

Ballad for a Mad Girl

VIKKI WAKEFIELD

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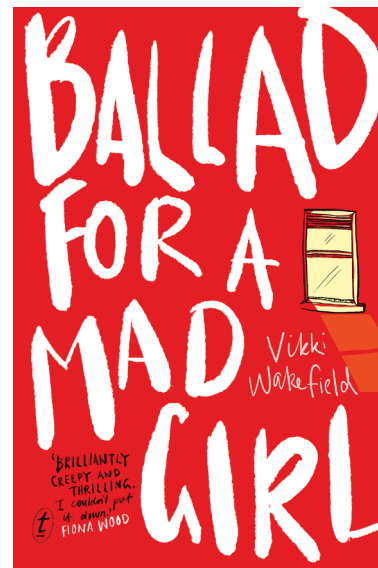
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CURRICULUM GUIDE

The following teaching guide has been designed to embrace shared curriculum values. Students are encouraged to communicate their understanding of a text through speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing.

The learning activities aim to encourage students to think critically, creatively and independently, to reflect on their learning, and connect it to audience, purpose and context. They aim to encompass a range of forms and include a focus on language, literature and literacy. Where appropriate, they include the integration of ICT and life skills.

SYNOPSIS

Everyone knows seventeen-year-old Grace Foley is a bit mad. She's a prankster and a risk-taker, and she's not afraid of anything—except losing. As part of the long-running feud between two local schools in Swanston, Grace accepts a challenge to walk the pipe. That night she experiences something she can't explain.

The funny girl isn't laughing anymore. She's haunted by voices and visions—but nobody believes a girl who cries wolf.

As she's drawn deeper into a twenty-year-old mystery surrounding missing girl Hannah Holt, the thin veil between this world and the next begins to slip. She can no longer tell what's real or imagined—all she knows is the ghosts of Swanston, including that of her own mother, are restless. It seems one of them has granted her an extraordinary gift at a terrible price.

Everything about her is changing—her body, her thoughts, even her actions seem to belong to a stranger. Grace is losing herself, and her friends don't understand. Is she moving closer to the truth? Or is she heading for madness?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vikki Wakefield's first YA novel, *All I Ever Wanted*, won the 2012 Adelaide Festival Literary Award for YA Fiction, as did her second novel, *Friday Brown*, in 2014. *Friday Brown* was also an Honour Book at the Children's Book Council of Australia, in 2013, and was shortlisted for the prestigious Prime Minister's Awards. Vikki's third novel, *Inbetween Days*, was Highly Commended in the 2016 Barbara Jefferis Award, was a 2016 CBCA Honour Book, was shortlisted for the 2016 Prime Minister's Awards and was a 2017 Golden Kite Honor book with the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. Vikki lives in the Adelaide foothills with her family.

BEFORE READING

1. Referring to the title of the text *Ballad for a Mad Girl*, ask students to examine the words 'Ballad' and 'Mad'. Ask students to research the definition of these words and consider the personal connotations they have with them. From this discussion, ask students to make inferences about the main character of the text, Grace Foley.
2. When introducing the text, collect objects that are symbolic of the plot, themes, character and setting. This may include: a leather jacket, a scrap of cardboard that has 'Saoirse Dunhill' written on it, a sketch of a girl framed by a window, a toy Celica car, a picture of a swamp, a piece of pipe, a poetry book, a red stained cloth, a white cross, a white rose, a friendship necklace, black and white photographs, a black bird figurine, tarot cards or a crystal ball. Using these objects, ask students to consider how these objects connect to the themes, character, plot or setting of the book. Inform students they will need to identify and connect these objects with the story as they read.

WHILE READING

1. The pipe challenge in the first chapter of the novel is exciting, dangerous and thrilling—but it is also symbolic. What might the pipe challenge represent for Grace? How might it connect to the broader themes of the novel?
2. What is the nature of reality? Grace considers this question when watching her axolotl moving in his tank: 'I know I could watch him for an hour and he'd only make it halfway. But what if his reality is different? What if, for him, it's only a few seconds' journey and he's moving at the speed of light? The tiny tank is his universe. Just because I can't see it—I'm not experiencing it—does that make his reality unreal?' (p. 29). What does this quote reveal about the nature of reality but also that of perception? How might this connect with Grace and the ghosts she is haunted by?
3. Grace says 'Kenzie was the first friend I found' (p. 32) but adds that 'Kenzie says she found me' (p. 33). How is it possible that the two girls have conflicting memories of how they met? What factors have influenced their conflicting memories?
4. What do you believe the quote 'My heart is a room with an unwelcome visitor' (p. 37) might mean? Which characters in the novel may feel this way?
5. What is the irony in the missing girl Hannah's surname being Holt? Additionally, what is the irony of Grace's name?
6. While reading the book, record when Grace experiences connections with the supernatural. These should be word-for-word records that you can reflect upon later and analyse closely to consider whether they really happened or were just a figment of Grace's imagination.
7. When reflecting on her childhood, Grace remembers the decorative stars her mother would place above her bed and her fascination with the 'factory reject' (p. 138). Why is Grace's fascination with the 'factory reject' significant in understanding her character and the themes of the novel?
8. 'Swampton, for as long as I can remember, has only had three base notes and two kinds of people. I used to think these two kinds were Hearts and Swampies, but now I believe they're the living and the dead' (p. 142). How does this quote support that Grace's perception of the world is maturing? Consider how children, teenagers and adults perceive the world differently.

