

Beautiful Mess

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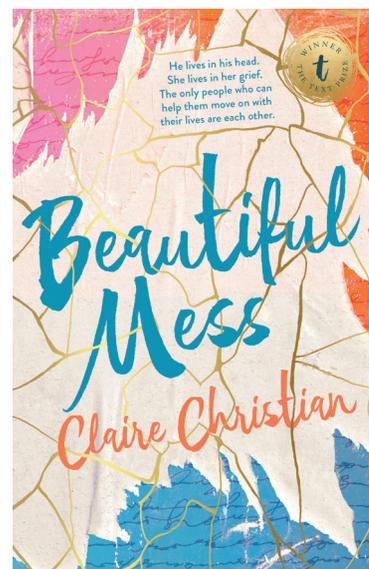
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Fiction

RECOMMENDED GRADES: 10–12

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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

Things haven't been going so well for Ava since her best friend Kelly died. Even before she gets thrown out of school for shouting at the principal, there's the simmering rage and all the weird destructive choices. What is she doing with Lincoln? Why is she smoking and drinking so much? Why does she wake up in strange places with a pounding head every Sunday morning? Her dad is supporting her as best he can but she is falling apart, trying to navigate a world she wasn't expecting. The only thing going right for Ava is her job at Magic Kebab.

Which is where she meets Gideon.

Skinny, shy, anxious Gideon. A mad poet and collector of vinyl records with an aversion to social media.

Gideon has two mums who worry about him. He's not always dealt with his sadness in constructive ways. He likes to make lists and control whatever aspect of his life he can. But life is tough to control and feeling are even tougher.

Gideon lives in his head. Ava lives in her grief. The only people who can help them move on with their lives are each other. They sound like the perfect solution to each other's problems. But are they?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Claire Christian is a novelist and playwright who lives in Brisbane. She has had three plays published by Playlab, and her play *Bloom* was shortlisted for the Griffin Award in 2009. She was one of the YWCA Queensland 125 leading women in 2013.

BEFORE READING

- Explore student understandings of the term family. What does it mean to be a family member? What constitutes a family? If you were once part of a family, are you always part of that family? If opposing views are expressed, facilitate a classroom discussion and seek to find the common ground. As a class, construct a definition of family.
- Divide the classroom into four corners. Each corner represents a response to a statement, as shown in the grid below:

Agree	Disagree
Strongly agree	Strongly disagree

Pose the following statements to the class and ask students to move to the corner of the room that symbolises their response.

- Communities are held together by shared customs and values.
- Communities are geographically determined.
- Communities are a stabilising influence on individuals.
- In the digital era, communities have lost their relevance.
- In the 21st century, communities have less impact and influence on individuals.

After each statement, select one person from each corner to present the thinking that informed their choices. Allow this to develop into a class discussion.

- Following on from the previous activity, in small groups, have the students determine a list of criteria essential for the constitution of a community. Each group can share their deliberations. Spend time discerning the commonalities of each group's criteria.
- The word 'journey' has become an overused and clichéd term today. Ask the students to list as many different contexts as they can think of, in which they've heard the word used. Discuss the idea that 'journey' is most often used metaphorically now. Discuss what metaphor actually means i.e. TO TRANSFER MEANING FROM AN ORIGINAL CONTEXT INTO A NEW CONTEXT. Given this definition of metaphor, ask the students what they believe the 'spiritual journey' or 'emotional journey' means.
- Allow students 15 minutes to explore www.beyondblue.org.au. Ask them to note down five facts or statistics about mental health issues that they previously didn't know. Ask students to THINK, PAIR, SHARE, this information. Then ask each pair to join with another pair to share their findings. Ask each group of four to select one fact or statistic to read to the class.

