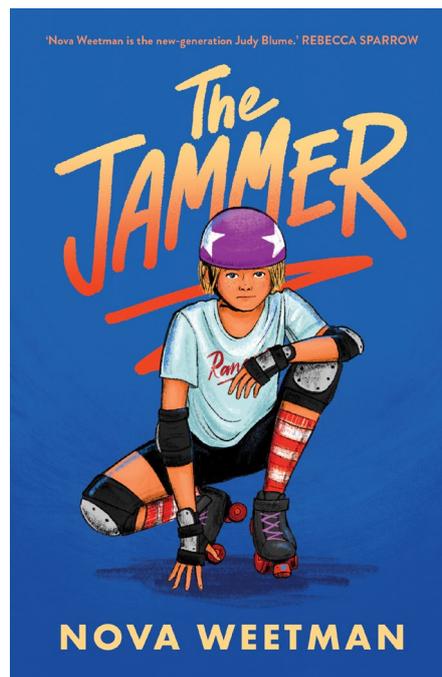


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THE JAMMER

Nova Weetman



Teachers' Notes

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SYNOPSIS

Fred loves to skate. More specifically, she loves being a jammer in the tough sport of roller derby. Her whole world is brought to a sudden halt, however, when her mum, Sarah, dies. Now, the thought of skating just hurts, and Fred is through with everybody's sympathy and empty words of comfort.

Trying to navigate unimaginable pain, Fred and her dad embark on a road trip to reconnect with Sarah's *special place*. But Fred doesn't know what to do with the anger that keeps fizzing inside her and is reluctant to engage with strangers whose stories of her mum only make her feel worse.

The Jammer is a coming-of-age story about aching grief, letting go and keeping on living.

THEMES

- Relationships
- Grief
- Belonging
- Friendship
- Growing Up
- Roller Derby

WRITING STYLE

The Jammer is told in first person, present tense. It begins with an intense flashback of a roller derby bout. Readers soon discover that this was *before* Sarah died. Now, Fred and her father are on a road trip to return Sarah's ashes to Melbourne. Fred is angry and tired of people offering sympathies and asking if she is okay. To make matters worse, Fred's twelve-year-old body is changing, making her feel isolated and confronted by the prospect of growing up without her mother. Fred's hard shell and tender insides are cleverly symbolised through the toughness of derby juxtaposed with the inclusive, close-knit derby community. As such, derby provides an evocative backdrop for Fred's grief and coming of age. Her voice catches readers off-guard with its honesty and rawness; it is impossible not to ache as she does. The quiet relationship that develops between Sarah's stepbrother, Graham, and Fred is one that is beautifully shaped. They both know what it is to lose their mothers at a young

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age and develop a gentle understanding of one another. Nova Weetman's use of dialogue, description and figurative language gives the text a literary quality that is both raw and compelling.

STUDY NOTES

- The prologue of *The Jammer* has a sense of urgency about it. Discuss the language features used to create such intensity in this scene. Why might it be entitled *Before*? Make predictions about what might happen *after*. What do the opening paragraphs of *The Jammer* reveal about Fred's character? Discuss how Nova Weetman directly draws readers into the text using this vivid description of the bout. Why is the inclusion of Fred's feelings, both physical and emotional, important to include?
- What clues do we get in Chapter 1 about Fred's mum? How do these clues allow readers to infer? Why is this important?
- What can we tell about Fred and her family from the first chapter? Why does Fred refuse to wear a dress to the funeral? What does she wear instead? Why has the author included this detail in the narrative?
- What does Fred mean when she describes derby as follows: 'Everything goes, just like with derby. There's no one body type. There's no one size' (p. 7)? As you continue reading *The Jammer*, collect evidence of how derby is depicted, and why it plays such a significant role in Fred's grieving process.
- What role does Jazzie play in *The Jammer*? How would the story be different without her?
- Derby players have special derby names, such as Fred or Dead, Scarer, Maxxed Out and Skate Winslet. How are these names formed? What would your derby name be? Create names for your classmates.
- Throughout the text, Fred complains that her clothes are 'tugging...reminding me she's gone' (p. 12). How are her too-small clothes a reminder of her mother's passing?
- Why does Fred stop skating and playing derby? What is it that eventually brings her back to skating? How does returning to derby help her?
- Why, now that her mum has died, does Fred think derby is 'just a bunch of people on wheels' (p. 13)? Do you agree with her? Discuss.
- Why does Fred throw all her skating gear into the Brisbane River? Why does she choose not to put them in a charity bin? In the role of Fred, write a journal entry about this day (see p. 17).
- Fred has a box of special things. As you read, take note of what is in her box. Why does she collect the things she does? Re-create this box, writing notes on each item to explain its significance to Fred. What items would you include in your box of special things? Share with a friend.

