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GOODBYE JAMIE BOYD

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Teachers' Notes

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Synopsis	2
Themes	2
Mental Illness	2
Relationships	2
Acceptance	3
Language/Poetic Devices	3
Writing Style	3
Author Motivation	3
Study Notes	4
About the Author	6

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SYNOPSIS:

Anna has schizophrenia. She experiences the delusion of her older brother's presence. Jamie is Anna's companion, confidant and mentor. When he becomes possessive and jealous of her real life relationships however, coercing Anna to harm herself and those she holds dear, she realises that she must seek help.

The story begins with the words, "before I killed him, my big brother was my best friend." This immediately draws the reader into Anna's world. It is only half way through her journey that it becomes apparent that she is suffering from a mental illness and that her prescribed medication in fact kills Jamie.

Anna feels incredibly guilty for killing her brother, resorting to self harm as a way to punish herself. Not wanting to burden her parents, she eventually confides in her small art class. Here she receives the support and friendship she so desperately needs.

THEMES:**Mental Illness:**

- Awareness, acceptance, empathy and support by society of those suffering from mental illness
- Acceptance by the sufferer of mental illness and the ability to seek help, both professional and personal
- Everyone experiences mental fragility of varying degrees at sometime throughout their lives; feeling Anna's pain by being 'in her shoes' helps to convey this struggle effectively. This is conveyed through subplots such as Anna's father and neighbour feeling the stress of farming during drought time.
- Feelings of isolation, confusion, helplessness and fear of sufferers of mental illness
- Drugs and mental illness – Anna smokes marijuana which may in fact have triggered her mental illness
- Self harm with regards to mental illness

Relationships:

- Friendship – Anna needs the friendship, acceptance and understanding of a small group of friends
- Anna has a friend, Karen, who does try to help Anna. Anna doesn't always recognise or accept this help.
- Anna won't open up to her parents
- She does confide in her art teacher and doctor

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- Anna has a lovely relationship with her younger siblings. When Jamie suggests that she try to hurt or kill them by driving into a tree, she begins to realise that she has to get Jamie out of her life.

Acceptance:

- Anna accepts that she has to help herself. She eventually sees that she has to rid herself of these harmful delusions.
- Anna's friends in her art class accept and support Anna after they learn of her schizophrenia
- The audience learns that those with mental illnesses need acceptance and support.

Language/Poetic Devices:

- The story is told in verse form. The imagery and language are beautiful, giving the reader a true sense of the turmoil that Anna endures every day.

WRITING STYLE:

Goodbye Jamie Boyd is a first person account of what it is like to suffer from a mental illness. The reader doesn't immediately recognise that Anna has schizophrenia; we discover this around the same time that Anna herself realises that it is time to seek help from her doctor.

The verse form conveys Anna's utter admiration for Jamie, their strong bond and their friendship that goes far beyond that of siblings to that of a mentorship and ultimately, a controlling voice. It is a powerful, emotional and haunting journey.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION**How would you describe this book?**

A first-person account of what it is like to suffer fearful delusions. The reader travels with Anna, the protagonist, through these delusions to a moment where she realises she needs help. It is a book that offers understanding and hope, provided that the support a person needs is available.

What was your reason for writing this story?

Throughout my life, from childhood onwards, I have known several people who battle serious mental illness. I have seen their epic struggles to deal with it and the isolation they have had to endure. I have also come to realise that every human is probably blighted at some time or other with a mental health issue. If, recognising our own fragility, we could more easily see the person behind a

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mental illness and offer them support and friendship, then that surely is a step forward?

Why did you choose to write it in verse?

This novel was inspired by a lovely young woman I know who suffers a mental illness. She was confused, alone and frightened. What she needed most was friendship and acceptance. As is the case with many sensitive teenagers, she enjoyed expressing her feelings in verse. As a teenager, I also wrote poetry. In some ways, perhaps teenagers keep poetry alive. Verse is, therefore, a natural genre for my intended audience of young adults. This form of writing is very personal; the reader immediately feels included in Anna's confidential disclosures and can get some experience of her fear and delusion. The other advantage of a verse novel is that it allows for very economical writing; a lot can be said using the impressionistic techniques of poetry, and a great distance of time can be covered in a brief read. This brevity makes the novel accessible to a range of people, including those who might not be particularly keen readers.

What would you hope teenagers would gain from reading it?

