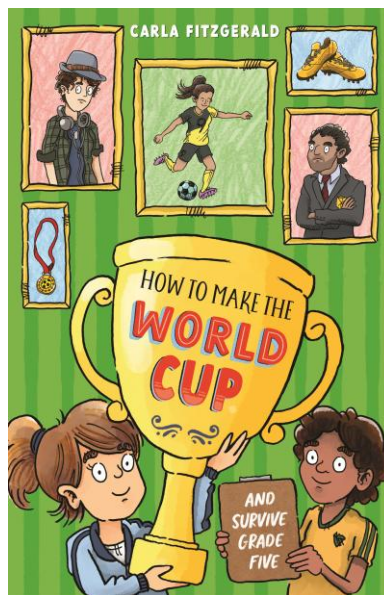


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HOW TO MAKE THE WORLD CUP AND SURVIVE GRADE FIVE

Carla Fitzgerald



Teachers' Notes

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SYNOPSIS

Eleven-year-old Ronni is an avid armchair sports fan who knows her way around any court, pitch or track. Her parents are just as obsessed, rarely taking their eyes off their screens and preferring to spectate from the comfort of their lounge room rather than in real life. Then there's Novak, Ronni's older brother, who would choose guitars and music over whistles and scorelines any day.

When Ronni wins tickets to a friendly match between the Australian and Canadian women's soccer teams, she has no idea how much her life is about to change. With her parents opting out, she attends the game with Novak and her best friend, Kai. Thrilled to be sitting so close to the action, Ronni and Kai can't help calling out advice from the sidelines like true diehard fans – unaware that the CEO of Soccer Australia is listening to every word.

Before long, the pair are offered secret roles as coaches – complete with unlimited iceblocks from the kiosk! But can Ronni and Kai really help the Australian women's soccer team qualify for the World Cup? And can they handle the fast-paced, high-pressure world of elite sport?

In this clever and humorous story about courage, trust and risk-taking, Ronni must navigate stealth training sessions, shifting school dynamics, and the very real possibility of losing her best friend forever.

THEMES

- Friendship
- Growing up
- Relationships
- Screen addiction
- Responsibility
- Risk-taking
- Sport; Soccer
- Trust
- Social media

WRITING STYLE

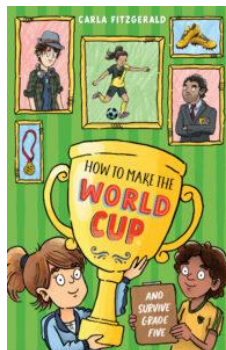
How to Make the World Cup and Survive Grade Five is told through the first-person, past-tense perspective of Ronni, an eleven-year-old girl with a passion for all things sport. Contrasting Ronni's enthusiasm – and that of her equally obsessed parents – is Novak, her fourteen-year-old brother, who loathes sport and prefers retreating to his bedroom to play guitar. Ronni's parents work,

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watch and even celebrate birthdays from home, marking occasions at half-time with half-cakes, their lives largely devoid of meaningful real-life experiences. This clever and engaging plot element invites readers to reflect on the impact of screen dependence and its effect on relationships. Ronni's innocent and naïve worldview is relatable, funny and endearing, particularly in her observations about entering Grade Five, where the unspoken rules of friendship and playground dynamics have suddenly shifted. As she and Kai are teased about having crushes on each other, Ronni also notices a change among the girls: lunchtime soccer games are losing appeal, replaced by singing popular songs or discussing favourite shows. Written with humour and inventive, effective figurative language, what begins as a light-hearted story about sports obsession and the World Cup develops into a thoughtful narrative that champions presence, inclusivity and balance. The novel is suited to middle-grade readers.

STUDY NOTES

- Before reading, discuss the front cover of *How to Make the World Cup and Survive Grade Five*. What are you wondering about the story? What do you think may happen in a story with this title?



- After reading Chapter 1, discuss what we learn about Ronni and her family. What surprises you so far? What complications arise? Make predictions about the story.
- On p. 2, we are told that 'Our devices are like extra members of the family, the most fun and interesting family members. The glow from our screens is like rays of sunlight that keep everyone calm and happy.' Is this true? How does this change as the novel progresses?

