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TEACHERS' RESOURCE KIT

Catch Me When You Fall

Eileen Merriman

Will Alex win the battle for life?

A moving novel about learning to find happiness in the face of uncertainty and a love that transcends the boundary between life and death.

Seventeen-year-old Alex Byrd is about to face the worst day of her life, and the best. A routine blood test reveals her leukaemia has returned, but she also meets Jamie Orange. Both teenagers have big dreams, but also big obstacles in the way: Alex's only hope for a cure is to have a risky bone marrow transplant; Jamie meanwhile has bipolar disorder.

'Promise me you won't try to die,' I said. 'Ever.'
'Promise me you won't either,' he countered.
'It's not really something I can control.'

Another compelling love story, again with teenagers facing tough issues, this novel is fresh and very different – though you'll still cry buckets.



Eileen Merriman works full-time as a consultant haematologist at North Shore Hospital. Her writing has appeared in a number of national and international journals and anthologies, including *Smokelong Quarterly*, *The Island Review*, *Literary Orphans*, the 2015 *Bath*

Short Story Anthology and the Sunday Star-Times.

Her awards include third in the 2014, 2015 and 2016 Sunday Star-Times Short Story competitions, second in the 2015 Bath Flash Fiction Award, commended in the 2015 Bath Short Story Competition and first place in the 2015 Graeme Lay Short Story Competition. Eileen is also the author of *Pieces of You*.



SPECIFICATIONS:

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RESOURCE KIT CONTAINS:

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- Language features, structures & narrative
- Characters
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Penguin Random House New Zealand
67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632
Phone +64 (0)9 442 7453



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Catch Me When You Fall by Eileen Merriman Teacher Notes

Before Reading:

1. Before reading the book, look at the cover image and title. Discuss what you think this book might be about and who you think its readership might be?
2. Discuss how important you think a back cover blurb is when it comes to how readers choose a book to read. Read the blurb to formulate an opinion about whether you would want to read this book. What is your reasoning behind your decision?
3. Read the blurb on the back cover and then the author information on the first page. How do you think the author's full-time job may have inspired her to write this book and aided her work?
4. Read the author's dedication (p. 5). If you wrote a book, to whom would you dedicate it and what would the dedication say?

Themes:

1. Discuss the following themes and find examples from the book which illustrate each of them:
 - a. family and friends' relationships
 - b. love and romance
 - c. illnesses
 - d. resilience and bravery
 - e. humanity and hope
 - f. sacrifice
2. What do you think is the **main** theme of the novel? Write an essay on your choice. Use examples and direct quotes from the novel to successfully illustrate your argument.

Setting:

The book is set in Christchurch, New Zealand.

1. How does the author use the setting of the city, the seasons and the weather, to evoke atmosphere in the novel?
2. Do you feel that the particular setting of this story affects the characters and the events that take place? Why or why not?

Language features, structure and narrative:

1. What do you think is the genre of this book? List the aspects that are indicative of this genre with examples from the book.
2. The novel uses multimodal writing, as is evident throughout the novel when different text types and styles are used. These include Alex and Jamie's Facebook messages (p. 252), Alex's lists (p. 292), Alex's feverish dreams (p. 124) and the text messages different characters send (p. 41). Discuss what impact these multimodal forms have on the novel. Did their inclusion add to or detract from your enjoyment of the novel?

3. The story is told in the first person. Why do you think the author chose to do this? Is it effective? Why or why not? Choose a passage from the novel which resonated with you and rewrite it in third person narrative. How does this change in point of view alter the passage and its role within the novel and the effect it had on you as a reader?
4. Figurative language is used to convey ideas that might otherwise be difficult to express. Examples of these include similes, metaphors and personification, such as, 'the inside of my stomach felt like a washing machine' (p. 30), 'a chink of sunlight sneaking into the fog in my head' (p. 62) and 'the leukaemia monster had sunk its claws into me already' (p. 55). Find more examples of each of these types of figurative language from the book, making sure to reference them as if you are listing them in a bibliography. Include the title, author, page number and publishing details.
5. The author uses food, animal and nature imagery in the similes found throughout the novel, for example, 'his voice as smooth as golden syrup' (p. 38), 'her eyelashes looked like dead flies' legs, all matted together' (p. 63) and 'Jamie of the Fox Glacier eyes and the snowy hair' (p. 16). Find more examples of each of these three simile categories from the book. Next, compose a written piece about how you feel about one of the characters or events in the novel making sure to include at least three similes which you have created.
6. The following is an example of what figure of speech: 'fluttery feeling' (p. 38)? Think of examples of this figure of speech for ten other letters of the alphabet.
7. The author uses nature imagery to reflect the emotions of the characters and the events that are taking place within the novel; for example, when Alex finds her leukaemia has returned she notices the 'autumn leaves — drying, dying' (p.33) or when Jamie is having a manic episode 'the sky was aflame, blood-orange' (p. 174). Use these quotes and moments from the novel as a starting point to research the literary technique of pathetic fallacy.
8. The author has chosen a title for each chapter. Choose one of the chapters and find and explain the link between its title and the events that take place within the chapter.
9. Discuss whether Alex and Jamie's talking about Schrödinger's Cat when they meet together in Hagley Park is an example of the literary technique of foreshadowing (p. 10). Why or why not? Find examples from the novel to help support your argument and write a definition of what this literary technique entails.
10. The author makes reference to a number of different texts throughout this book, including, *18Q4* by Haruki Murakami (p. 8), *The BFG* by Roald Dahl (p. 60), *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll (p. 164), *Mr Pip* by Lloyd Jones (p. 189), *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy (p. 219), *The Bone Clocks* by David Mitchell (p. 242) and *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak (p. 248) Briefly research each one of these texts and consider the similarities or connections to the plot or characters in *Catch Me When You Fall*. Discuss whether this use of literary allusion added to your understanding and enjoyment of the novel,