I would hope that teenagers learn what schizophrenia can be like. As I have done when confronted with mental illness, I would like teenagers to reflect on the nature of mental illness and the causes. In the case of Anna, it is highly likely that smoking marijuana has triggered her illness. It is a huge concern that young people are playing Russian Roulette with their mental health by taking drugs or drinking alcohol. Above all, it would be good if young adults recognised people like Anna who are in need of friendship and gave them support.

STUDY NOTES

- Read the first chapter, *R.I.P Jamie Boyd*. Respond to this opening. What do you think has occurred? Why would the author begin Anna's story in this way?
- *Us Kids* is a beautiful reflection on childhood. Pay particular attention to the imagery of summer and winter. What did your childhood summers and winters consist of? Write your own metaphors for seasons, reflecting on your childhood memories:
 - *Summer was...*
 - *Winter was...*
 - *Spring was...*
 - *Autumn was...*
- Re-read the imagery describing the night sky in *Ideas Man* (p4/5).

Write your own verse depicting night time sounds

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- *Prophet* (p6/7) contains a rich portrayal of Milly's birth. Re-read *Prophet*, taking note of the way Fensham has described Anna's father's hands and the colour of Milly's hair, for instance.
- In *Dare You* (p8/9), Anna describes her family's property. Sketch this scene, using colours to depict Anna's account.
- Research the relationship between smoking marijuana and mental illness.
- Has Jamie always existed or only after Anna starting smoking marijuana? Discuss, giving sound reasons for your opinions.
- What are some of the indications that Jamie could become a harmful influence on Anna?
- Track Anna and Jamie's relationship on a plotline, highlighting the way in which it changes. Does Anna's smoking 'weed' contribute to Jamie's downturn in behaviour?
- *On the Outside* emphasises Anna's feelings of alienation from the group. Some of this may be Anna's perception. "Their laughter sounds secret and cruel." (p16) Are Anna's feelings legitimate or is she being paranoid? Explain.
- Anna matches the characters in her Art class with the type of art that represents them, for instance, Karen is portrayed as liking 'watercolours.' What are the other class members described as? Is there any link between their personalities (as Anna perceives them) and the art they appreciate?
 - What would Anna's style be?
 - What would your style be? Explain, using examples of an art form/artist that reflects your personality.
- The school counsellor and principal realise something is wrong with Anna. What signs would they have noticed?
- Research the symptoms of schizophrenia. What warning signs are evident?
- Visit websites such as:
 - www.beyondblue.org.au Beyond Blue
 - www.sfnsw.org.au Schizophrenia Fellowship of N.S.W.
 - <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/drugservices/pubs/cannabis.htm>
- Select a scene/chapter from the book to dramatise.
- What is the significance of the scene where Anna sees her father crying? Of Big Pete's dad committing suicide?
- Why does Anna carve Jamie's name into her arms?
- Anna eventually writes Jamie a letter to say goodbye to him forever. Write this letter assuming the role of Anna.

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- Alternatively, imagine that you have to write a similar letter to a delusional character of your own.
- I Pray (p54/55) is a powerful chapter where Anna vents her frustration, fear and anger to God. She questions whether God is real or yet another delusion. Discuss these thought patterns and the significance they have in **Goodbye Jamie Boyd**.
- What does Anna mean when she says, 'I'm holding onto string?' (p57) In *Out in the Open*, (p63/64), Mr Edwards encourages Anna to 'write it all down...just get it out in the open.'
 - Find poems, songs, artwork etc where the composer may have been 'getting it out in the open.' Explain your selection. Research the artist and the piece of work. Present this to the class.
 - Write your own journal that conveys your inner thoughts and emotions; or create a painting that does this.
 - Create a painting to represent Anna's story.
- Research further the famous people mentioned in Anna's presentation to her class. What were their illnesses? How did they overcome such challenges?
- Anna uses Van Gogh's *Starry Night, Saint Remy* to self-reflect. Examine this painting. Why did Anna choose this particular painting?
- If you had to do the same talk that Anna had to, what painting would you choose? Why?
- Why has the author told this in verse form? How has this contributed to the story?
- Watch an episode of **Australian Story** that deals with schizophrenia such as "About a Boy" (2004) – Dan Halloran's story about growing up in a household dominated by his mother's schizophrenia.
- Watch the movie "A Beautiful Mind". Compare the film with **Goodbye Jamie Boyd**. Read reviews of this film from a website such as Successful Schizophrenia www.successfulschizophrenia.org

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Elizabeth Fensham has worked as an English teacher for many years. She is the author of *Helicopter Man* which won CBCA Book of the Year: Younger Readers and *Miss McAllister's Ghost*, published in 2008. Elizabeth lives in the Dandenong Hills in Victoria.