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- Why has the author created Novak as a character who hates sport and prefers music? Why is he described as a 'problem child' (p. 2)? How, despite their differences, do Novak and Ronni complement one another?
- Initially, Ronni describes her parents' decision to 'never have to go out or talk to a single person IRL' as reasonably acceptable (p. 3). How do her attitudes about this change?
- Ronni's dad, Ryan, is obsessed with his socials and algorithm, eager to maximise his number of followers. How is @ryansrants damaging to Ryan and his family?
- What has changed since the family exchanged their lounge for three armchairs that all face the television (see pp. 3–5)?
- In the role of Ronni, write a journal entry describing how it feels when your parents opt out of the friendly between Australia and Canada (see p. 5 onwards).
- Describe the friendship between Ronni and Kai. How does it change over the course of *How to Make the World Cup and Survive Grade Five*? What instigates these changes?
- Why is Ronni surprised that Novak agrees to take her to the soccer match? Why does she find it weird that Novak says, 'it will be fun to hang' (p. 11)? How does their relationship develop as the story continues?
- According to Ronni, what makes attending the Australia–Canada friendly IRL so different from watching it at home (see Chapter 2)? What point is being made in *How to Make the World Cup and Survive Grade Five* about the importance of real-life experiences?
- How does the author use hooks at the end of chapters to engage readers?
- Create Character Profiles of Ronni and Kai. How are they similar and different? How do they grow and change over the course of the novel?
- Kai is easily stressed and risk averse. How does he grow and change throughout the novel?
- Ronni and Kai get teased at school, accused of having crushes on one another. How might this threaten their friendship? Does this happen at your school? Why is this a dangerous and irresponsible thing to do to your friends? What advice would you give to Ronni's and Kai's friends about this?
- Ronni notices the changing dynamics of friendship now she's in Grade Five. The girls don't play soccer before school because they prefer to 'catch up' and 'download' (p. 24). Discuss how the theme of friendship is explored in *How to Make the World Cup and Survive Grade Five*.

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- Ronni makes the comment that ‘*nobody* talked on the phone anymore’ (p. 28), finding it strange that Angela has asked her to call. Kai even writes a script to help with this conversation (p. 29). With a partner, re-enact this phone call. How is this reluctance to talk on the phone not unlike Ronni’s parents’ reluctance to leave the house?
- Why, when asked to help coach the Australian team, does Ronni say, ‘Part of me wanted to race out and tell Mum and Dad. But there was another part telling me to keep it to myself’ (p. 37)? What might her reservations be?
- Discuss whether coaching from an armchair is easier than coaching IRL.
- How have ‘the rules of ... life’ changed for Ronni (p. 43)?
- Why does Ronni eventually wish she could speak with her parents about the coaching job (p. 57)? In the role of Ronni, write and perform a monologue about your parents and your feelings of disconnection.
- Ronni and Kai use a lot of clichés and motivational sayings throughout *How to Make the World Cup and Survive Grade Five* such as ‘Nothing ventured, nothing gained’ and ‘Better safe than sorry’ (p. 63). Record these sayings as you read the text. Add to the list other sayings you know. Why have these been included in the text?
- Explain what Kai means when he says that ‘Soccer *is* mathematics’ (p. 63). Use soccer statistics to investigate mathematical concepts such as angles, shapes, percentages and probability.
- In the role of Kai, write a journal entry sharing your fears about coaching using the following excerpt as stimulus: ‘But what if this goes wrong and Australia loses and it’s all our fault?’ (p. 64).
- Using a graphic organiser, compare Kai’s dad with Ronni’s parents. Include excerpts from the text to support your thinking. Why might Ronni be a little envious of Kai?
- Discuss Coach Jorge’s comment that ‘It’s easy being an armchair critic’ (p. 74). Why has this been included in the text?
- What role does Ronni’s hero, Alex Burr, play in *How to Make the World Cup and Survive Grade Five*? How would the story be different without her?
- In response to the following excerpt, write a reflection about the importance of spending quality time with family members: ‘Part of me wondered what would happen if I wrapped my arms around Mum’s neck and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Or slid in beside Dad in his armchair for a side hug’ (p. 86).
- How do you think Ronni feels about her dad’s social media posts? In the role of Ronni, write a letter to Dad to explain how you feel.