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- Why does Fred prefer the 'in-between' times when on the road trip to Melbourne? Why does she feel odd about sitting in the front seat?
- Fred's mum described her dad as a 'sentimentalist' (p. 21). What evidence is there of this character trait throughout the text?
- Why is Fred reluctant to stay at the Big Banana (see p. 21)? Would you want to visit such places if you were in the same situation, or avoid them? Share with a friend.
- What is particularly moving about Fred's observation that 'nobody travels three weeks before Christmas', even though that is what she and her dad are doing (see p. 27)?
- Why does Fred want to take the fossil from the beach and place it in her box of special things?
- What impact has constantly moving towns had on Fred? Why does this make her friendship with Jazzie even more important?
- Discuss the role of Uncle Graham in *The Jammer*. How would you describe their relationship? How do he and Fred help one another?
- Why does Fred's dad think that by meeting people who knew her mum, Fred will start to heal? Do you agree with him? Share in a reflection.
- Why does Fred get frustrated when her dad keeps asking her if she's okay? Have you ever been in a similar situation? Did this annoy you too? Share with a friend.
- What does Brisbane represent to Fred? Why does she now feel she doesn't belong anywhere?
- Fred says that 'too many worries are drowning out my tiredness' (p. 35). Do you ever feel like this? What do you do to help alleviate these worries? What advice would you give Fred to help her sleep?
- Why is it that Fred hasn't cried about her mother's death? Why does she 'let the sky do my crying' for her (p. 40)?
- How do the skills of a jammer help Fred to navigate this difficult time in her life (see p. 37)?
- Examine the contribution of figurative language throughout the text. Examples include:
 - The whistle blow stabs the air (p. 2)
 - He's immediately swallowed up by arms and hugs (p. 6)
 - We all flip up on our toes exactly where we are, like we're ballet dancers en pointe (p. 11)
 - I'm outside in the soupy air (p. 13)
 - I hang back, letting the dogs be a fence between us (p. 32)
 - I hear the thickness of sleep leave him (p. 37)
 - Those other parents made me want to slam through them all, scattering them like fresh-meat skaters (p. 39)
 - The sun is bleeding in through the skylight (p. 41)
 - The house is calm, like it's taking a rest (p. 57)

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- She delivers a smile to me, like it's a present (p. 60)
- She leans over, like I'm an injured dog (p. 61)
- He deflates like I've taken all his air (p. 74)
- My muscles are coiled whip-tight (p. 88)
- I'm like a bottle of drink that someone has shaken up but not opened (pp. 111–2)
- There's a flash of rage through my body (p. 123)
- My head flicks sharply to the left like I'm in a horror movie (p. 132)
- He clung to the carpet-covered wall like he was on an ocean liner and worried about falling overboard (pp. 133–4)
- I'm starting to deflate, like a day-old balloon (p. 139)
- They are sitting in my lap like a poison apple in *Snow White* (p. 169)
- It feels like I've caused a massive crash on the derby track because of an illegal bump (p. 171)
- The first time Fred accidentally touches the urn with her mother's ashes in them, why does she 'pull away like my hands have been burned' (p. 41)? How does this change later in the text?
- In the role of Sarah, write a letter to Fred about how to process her grief and move forward. Use evidence from the text to support your ideas.
- What does Fred learn about her mother from the people in Melbourne? Why does finding out small details about her youth help Fred?
- What is the significance of Graham having photos of his pets on his mugs? Why is Fred so careful to vary her choice of mugs when they have cups of tea together?
- Using details from the text, re-create one of the maps that Graham makes for Fred. What does it reveal about Graham's character that he pays so much attention to detail, and that he wants to share little details with Fred? Why does Fred place these maps into her box of special things?
- In the role of Fred, create a monologue about meeting Sammy and Anonymouse. How does it feel that 'the old me is lying on the bottom of the Brisbane River' (p. 51)? Share how conflicted she feels about skating.
- How is the old Fred different from the new Fred? How does the new Fred find some of her old self eventually?
- Fred often refers to a 'fizzing pressure building up' (see p. 56). What does she mean by this? What causes it? How is this pressure eventually relieved?
- Why did Nova Weetman decide Graham should have a job at the pet shelter? Why does Graham relate so well to these animals? Why does Fred's dad say that Graham has 'pets for children' (p. 57)? How do

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Graham's pets such as Tom and Mary help bring the themes of *The Jammer* together?

