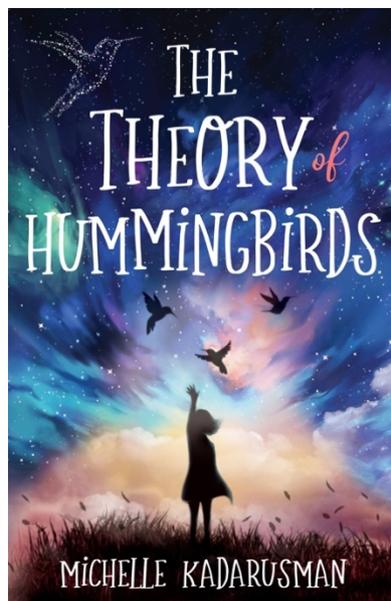


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THE THEORY OF HUMMINGBIRDS

Michelle Kadarusman



Teachers' Notes

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

ISBN: 978 0 7022 6292 0 / AUS \$14.99

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SYNOPSIS

After years of being timekeeper, Alba is determined to run in this year's cross-country race. The only problem is Cleo, her twisted foot that makes running all but impossible. But with the cast from her final corrective surgery about to be removed, Alba is certain she can make her dream a reality. If only her best friend, Levi, had the same faith in Cleo that Alba does.

The Theory of Hummingbirds is a warming story with acceptance, self-belief and friendship at its core. It is as much about overcoming obstacles as it is about celebrating differences and being *extraordinary*.

THEMES

- Acceptance
- Differences
- Resilience
- Courage
- Friendship
- Hummingbirds
- Disabilities

WRITING STYLE

The Theory of Hummingbirds is told through the first-person perspective of Alba, a fourth-grader who has only ever known life with her club foot, Cleo. Using the metaphor of hummingbirds to reflect Alba's journey, the text is a perfectly nuanced exploration of grit, patience and acceptance. Together with her mother and best friend Levi, Alba realises that everyone has challenges to overcome and that with the right support and determination, dreams can come true. Alba is a relatable and endearing character who realises that self-acceptance and the need to love oneself is what truly matters. The integration of Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* through Levi's obsession with wormholes proves *The Theory of Hummingbirds* to be a clever and literary text that is accessible to middle readers.

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STUDY NOTES

- The first chapter introduces readers to Alba and her foot, Cleo. What do the opening paragraphs of *The Theory of Hummingbirds* reveal about Alba's character and her situation? How has the author evoked an instant sense of empathy with readers with Alba's voice? Why is it important that readers quickly feel a connection with a novel's protagonist?
- Why is Levi convinced there is a wormhole in Ms Sharma's office? Why is he so committed to believing in big ideas and theories? How does this coincide with Alba's 'big idea' of competing in the cross-country race?
- Alba wants to run like a 'normal girl' (p. 16). Later in the text, Alba says to Levi, 'Can't you just be NORMAL for a change ... Why do you have to be so WEIRD?' (p. 38). When her cast is about to be removed, she says, 'The idea of being NORMAL hovered ahead of me like a glittering, shiny new world', hoping that running in the race would take her to 'magical Normal Land' (p. 40). Discuss the concept of 'normal'? Does it really exist? Is there a danger in classifying people as normal? How is this contrasted with Sadie's comment to Alba later in the novel: 'Normal? Who wants to be *normal*? ... Normal is so *ordinary* ... You can't be *extraordinary*, if you're ordinary' (p. 92).
- Why does Dr Schofield call Alba his 'cowgirl' (p. 21)? What does this show about his relationship with Alba and her mother? What evidence is there of this later in the text?
- Why, when Levi questions how *she* can run in the race, does Alba say, 'The sting was sharp and sudden,' feeling 'a lump catch in my throat' (p. 51)? What does this reveal about the closeness of their friendship, and the hurt that Levi's comment causes? Why does this feeling cause Alba to lash out and say mean things to Levi about his illness and quest to uncover the wormhole?
- Why do Alba and Levi have a falling out? Why is it so difficult for either one of them to apologise? What is the author sharing about the necessary skills for friendship?
- Alba says that 'the kids at school aren't mean to me ... I'm the girl that everyone is super polite to but who never gets invited for a sleepover' (p. 55). What does the author hope readers will understand by including this in the text?
- Why does Alba want the same pair of trainers as Miranda? Why does her mother agree to buy them for her?
- How are the points about hummingbirds on page 66 a reflection of Alba's feelings about herself as a friend at this stage of the narrative?
- Abigail suggests to Alba that she whisper her troubles into a serviette before washing it in the washing machine to '[wash] away the bad feelings', otherwise the 'feelings get toxic' (p. 71). Share a time when

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your bad feelings became 'toxic'. Why is it important to let such feelings go? How does this advice help Alba later in the text?