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- Why does Ronni 'suddenly feel so annoyed' with her parents (p. 90)? Is she justified? How is this contrasted with her dad's comment that 'Kids should be at home spending quality time with their families ... Not running around pretending to coach a national team. What self-respecting parent would let their child do that?' (p. 185)?
- Novak writes a song 'about hope and ... taking chances and ... maybe love' (p. 141). How is this song later used to bring the storylines of *How to Make the World Cup and Survive Grade Five* together? With a partner, write the lyrics of this song.
- How does Burr's sponsorship deal affect her game? How does Ronni help her with this? Why does this cause friction between Ronni and Kai?
- How is gold used throughout *How to Make the World Cup and Survive Grade Five*?
- Discuss Burr's saying: 'if you don't go out on a branch, you're never going to get the best fruit' (p. 187).
- Why doesn't the 'armchair ... feel as comfortable as it used to' (p. 198) for Ronni?
- Discuss the idea of 'being out of [your] comfort zone' (p. 198). In a reflection, describe a time when being out of your comfort zone turned out to be 'incredible'.
- Discuss Ronni's comment to her parents that 'You don't care about the details of my life because you're always looking at a screen' (p. 202). Why is this important to have shared? In what ways can you relate to this issue? Share during a Circle Time.
- How does Novak's song and love for music bring him and Ronni closer together?
- Discuss Ronni's comment that sport 'brings people together. Makes them feel like they're part of something bigger. It makes them *feel* something!' (p. 209). How does *How to Make the World Cup and Survive Grade Five* show this? How is this true also of music?
- Time permitting, watch *The Mighty Ducks* (1992). Make comparisons between the film and *How to Make the World Cup and Survive Grade Five*.
- Re-read Ronni's pre-match speech to the team (starting on p. 214). Analyse the rhetorical devices she uses to motivate them. Why are her words so effective?
- What is the significance of the hug that Novak gives Ronni at the final qualifying game (p. 218)?

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- What can be learnt from a character such as Kai's dad? How does his attitude of 'good vibes only' help not only him, but those around him as well (p. 220)?
- What is the difference for Ronni between watching matches at the stadium along with 75,000 other fans and watching them at home? What does Ronni come to understand about the importance of experiences IRL? How does this help you to reconsider the joys of IRL experiences?
- Discuss the connection between Novak's song bringing the team together and Ronni's friends at school singing together. What do you admire about Ronni's approach to the changing friendship dynamics in the playground? How does this show her growth and maturity?
- Why are birthdays in Ronni's household celebrated with half-cakes? Why do they later enjoy 'a *whole* cake' (p. 231)? How does this reflect the family's changing outlook on life?
- In what ways is *How to Make the World Cup and Survive Grade Five* a story about trust and courage? What other themes stand out to you?
- Which character from *How to Make the World Cup and Survive Grade Five* are you most like? Why?
- In small groups, choose a scene from *How to Make the World Cup and Survive Grade Five* to dramatise.
- At times, Ronni and Kai have different ideas about the best tactics for the team. How do they navigate these differences of opinion?
- Ronni's dad, Ryan, is one of the more vocal social-media critics putting pressure on the soccer team. How does this affect Ronni? How would you feel if someone in your family publicly criticised something you cared about?
- The Australian women's soccer team faces a lot of outside noise from internet critics. How do Ronni and the players learn to tune out negative comments and focus on their goals? What does this share about handling pressure in real life?
- How does the author use the humour of Ronni's everyday school life to balance the high stakes of World Cup soccer qualifiers? Why is humour an important tool in this story?
- Time permitting, use *Behind the Screens* by Niraj Lal and Aśka (UQP) as a companion text to investigate concepts of screen addiction, bias, echo chambers and algorithms.