and of the characters and what they are experiencing in the book. Does this technique make you want to read the other books mentioned?

11. Alex and Jamie have nicknames for one another (p. 17 & p. 53). Discuss why you think we use nicknames and how people get their nicknames? Do you think including these nicknames helped to establish these two characters and their relationships? Find examples from the book.
12. Alex and Jamie discuss their favourite words (p. 90). Find definitions of the following words from the novel. Write a sentence for each or use them to create a glossary for the novel. You may like to add any other words that you like from the novel.
 - a. enigmatic (p. 21)
 - b. euphoric (p. 28)
 - c. despondent (p. 28)
 - d. paradoxical (p. 30)
 - e. jettisoned (p. 36)
 - f. generic (p. 42)
 - g. vacuous (p. 45)
 - h. celestial (p. 53)
 - i. flummoxed (p. 68)
 - j. dissipated (p. 69)
 - k. tantalising (p. 73)
 - l. senescent (p. 78)
 - m. monotone (p. 82)
 - n. diaphanous (p.91)
 - o. ensconced (p. 95)
 - p. baleful (p. 103)
 - q. undulating (p. 107)
 - r. detritus (p. 108)
 - s. ethereal (p. 138)
 - t. petulant (p. 139)
 - u. ablate (p. 143)
 - v. acerbic (p. 173)
 - w. piqued (p. 258)

Characters:

1. Do you like Alex and Jamie as characters? Do you think they are realistic characters? Why or why not? Compare and contrast their personalities, opinions and actions, and analyse how they influence and are influenced by one another throughout the book. Use quotes from the novel to support your opinions.
2. Do you think Alex and Hannah have a realistic sibling relationship? Do you believe that their relationship, as well as their relationship with their friends and family, develops and changes though the book? If so, list what these changes are, and the main events which contribute to them.
3. Choose three adjectives to describe the following characters: Alex, Jaimie, Hannah, Dad, Nicole, Angus, Astrid, Tweedledum and Mum. In pairs, read your adjectives to your partner and see if they can guess the character you are describing.

4. Choose an important event from the novel and describe Alex and/or Jamie's reactions to it? What are the different pressures on Alex and Jamie throughout the novel? What factors lead to the decisions they make and how do they cope with the various situations they find themselves in?
5. What does the novel say about friendships and/or family and their importance during difficult times? List examples of episodes when friends and/or family are either a help or a hindrance to Alex and/or Jamie.
6. Draw a picture of one of the characters based on their physical descriptions, for example, Jamie (p. 37) or Tom Yates (p. 60).
7. Choose a character from the book, other than Alex and Jamie, to write a character study on, such as Angus or Mum. What part do they play in the novel? Think about the development of the character throughout the book, and how your chosen character's attributes and actions affect those around them.
8. Which character do you particularly like or dislike? Why?
9. Which character do you most identify with? Why?
10. Which character do you most empathise with? Why?

Activities and Creative Responses:

1. Alex uses the Google search engine to research *bipolar disorder* (p. 156). Choose one of the other medical terms or illnesses mentioned in the book, and listed below, to research. Present your findings as an illustrated report.
 - a. polio (p. 18)
 - b. bone marrow biopsy (p. 18)
 - c. chemotherapy (p. 35)
 - d. immune system (p. 36)
 - e. neutrophils (p. 42)
 - f. haemoglobin and platelet levels (p. 43)
 - g. lithium (p. 47)
 - h. schizophrenia (p. 48)
 - i. neutropenic sepsis (p. 56)
 - j. mucositis (p. 118)
 - k. E. coli septicaemia (p. 141)
 - l. ophthalmologist (p. 181)
 - m. psychosis (p. 210)
 - n. afebrile (p. 252)
 - o. frusemide (p. 261)
 - p. echocardiogram (p. 261)
 - q. inotrope (p. 269)
 - r. venoocclusive disease (p. 291)
 - s. palliative care (p. 299)
2. Facebook is one of the ways Alex and Jamie communicate (p. 241). Imagine what each of their profile pages might look like. Use evidence from the text to create a fake Facebook page for either Alex, Jamie, or another character, such as Hannah or Nicole. Include pictures, hobbies, quotes, friends, status

updates, or anything else that would make your character's Facebook profile complete.

