy, does Viv feel 'sadder and better at the same time' (p. 230)?
- How important will Team Olizian be in helping Viv face her challenges? How have your friendships helped you through tough times? Write a reflection to share your thoughts.
- *When I Grow Up* from *Matilda* is played at Wallaby Flat Primary School. View a performance of this song on YouTube or analyse the lyrics. Why has this song been used in *As Fast As I Can*? How does it reflect Viv's journey?
- How important is it to strive for personal bests? What goals and strategies do you have that will help you to achieve your personal bests, both on and off the sports field? How will you measure such achievements?
- How does Viv show persistence and resilience throughout the text? Why has the author contrasted these traits with those of Noah? Why is it important to show both perspectives?
- How does the Olympic creed included at the start of the book reflect the themes and plot of *As Fast As I Can*?
- Describe Olivia's character, using examples from the text to support your ideas.
- How has the author used Olivia to explore the perils of being overly competitive?
- In what ways is Viv a strong character? Create a mind map to share your ideas.
- What clues do we get that Viv's mum is sick? Which of these clues are explicit? Which are implicit? Why is it important that readers have the space and opportunity to infer?

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- Describe the relationship that Viv has with her dad. How does he help her?
- Use the topics on p. 81 to hold your own class debates about the Olympic Games. Use the structure and points outlined on pages 82, 109, 118 and 169–176 to help with your preparation. What persuasive techniques do you recognise in Team USA’s speeches?
- Why, in debating, is it important to make a good argument, even if you don’t agree with the topic? How is this point missed on Viv?
- Discuss the girls’ ‘I Run Like a Girl’ badges. What point are they wanting to make?
- Why does the novel have the title *As Fast As I Can*? Discuss considering the text’s themes.
- Examine the use of figurative language throughout the text, discussing the contribution they make to the narrative. Examples include:
 - My hair feels wet, almost like I’ve had a shower (p. 6-7)
 - You look like a tomato in a blonde wig (p. 7)
 - In Australia, Olympic medallists are heroes because they’re so rare, like hen’s teeth (p. 13)
 - She stops when she gets to the bar like a spooked horse in an equestrian event (p. 36)
 - I feel like heavy weights are attached to my thighs, dragging me down; my legs are aching and my chest is bursting (p. 45-46)
- In context with reaching goals, discuss Olivia’s comment that ‘the journey of 1000 miles starts with a single step’ (p. 12). How can you use this to help reach your own goals?
- Find out more about Chloe Esposito’s gold medal journey at the 2016 Rio Olympics. Why is Viv so inspired by Chloe’s story? Who is your inspiration? Share in a reflection.
- Incorporate probability activities into the shared reading of *As Fast As I Can*.
- In small groups, choose a scene from *As Fast As I Can* to perform to your class.
- In the role of Viv, write a letter to Daniel about his put-downs and teasing. Why has a character such as Daniel been included in the text?
- Viv reads *Athlete’s World* to learn more about nutrition and exercise. In pairs, choose an aspect of health and fitness to research. Write your own simple article to contribute to a class edition of *Athlete’s World*.
- Why do you think the novel is told in two parts? How is Part One different from Part Two? Write a chapter suitable for Part 3 of *As Fast As I Can*.
- In the role of Viv, write a recount of participating in the opening ceremony of the 2032 Olympic Games. View footage of an athletes’ parade on YouTube to help brainstorm ideas for this piece.

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- Discuss whether you think the Olympics ‘represent values like equality, living a good life...doing your best...[and] improving humanity’ (p. 80). Give evidence to support your ideas.
- Compare *As Fast As I Can* with the verse novel *On Track* by Kathryn Apel.
- Use *As Fast As I Can* as a springboard into the Personal, Social and Community Health strand of the Australian Curriculum: Health and Physical Education.
- Coordinate a visit from the Life Education van. More information and resources can be found at <https://www.lifeeducation.org.au/our-program/primary>

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Inspired by the Barcelona Olympics, I wrote in my Grade 5 diary, ‘When I grow up, I am going to the Olympics, not as a spectator, but as a competitor.’ At that point I hadn’t decided on a sport, but I was confident I would soon discover my talent. The truth was disappointing and I didn’t go on to be an elite athlete, but participating in sport has been a fun and valuable part of my life. In *As fast As I Can* I wanted to write about girls enthusiastically playing sport and having big plans for themselves just like I did.

The idea for the medical aspect of the book came from members of my extended family who were diagnosed with long QT syndrome and had to make difficult life changes. As it’s a genetic condition, I spent some months contemplating how my life would change if I was also diagnosed. Fortunately, I’ve been excluded from having inherited long QT, but I was very struck by the grief and fear that occurs with a diagnosis like this. I wanted to write about how families experience this and a path they might begin to take through it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Penny Tangey publishes humorous books for young people. Her latest, *Stay Well Soon*, was shortlisted for the New South Wales and Western Australian Premier’s Literary Awards and the Readings Children’s Book Prize. Penny studied arts/science at Melbourne University, majoring in chemistry and Indonesian. While at university, Penny performed stand-up comedy, including in the Melbourne International Comedy Festival. Penny has worked as a researcher for television quiz shows *Hard Quiz* and *The Chase*, but she is still terrible at trivia. She is studying information management to become a librarian.