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- Conduct a simple experiment: spend one session watching sport and one participating in a physical activity. Record the emotional, physical and social differences. Reflect on your findings in a paragraph.
- With a partner, create a Sports Commentary Podcast about your favourite sport.
 - Include commentary, analysis and ‘expert opinions’.
 - Reflect on your tone: supportive vs critical.
 - Evaluate how commentary affects audience perception.
- The soccer team shows resilience and perseverance, as do Ronni and Kai. Create your own *Goal Setting and Resilience Journal* by following the steps below:
 - Set a personal goal (academic, sport or social).
 - Track your progress over a week or fortnight.
 - Reflect on setbacks, motivation and successes.
- Discuss Carla Fitzgerald’s use of figurative language throughout *How to Make the World Cup and Survive Grade Five*, and how it contributes to the text. Some examples include:
 - The glow from our screens is like rays of sunlight that keep everyone calm and happy (p. 2)
 - Mum and Dad glared at each other like two captains from opposing teams (p. 6)
 - I’d never seen this many people in one place: a great organism vibrating together as one (p. 9)
 - The air was thick with the smell of meat pies, anticipation and human sweat (p. 9)
 - His head kept swivelling back and forth like he was at the Wimbledon final (p. 10)
 - He was wearing his usual black fedora and an expression that suggested he was about to be fed to the lions, gladiator style (p. 11)
 - He would occasionally peer out from beneath his hat, before scurrying back under like a nervous squirrel (p. 12)
 - My stomach flip-flopped as the players took up their positions (p. 15)
 - The air was filled with chatter and balls being bounced and kicked (p. 24)
 - My heart was hammering against my chest like a tennis ball volleying against a brick wall (p. 31)
 - Still, that phone call had lit something in my belly. It was spreading through my body and making me jumpy and excited. (p. 38)

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- A small knot formed in my stomach (p. 42)
- There was a thundering of boots (p. 44)
- the tunnel of light from the big screen lit the way (p. 53)
- This song had a fast, urgent beat that vibrated through my body (p. 58)
- A bolt of excitement shot through me like an electric shock (p. 58)
- It was like copping a stray ball in the guts (p. 75)
- He had his arms crossed and bottom lip stuck out like a defiant toddler (p. 78)
- I often felt a bump of sadness in my chest when we'd reach our houses and our soccer analysis would end with the bang of his screen door (p. 82)
- They started twittering away, just like Kai and I normally did (p. 83)
- I kept my gaze on the lorikeets as a flurry of thoughts swirled through me (p. 83)
- My whole body felt heavy and my mind was reeling (p. 84)
- Mum was now scrolling through his stuff on the internet, like a vulture picking at a carcass (pp. 89–90)
- I couldn't help noticing the bulging muscles in her arms. They were like oranges in a sock (p. 110)
- My stomach fluttered in nervous excitement (p. 110)
- I wanted to fill up the empty space too: pile some words on top of each other so everything would make sense (p. 112)
- I danced around like nobody was watching (p. 126)
- Burr was holding the ball protectively under one arm like a precious toy (p. 127)
- Mum covered her eyes like she'd witnessed a violent crime (p. 136)
- an icky feeling spread over me (p. 174)
- A tiny spark inside me flickered (p. 193)
- my chest tightened and tears spilled down my cheeks (p. 203)
- I stood up and tried to cover my tear-stained face and pretend that I didn't feel like my insides were in a blender (p. 204)
- My heart was beating wildly (p. 214)
- The song's urgent riff filled the whole room. The drumbeat thudded in my chest. The chords shot through my veins. I could feel the energy in the room lift. (p. 216)
- Some might even say that the atmosphere was electric (p. 217)

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- Dad's head shot up as though she had suggested dancing Gangnam Style down the street in our underpants (p. 227)
- She said it so emphatically, as if she was announcing that Novak had won an Olympic medal or a World Cup (p. 227)

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

When discussing another 'survive grade five' book with my publisher, we talked a lot about the fun and wish-fulfilment of the previous books. This led me to sport and soccer. The Matildas had recently captured the nation's attention at the 2023 World Cup. I had a 'what if' moment. What if a child was the coach of our national team? Who wouldn't want that sort of power?

As often happens, deeper themes emerged in the writing process. I'd been thinking a bit about social media and screens and how insidious they can be in disrupting human connection and family life. I wanted to highlight that without demonising modern technology. I also couldn't resist delving into the power of the arts (specifically music in this case) to inspire and connect.

I hope the result is a fun book about sport, family, friendship, technology, human connection and giving things a go.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carla Fitzgerald is a writer, a recovered lawyer and a mum of three from Sydney. She studied arts and law at university, and worked at the Australian Human Rights Commission. Only after that did she rediscover the great fun of making stuff up. Carla is a Books in Homes role model, a tutor at the Australian Writers Centre, and a guest speaker at schools around the country. Her favourite things to do are write, walk, read, eat and hang out with her family. Not necessarily in that order.