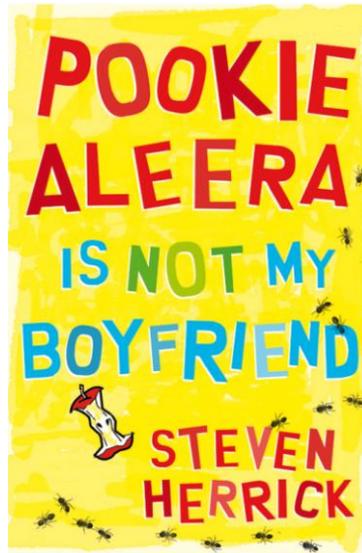


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POOKIE ALEERA IS NOT MY BOYFRIEND

Steven Herrick



Teachers' Notes

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

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SYNOPSIS

When Ms Arthur writes two words on the board – ‘Pookie Aleera’ – her Year 6 class let their imaginations go wild. They soon concoct a range of quirky definitions, not the least of which predicts that Pookie Aleera is their teacher’s boyfriend. This is a humorous verse novel that follows the thoughts and daily lives of some of her students in their country town.

Whilst endearing, engaging and funny, Steven Herrick has also drawn into his narrative a real sense of grief, loneliness and alienation. Cushioning this sadness are the underlying virtues of friendship and kindness.

THEMES

Friendship:

- The characters in the text are exploring their friendships with one another as they finish primary school.
- Older community members reflect on friendships with those who have passed away.
- Laura feels that no one wants to be her friend. This changes towards the end of the novel.
- Friendship can be shown in a range of ways.

Kindness:

- One random act of kindness – someone bringing cookies in to share – begins a chain of kind acts.

Loneliness and Grief:

- Laura is lonely.
- Nan is lonely after the death of her husband; Pete misses his granddad.
- Mr Korsky misses his friend Mr Baxter.

Humour and Poetry:

- Humour, figurative language and poetic devices are used throughout the text.

WRITING STYLE

Pookie Aleera Is Not My Boyfriend is a verse novel told in first person, present tense. The poems are narrated by various characters, many of whom are Year 6 students at the local primary school. The narrative is a compelling, humorous and very touching account of life in a small country town.

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STUDY NOTES

- The first poem introduces us to the setting of the text.
 - Discuss the description of this setting, analysing Steven Herrick's comparison of the beach with the bush.
 - Note his use of waves to contrast the ocean with the dust.

- Rachel mentions that 'starlings fantail across the sky' (p2). Sketch a picture of this image.

- Laura tells us that Ms Arthur's hair is 'crow-black' (p3). Discuss the importance of creating original images rather than reverting to clichés.

- Ms Arthur asks her students to tell her 'something, one thing' that they like about themselves (p3).
 - Why do you think Laura 'slinks as low as possible' when asked to do this?
 - Take note of the way in which the author 'shows' us Laura's personality rather than 'tells'.
 - Discuss the importance of having a healthy self-esteem.
 - Consider doing this same activity as a class. This could be a written task if students feel more comfortable writing their responses.

- Each free-verse poem is written from a certain character's point of view. For each new narrator, keep a journal of their characteristics, likes and dislikes.
 - Which is your favourite character? Why?
 - Which character do you most relate to?

- Record examples of poetic devices and figurative language that you particularly enjoy as you read the text. Examples include:
 - Madder than a nest of bull ants (p7)
 - Road like a train track without the rails (p15)
 - Great dollops of liquid gold dribbled over the bread (p19)
 - Waves his right arm up and down like a crazy windmill (p27)
 - A piece of roofing iron flaps like a wounded bird (p153)
 - Nan's voice floats on the wind as fragile as glass and as sad as loneliness (p170)
 - Dad snores like a broken kettle (p196)
 - Waiting for the applause of wings as the white-faced owl circles high over our yard like a delicate kite (p196/197)
 - My clock glows midnight (p197)
 - It tastes as fresh and crisp and sweet as friendship (p200)
 - Like removing a bandaid from a scab (p203)

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- Ms Arthur asks the class to bring in their favourite photo of themselves (p4).
 - Create your own 'Fakebook' wall of class photos; each week write what you've been up to over the past few days.
- Ms Arthur asks her class what they'd like to be when they grow up. What would you like to be?
 - Alex states simply that he'd like to be a dad (p8). What does Alex's response reveal about his character?
 - Are these characteristics noticeable in other verses narrated by Alex? Explain your thoughts.
- Re-read Mick's poem starting on p10. Notice the author's technique of sharing a conversation between two characters; yet we only hear Mick's dialogue.
 - What do you think Mr Hume would be saying during this conversation? Write a script for this scene. Re-enact the scene with a partner.
 - Try writing your own original scene using this same technique.
- Pete describes holding his sister's hand during his grandfather's funeral (p16). Why did he look at Ursula's hand rather than look at the coffin? What do we learn about Pete's character from this particular verse?
- While much of *Pookie Aleera Is Not My Boyfriend* is light-hearted and humorous, it also contains sincere and poignant moments.
 - Highlight those parts of the text that appeal to the emotions of the audience.
 - Discuss the appeal of humorous texts that are anchored by serious moments.
- Re-read the verse on p31/32 in which Ms Arthur writes 'night sky' on the board, asking the students to write a sentence to describe a night sky.
 - Discuss the students' responses to these words.
 - Which descriptions do you like the most? Why?
 - Try this same activity each day by writing two words on the board, asking students to describe it in a sentence.
- Re-enact one of Constable Dawe's safety lessons with the class. (e.g. p33-37)
- Ms Arthur corrects the students on their use of the terms 'well' and 'good'. Discuss the grammatical concepts behind her correction. (p46)