- Why is it so hard for Alba and Levi to apologise to one another? What advice would you give them to help restore their friendship?
- In what ways is *The Theory of Hummingbirds* a story about open-mindedness? Use evidence from the text to support your ideas.
- Why does Alba feel that getting Cleo's cast off is like falling through a hole? What is the significance of Alba's dream in which she finds herself sitting in a tree wondering how she's going to get down?
- When Cleo's cast is removed, Alba phones Levi but he doesn't answer. Why does Alba say, 'feeling both happy and sad at the same time makes your head hurt' (p. 90)? Have you ever felt this way? Share in a reflection.
- Why does Alba's mum say, 'I didn't raise you to ... sulk and feel sorry for yourself' (p. 98)? How is she helping Alba to accept Cleo and become a stronger person because of her foot, not despite it?
- How does *The Story of the Hummingbird and the Fire* help Alba? Why does she think Levi sent her the story? What makes her finally realise it was her mother? How does this story fit within the broader context of *The Theory of Hummingbirds*?
- Hummingbirds are the code between Levi and Alba. What special bonds or codes do you have with your friends? Share in a reflection.
- Why does Alba's mum suggest that Alba undertake her rehab at *Golden Elm* rather than at school? How does this show her mother's strength of character and sense of empathy?
- Why, on her first day back at school, does Alba say, 'Now I looked normal, but I didn't *feel* normal' (p. 109)? Why is she angry with her mother for giving her skinny jeans that made her 'look so dumb' (p. 114)?
- Alba asks the hummingbird in her backyard what took him so long to arrive. Alba imagines the hummingbird saying '*I could be asking you the same question*' (p. 116)? Why does the author include this in the text?
- When she and Levi make up, Alba says 'Happiness, like hummingbirds, can land in your heart' (p. 117). Share a time when you felt happiness 'land in your heart'.
- Using the dialogue on pages 129–130, role-play apologising to a friend. Why is it important that Alba and Levi apologise to one another in this way?
- In your own words, explain Alba's theory of hummingbirds. Create an illustrated poster for your classroom to celebrate Alba's realisation. (See p. 134.)
- Levi never finds his wormhole and Alba never finds *normal*. Why doesn't this prevent them from finding happiness?

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- What is your biggest takeaway from reading *The Theory of Hummingbirds*?
- What character strengths do Alba and Levi possess? What can you learn from these characters? Share in a reflection.
- In pairs, choose a scene from *The Theory of Hummingbirds* to perform to your class.
- In the role of Alba, write a description of the cross-country race in which you finally participate.
- Using a recording app such as *Explain Everything*, explain how the hummingbird is a metaphor for Alba's personal journey?
- How does the Albert Einstein quote at the start of the text reflect the themes of *The Theory of Hummingbirds*? How does Alba use hummingbirds to better understand her life? What examples from nature could you use to better understand your world?
- Create a character profile of Alba, outlining her traits. Support your ideas with evidence from the text.
- Describe the relationship between Alba and her mother. Why does Alba say her mother 'just smiles like I haven't opened the surprise yet' (p. 1)?
- Discuss the role played by Miranda in *The Theory of Hummingbirds*. Why are characters like this necessary?
- Using Alba's notes and your own research, create an information report about hummingbirds, sharing your understanding in a format of your choice. View documentaries about hummingbirds such as <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v359ESIVfNw> to further your research.
- Write a chapter of *The Theory of Hummingbirds* from Levi's perspective.
- Using the chapter headings as a guide, outline the main plot points of *The Theory of Hummingbirds* on an illustrated story map.
- What role do characters such as Coach Adams and Ms Sharma play in *The Theory of Hummingbirds*? How do they help Alba?
- What, according to Ms Sharma, is the difference between science fiction and non-fiction (p. 125)? How does she encourage Levi to keep being curious and a risk-taker? What can you learn from Levi?
- Why is Stephen Hawking referenced in the text? Read *The Theory of Hummingbirds* in conjunction with *Stephen Hawking* by Maria Isabel Sánchez Vegara (Little People, Big Dreams series) to make connections between Alba, Levi and Hawking.
- With older students, compare *The Theory of Hummingbirds* with the movie *The Theory of Everything* (PG).

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AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Alba's story in *The Theory of Hummingbirds* was inspired by my experience of having a club foot. Essentially, I wanted to write a story about self-acceptance. We all have things that make us feel different, some are obvious, like Alba's foot, but often the differences cannot be seen. We long to fit in and be 'normal' but what is normal and does it really matter that much? The message in the parable, *The Hummingbird and the Fire*, of accepting who you are and doing what you can – and the qualities of hummingbirds themselves – appeared to me to be the perfect analogy for Alba's challenges.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michelle Kadarusman is a teen and middle-grade fiction writer. She grew up in Melbourne, Australia, and has also lived many years throughout Indonesia and in Canada. Her novels have been nominated for various awards and honours, including the Canadian Governor General's Awards, the Ontario Library Association Forest of Reading Awards and an American Junior Library Guild gold star selection. Her books have been translated into Spanish and Turkish.