- Why does Fred get upset when others talk about her mum? Why does she think 'Mum isn't theirs to talk about' (p. 62)?
- Discuss Fred's feeling that 'it doesn't seem right. My first Christmas without Mum in a place where I know nobody but where people think they know me' (pp. 67–8). Why do people think they know Fred?
- In the role of Fred, write a journal entry about everything hurting 'like I've taken a bad fall on wheels' (p. 68).
- Why does Graham buy Fred a flannelette shirt? What does this mean to Fred?
- Why does Fred worry that her memories of Brisbane are fading (p. 69)?
- Why can't Fred eat the crumpets that Graham bought for her?
- Reread the last paragraph on p. 77 in which Fred wants to shoulder her dad out of the way to avoid the hug that's coming. How has Nova Weetman used a derby analogy to share Fred's feelings in this scene?
- Why, once Fred realises what details are on Graham's map, does it feel 'bulky in my pocket in a way it didn't before' (p. 81)?
- What do you learn about derby as a sport by reading *The Jammer*? Discuss the contrast between the roughness of the sport with the inclusivity of the sport's community. How is this sport a perfect metaphor for Fred's life?
- When Tom gets sick and Fred moves him inside on her mother's skates, what does Fred really mean when she says, 'as long as we make it out of this in-between place we are currently stuck in' (p. 104)?
- Why does Fred seem angry with her dad? Why isn't she ready to share her box of special things with him?
- Why does Fred have reservations about returning to Brisbane? What is she dreading?
- Why does Graham think that he and Tom may have 'saved each other' (p. 109)?
- On p. 117, Fred refers to her box of special things as 'a little box of sadness'. How does this change by the novel's end?
- How significant is the letter from Sarah to Fred (see p. 118)? How does the notion of a *special place* help give the text cohesion? What is your special place? Why is it special? Share in a reflection.
- Why is Fred so reluctant to talk about derby with Maxxed Out? Why does she leave Max's house in a rush? How does Fred feel to be spending Christmas at Max's?
- How is Fred going to the op shop with \$20 from her dad a symbol of her coming-of-age?

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- Why does Fred feel the need to 'get away from Dad and his hurt' (p. 172)?
- Why, when she gets her period, does Fred cry? Why does she go to Max rather than her dad? How does this help Fred to allow Max into her life?
- What role do Fred's new skates play in the plot?
- In what ways is belonging a central theme in *The Jammer*?
- How did derby save Sarah? How does it save Fred?
- In context with the themes of *The Jammer*, discuss the following two excerpts from p. 190:
 - Maybe it was wrong to come here, to search for Mum in the past. Maybe I'd be better off pretending derby never happened.
 - It's hard learning to skate without a wall to grab or collide with. It means you need faith in your feet and your balance and whoever is teaching you.
- Why does Fred take a stone from outside the museum for her box (p. 194)?
- In the role of Fred, write a journal entry about your first Christmas without your mum. Include details from the text such as decorating the Christmas tree at Graham's, as well as your fears that 'Mum will start to fade' (pp. 199–200).
- How does Graham help Fred to understand the importance of 'also living' (p. 200)?
- Why does Fred only feel brave when on wheels? What does this say about the role of derby in her life? How does derby help Fred? What role has your favourite sport or hobby played in your life? Share in a reflection.
- How does Fred feel when she discovers that her mother organised the Bonts?
- Fred's dad says, 'We should have done a bunch of things differently...we've never done this before' (p. 205). How does this help Fred?
- Fred sees her dad as 'loose...light and comfortable in a space', while she is 'like a coiled ball of string' (p. 213)? How does this add to Fred's feelings of alienation?
- When skaters get injured in derby, the skaters 'huddle around, making a privacy screen' (p. 217). How does Fred put up her own privacy screen throughout the text?
- Why does Fred think that if she skates, she'll be leaving her mum behind? What does it take for her to realise how wrong she's been?
- How does skating help Fred to remember her mum as 'small and strong' rather than 'bed-bound and bald' (p. 221)?
- How does derby give Fred a sense of belonging?