3. Jamie praises Alex, telling her that; 'I think you're more amazing than dew drops at sunrise, and the full moon rising, and the Milky Way' (p. 185). Use Jamie's words as inspiration to study the poetic form of the ode. Next compose an ode to praise someone you love and/or admire.
4. Alex ambles through Hagley Park (p. 19) and later goes to the Post Quake Café (p. 207). Find other references to the novel being set in Christchurch. Locate the places mentioned on a map of Christchurch. Create and design an entry about Christchurch for a tourist travel book. Include information, such as population size, geography, history, things of interest, cafés, restaurants, weather, etc. Compare these details with how the place has been described in the book.
5. Alex and Jamie make annotated playlists to help them communicate with each other and to express how they are feeling (pp. 251-252). Read the epilogue, and based on this create a new playlist of music to reflect how you imagine the next part of Alex and Jamie's story and relationship plays out. Organize the playlist however you like, whether chronologically, thematically, or another way. For each song on the playlist, include the song title, artist, year, and a few sentences of explanation for your song choice, using evidence from the text as appropriate, such as previous songs and artists Jamie and Alex referenced in the book. Finish by creating an album cover for your playlist, either digitally or on paper.
6. Descriptions of exteriors and interiors are featured throughout the novel, such as Taylor's Mistake (p. 192), one of Alex's rooms in the BMTU (p. 127) and Jamie's house (pp. 84-86). Find other examples of descriptions of exterior and interior spaces in the book. Draw one of these based on the descriptions. Next, in pairs, each write a description of an exterior or interior space of your choice. Read your description aloud to your partner and get them to draw the space based on your description.
7. The author includes references to other texts, films, television programmes, and historic and contemporary figures, such as, *Game of Thrones* (p. 44), *Eyes Wide Shut* and Stanley Kubrick (p. 69), Ed Sheeran (p. 73) and Prince (p. 263). Imagine that you are to appear as a character in a novel. What other novels, films or historic figures might you use to add depth to your story and why?
8. Alex is a talented photographer and wants to be a photojournalist (p. 263). Choose your favourite part of the novel and create an artistic interpretation of it, using, for example, a painting, drawing, photograph, model, poem, etc. Or, research the technique of using the prism that Alex and Jamie use and create your own prism photograph.
9. The novel is full of events that are emotionally charged. Choose a moment from the book which you found particularly moving. Study the language the author uses in the sequence, then write a recount of a moment in time that has affected you emotionally, such as a time you have been concerned about someone's physical or mental well-being.

10. Tweedledum needs to have Peter to help communicate with his patients (p. 269). Imagine you are going to run a workshop about positive communication skills. What would you include in your workshop? Create a Google Slide of your presentation.
11. Jamie has a mask collection, including an opera mask from Venice (p. 86). Research the history of Venetian masks. Present your research findings in the style of an illustrated children's encyclopedia entry.
12. After a close reading of the book, choose your favourite chapter to write your own comprehension questions about. Create a quiz based on your questions. Ask a classmate your quiz questions.
13. Using drama conventions, in pairs, both choose one character each to embody, for example, Hannah and Dad. Use role-play, 'hot-seating' and improvisation to get into the minds of characters from the book. Consider what interactions and dialogue took place between your characters. What thoughts and feelings were expressed or repressed? Get the class to ask questions about what it is like to be these characters, your relationship and how you feel about each other and the events which have taken place within the book.
14. Imagine you are one of the other characters from the book. Choose an event or moment from the book and write a personal diary entry or monologue about it from your point of view, for example, Nicole on meeting Jamie in the hospital (pp. 69-70). Think about how you would describe the physical scene, any other characters who were involved, and your feelings about the incident.
15. Alex feels that her life is turning into a 'made-for-tv movie' (p. 247). Rewrite one of the climactic scenes as a television or film script. Include a storyboard and think about which actors you would like to play the parts and what the soundtrack to your scene might be. Then create a marketing campaign to advertise your programme/movie. Think about possible advertising avenues, such as movie posters, radio and television commercials and a preview to screen in cinemas.
16. Create a timeline of the main events of the novel. Write a short summary of these main events. Then choose one significant event at, or near the end of, the book, and describe how it helped you understand one of the themes of novel.
17. Did you like the ending of the book? Why or why not? Either rewrite the ending of the book or write a plot outline for a sequel.
18. Design your own cover for the novel, including a blurb.
19. Find other books which have young adult characters dealing with an illness. Write a comparative review in which you compare and contrast *Catch Me When You Fall* with at least one other novel dealing with this theme.
20. Write a review of the book, aiming it at the readership of your favourite magazine, newspaper, website or blog. Give it a rating, such as stars or a number out of ten. Consider the following questions:
 - Which characters appealed to you the most? The least?
 - How did the story make you feel as it unfolded?

- What ideas and themes in the book awakened your interest?
- What did you dislike, or find boring?
- Why do you think this is a significant and important book for today's readers?