AFTER READING

CHARACTER

1. 'We won't recall the before-times when Mum ran like a demon or the days when she couldn't get out of bed; we don't speak of the dark days or the reasons why, sometimes, it seemed as if she hated us' (p. 122). What similarities are there between Grace and her mother?
2. Re-read pages 261-267. Does Dr Nichol provide reasonable explanations for Grace's strange visions and experiences? In the text, what clues exist that support that Grace may be suffering with anxiety?
3. When Grace was in primary school, she wrote 'I will love and protect my friends forever because they are the best things in my life and even when we get old and married my friends will always come first' (p. 225). Do you think Grace's promises would be the same as an eighteen-year-old? If not, what might her new promises be?

STRUCTURE

1. Italic font is used in some sections of the novel. Why has Wakefield used italics in some circumstances and not in others?
2. Towards the end of the novel, Dr Nichol provides explanations towards Grace's supernatural experiences. 'An overactive imagination and catastrophic thinking can be symptoms of extreme anxiety. That thinking can result in you seeing signs and warnings—it's a way of convincing yourself that you can prevent tragedy if you follow a specific process. It can be a guilt-based response' (p. 264). This is a rare moment, outweighed by scenes of hauntings and the supernatural. What is Wakefield's intention in having an imbalance between make believe and reality? Is it to demonstrate the intensity of Grace's anxiety or to suggest that she really does have supernatural abilities?

THEMES

Friendship

1. 'I would never ditch you because I couldn't fix you. And I would never, ever think you needed fixing' (p. 174). Is the responsibility we have towards our family different from the responsibility we have towards our friends? Discuss with reference to the text.
2. How do Grace and her friends change in the course of the novel? What signs indicate they have matured?
3. The importance of listening is strongly explored throughout the novel. In what ways is this represented through Grace's friendships?

Family

1. There are many examples of different types of families within the novel. Describe each of these families: Foley family, Holt family, Dean family and the Grady family.
2. '—Mum told me there was nothing that couldn't be fixed between two people, as long as one person was willing to be the first to give ground' (p. 176). What examples are there of people forgiving and seeking forgiveness in the book?

3. What similarities are there between Grace and her mother?

Reality and Perception

1. In most Western cultures, people perceive time as being linear. In the novel, how do the past, present and future connect all at the same time?
2. How reliable is Grace's perception of reality in the novel?
3. 'The push-pull of reality versus unreality is exhausting' (p. 276). Referring to the text, what factors shape how we perceive the world around us?

RESPONDING

1. It's twenty years into the future and the story of Grace Foley and her ability to connect with the dead has become folklore in the town of Swanston. You're a local historian and have been given the task of investigating whether or not Grace had clairvoyant abilities or was in fact experiencing mental illness. Is Grace a 'mad girl' or does she have a gift with connecting with the dead? Use evidence from the text and compile a report putting forth your historical interpretation.
2. 'What if ghosts are all around us, all of the time? What if they're not always stuck, unable to move on until earthly justice is done—what if they're just existing, loving, hating, desiring, like us? Maybe it takes someone like me—in the middle, not really living—to close the gap' (p. 142). What role, if any, do the dead play in the lives of the living? Discuss with reference to the text.
3. 'But I remember when I was small and Mum got her first mobile phone—she taught me to play a game called Snake. It starts easy: avoid running into walls and running over your own tail. But your tail becomes the main obstacle; every time you change direction, the space within your walls grows smaller as your tail grows longer and longer, until your tail isn't following anymore. It has become an entity of its own. It's chasing you' (p. 162). There are numerous characters in the book trying to escape their pasts. Select two or three characters from the novel and examine how the past catches up with them. Present your findings in analytical paragraphs and include predictions of what this might mean for the future of each of these characters.
4. Select between Dominic Aloisi, Erin Grady or William Dean and write an extended creative piece telling the story of how William Dean came to be murdered on the night at the quarry.
5. You are a prosecution lawyer in the murder trials of William Dean and Erin Grady. Using evidence from the text, create a case for why Dominic Aloisi is guilty for two counts of murder.
6. On page 219, a full transcript of William Dean's poem to Hannah Holt is included. Pretend you are Hannah Holt and you have decided to write a poem in return to William.

TEXT RESPONSE ESSAY PROMPTS

1. Vikki Wakefield's *Ballad for a Mad Girl*, is more than a mystery and thriller. It sheds light on mental illness and the daily struggles of someone living with anxiety.
2. To what extent does Grace's 'madness' consume and control her life? (*Ballad for a Mad Girl*, Vikki Wakefield)
3. 'I have hateful thoughts in my head' (p. 260). Are all the characters in the text battling their own type of 'hateful thoughts'? (*Ballad for a Mad Girl*, Vikki Wakefield)