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- Fred admits that she's still 'trying to work out the rules of friendship' (p. 227). In small groups, devise what you believe are the rules of friendship. Why might Fred find this so difficult?
- After she plays derby again, Fred realises how much she needed 'the feeling of being alive'. Why does she feel like she's been 'through a washing machine and come out clean but battered' (p. 228)?
- In what ways is *The Jammer* a book about life, not death?
- How does listening to the stories about her mum eventually help Fred to begin healing? Why does it take so long for Fred to be willing to hear these stories?
- How does the relationship between the dogs, Mary and Tom, reflect other characters and relationships in *The Jammer*?
- How are you different and similar to Fred? Share your thoughts using a graphic organiser.
- How did you feel when Fred finally allowed her grief and emotions to surface? Why? Why does it take Fred so long to cry about her mother's death? How have you dealt with the loss of a loved one? Share in a reflection.
- Why doesn't Fred 'want to grow up. Not yet' (p. 233)?
- Why does Fred find it so comforting to talk to Jazzie on the phone, especially as they don't talk about Sarah (see p. 236)?
- Graham is a stepbrother to Sarah. Grannie Annie, who 'didn't even belong to my mum', taught Sarah to bake and let her seek refuge when there was fighting at home. How are the derby community and Sarah's stepfamily similar?
- Why does Fred say, 'it's hard to know if I can laugh now or if I should be sad all the time' (p. 240)?
- Discuss the significance of the Christmas presents Fred and her family exchange, such as the mug for Graham, the skating lessons for Fred's dad and the memory book from Graham.
- Create your own memory book of a person who's special to you.
- Explain how Fred decides upon her special place? Where is your special place? Why is this place special to you?
- In what ways is Fred a jammer 'through and through' (p. 254)?
- Create a mind map that shows how various characters in *The Jammer* help Fred to process her grief.
- Create character profiles of the main characters in *The Jammer*, including Fred, Fred's dad, Graham, Sarah and Maxxed Out. For each character, provide excerpts from the text to support your ideas.
- Choose a scene from *The Jammer* to retell from Dad's or Graham's point of view.

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- Select one of the minor characters in *The Jammer* such as Jazzie, Ally, or Sammy. Choose a part of the story to tell from their perspective.
- Create a diagram that shows the similarities between Fred and Graham. Give examples from the text to help support your ideas.
- Map the journey that Fred takes throughout *The Jammer*, showing how she slowly finds happiness along the way.
- Create a visual representation of Fred's life before and after her visit to Melbourne.
- Make a chatterbox for a friend, including special things about your friendship.
- Why is Sammy's character necessary in *The Jammer*?
- See the Rules of Flat Track Roller Derby on pp. 255–6. The following YouTube clip may also be of interest.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sFC6YE8zLmY>

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

The Jammer is about many things: family, belonging, grief and roller derby. Inspired by watching my 14-year-old son play roller derby, I wanted to tell the story of finding your place when your family has been cracked by loss. My partner died in 2020, and my son found great support from his derby club. It is a sport that accepts everyone.

I never set out to write a book about grief, but characters have a funny way of making themselves known. Fred was supposed to be a boy who played derby in an all-girl team. Instead, she came onto the page as a devastated young girl, so angry that her mum has died (and blaming derby for her death) that she tosses her entire skating kit into the Brisbane River. I hope I have captured the very real experience of a grieving 12-year-old who doesn't know how to feel, how to talk about, or how to process what is in her head.

But it is not all gloomy. Fred has a dad who loves her, a newly found step-uncle who gets her, and the makings of a quirky friendship with a boy called Sammy who traps mice and sells them as pets at school to fund his derby career. It's a cast of messy, honest and real characters who welcome Fred into a new form of family, just like the one my kids and I have found.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nova Weetman lives in Melbourne with her family. She has written for TV and is the author of many middle grade and young adult novels. Her books have been listed as CBCA Notables and shortlisted for many awards, including the Readings Children's Book Prize, the Speech Pathology Book of the Year Awards and the YABBA Awards. Nova's middle grade novel *The Edge of Thirteen* won the ABIA Award for Small Publishers' Children's Book of the Year.