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- Laura likes to look at a certain photo of her parents in which her mother looks like she's sharing a secret. Laura is dying to know what the secret is, thinking it is the secret of happiness (p56).
 - What do you think the secret of happiness is?
 - Find a range of photos that allow students to wonder about the circumstances of the photos. Use these as stimulus for writing activities.
- Laura feels as though she is invisible to the others at school. Why does Laura feel this way?
- Re-read the verse starting on p70 in which Pete's grandfather shares the story of the prisoner and the birds. How is this relevant to the rest of *Pookie Aleera Is Not My Boyfriend*? Discuss the relationship that Pete shared with his grandfather.
- Rachel and her friends take turns choosing activities to do together such as bringing in embarrassing photos of themselves or listening to music (p74/75). She goes on to define her true friends as being those people she trusts.
 - How would you define friendship?
 - Why would Rachel feel comfortable showing her embarrassing photos to her true friends?
 - Consider doing some of the things that Rachel and her friends do together as a class. What else could you add to that list?
- Why do you think Mick might not consider Mr Hume to be one of his true friends? (p78/79)
- Steven Herrick has described a storm on p81. Re-read this passage, examining the poetic devices at work.
 - Choose other topics on which to write descriptive verses.
- Ms Arthur takes the children to the library and tells them NOT to borrow a poetry book. Try this with your class!
 - Alternatively, borrow a range of poetry books from your school library and allow students the time to read poetry for themselves.
- Mr Korsky talks about his friendship with Mr Baxter (p99-101). Re-read this verse.
 - Discuss the theme of friendship held within this verse and in *Pookie Aleera Is Not My Boyfriend* more generally.

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- How do you think it made Mr Korsky feel when Mr Baxter's body was found?
- Mick and his friends decide to be nice to everyone for a week (p158/160). In small groups, make predictions about possible outcomes of this decision.
 - How might they 'be nice' to others?
 - What sorts of things would you do to be nice to everyone for a week?
 - As a class, come up with ways that you can 'be nice to everyone' in your school community for a week. Carry out this activity, writing a reflection afterwards about the impact these actions had on you as well as on others.
- What does Mick mean when he says, 'I asked my own questions, and spent the afternoon not answering them'? (p166)
- Cameron's dad comes up with 10 good reasons to go outside and throw the frisbee around (p167/168). Brainstorm other activities and give 10 good reasons for each.
- Pete describes his nan's grief as follows: 'Nan's voice floats on the wind as fragile as glass and as sad as loneliness' (p170). Discuss her grief and Pete's sensitivity towards his nan.
- Ms Arthur tells the class about the footballer Lionel Messi whose club donates money to UNICEF (p172). Research this organisation and consider a class project to raise awareness of such causes.
- Recipes for the biscuits and rice crackles are included at the back of the book. Try cooking some of these treats and sharing them amongst the school community.
- Why do you think Mr Korsky still mows Mr Baxter's lawn? (p193)
- How important is Mick's word 'please' on p199?
- What does Laura mean when she says 'it tastes as fresh and crisp and sweet as friendship'? (p200)

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- Choose other free-verse poems or verse novels by Steven Herrick to study.
 - Blank out a selection of words in free-verse poetry, and fill them in as you wish. Emphasise the importance of choosing the most fitting vocabulary.
 - Discuss the poet's choice of line breaks. Why has the poet chosen to start new lines where he has?
- Try rewriting some of the poems from *Pookie Aleera Is Not My Boyfriend* in prose form.
 - Likewise, try rewriting some prose in verse form.
- Create a word cloud about a selected character using an online tool such as Wordle (www.wordle.net).
- Write a reflection on friendship, using examples from your own experiences as well as from *Pookie Aleera Is Not My Boyfriend*.
- Experiment using figurative language and poetic devices in your own writing.
- Visit the Dorothea Mackellar Poetry Awards website, which has excellent tips for teachers on how to teach poetry <http://www.dorothea.com.au/>.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Pookie Aleera Is Not My Boyfriend is the book I've been wanting to write for ages: a simple tale of the everyday lives of children in a rural town. I loved exploring the small details of each character's motivations, concerns, joys, frustrations and hopes. It's where the true value of our existence resides ... among friends, family and our community.

It was satisfying to return to the verse novel format, after writing a few prose novels. I realised just how effective the format can be in telling a story from multiple perspectives. Every writer wants to inhabit each of their characters and the verse novel allowed me to enjoy my time in the hearts and minds of these children.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven Herrick was born in Brisbane, the youngest of seven children. At school his favourite subject was soccer, and he dreamed of football glory while he worked at various jobs. For the past twenty-five years he's been a full-time writer and regularly performs his work in schools throughout the world. Steven lives in the Blue Mountains with his partner Cathie, a belly dance teacher. They have two adult sons, Jack and Joe.