WHILE READING

- After reading the first two chapters, make five predictions about the plot events of the narrative.
- On page 24, Gideon tells us about his family. Considering Gideon's description, what message is the author communicating about Queerness?
- Gideon expresses on page 25 that "Maybe being bored is a good thing." What does he mean by this? What is the alternative to being bored that he is implying is no good?
- On page 26, we begin a new Ava chapter. In this chapter, she wakes, hungover, in a random house with Lincoln. She later (pp. 29) says, 'She [Kelly] died thirty-one Sundays ago. I know because I've counted. And now, every Sunday feels like this. Starts like this. All thirty-one of them.' Do you think that Ava is punishing herself or numbing herself with her destructive behaviour? Why might she be doing this?
- What does Ricky give Ava after Kelly dies? Explain the symbolism of the gift.
- When the students are approximately halfway through reading the novel, conduct a paired interview. In pairs, students interview each other with these questions:
 - What has been your favourite moment of the novel so far?
 - Who is your favourite character and why?
- On pages 52-53, Gideon experiences a turning point in his self-confidence. Explain the event that prompts this and how it shapes the way Ava sees Gideon.
- Ava says that she's nervous around everyone but not Gideon. She suggests that it's because Gideon fills the nervousness quota between them, so there's none left for her. What does this reveal about the power dynamic between Ava and Gideon?
- When Ava meets Gideon's friends at the Day in the Park, Ava discusses a memory she has of her and Kelly learning to hula hoop. How do Ava's memories of Kelly help her deal with her grief?
- Gideon reveals his self-harm to Ava in a poem he delivers at a competition. Later they discuss what he did. Explain Gideon's motivation for hurting himself.
- After Gideon shares the poem he has written about her with Ava, Ava abruptly leaves without saying a word. Why do you think she does this?
- After Ava and Gideon attempt sex the first time, what does Ava do when she has a shower? Why do you think she does this?
- On page 234, Ava does something that is Gideon inspired. What does she do and what does this act tell us about how she feels about Gideon?
- Why does Ava kiss Lincoln at the formal? Do you think the explanation she gives herself in the moment is truthful? What do you think the truth is?
- How does the author foreshadow that something is bothering Ava in the leadup to the formal fight?
- On pages 260 -261, Gideon threatens Ava. What does he say and why is this the worst thing he could say to her?
- Ava asks Gideon why he recited her poem at the graduation ceremony. He doesn't give her an answer. Why do you think he did it?

AFTER READING

CHARACTER

- Construct a map or flowchart of the major characters in the novel. Situate Ava and Gideon in the middle and visually represent the connections each character has to other characters. How much overlap is there between Ava's and Gideon's worlds?
- We are introduced to Ava in the first chapter, what do we learn about her in the first three pages? What event has triggered Ava's emotional response?
- Ava mentions that she considered getting a t-shirt with the words, My best friend just died soz if I make you uncomfortable printed on it. What does this tell you about Ava and the way she is handling her grief?
- Describe the relationship that Ava has with her father. Is it a traditional father/daughter relationship? Explain your answer.
- Make a list of quotes that exemplify either:

Students can turn the interview into a discussion and disagree with each other's perspectives



- Ava’s resentment towards the world.
 - Ava’s emotional confusion.
6. On two separate timelines, plot the defining moments that Ava and Gideon experience. Underneath each moment, write a short explanation of how this moment helped shape each character. Do Ava and Gideon share any defining moments? Were the moments influential for the same reasons?
 7. We are introduced to Gideon in the second chapter. We learn a lot about his character on pages 16-19. Write a paragraph describing Gideon’s personality traits and draw some conclusions about who he is based on the idiosyncrasies we witness in the section.
 8. Gideon has very close relationships with the females in his life (his two mothers and sister, Annie). Do you think that the relationships he builds with men are different from the relationships he builds with women and, if so, why? Give examples.
 9. Describe the different types of relationships Gideon has with each of his mothers. How does each person contribute to the building of his self-confidence?
 10. The novel’s blurb states, in reference to Gideon and Ava, ‘He lives in his head. She lives in her grief. The only people who can help them move on with their lives are each other.’ How has the author utilised the characters’ similarities and differences to prompt personal growth for each person?

STRUCTURE

1. The narration of the story is delivered from two first-person points-of-view. We hear from both Ava and Gideon. First person narration gives the reader access to the thoughts of the narrator and, as such, the representations in the text are not neutral. Select a passage, no longer than a page, in which Ava and Gideon share an event—the passage can be from either character’s perspective. Rewrite that passage in first-person but from the other character’s point of view. Consider stylistic elements the author uses when creating the voice of each character and include thoughts and feelings relevant to that character. Keep any dialogue used in the novel verbatim.
2. As the novel progresses and the interaction between Gideon and Ava become the focus of the narrative’s content, the chapters become increasingly shorter. The last two chapters of the text revert to being longer. In what ways does the length of the chapters influence the way the novel is read and how is chapter length reflective of narrative activity?
3. Discuss the significance of the title *Beautiful Mess*.
4. *Beautiful Mess* inserts some alternative generic structures into its narrative. The use of slam poems, lists and letters help communicate specific character traits and back story to the reader. Use a retrieval chart and explore the information readers gather through the inclusion of these genres (cite evidence

for your conclusions).

	Letters	Lists	Poems
Gideon		Gideon is highly analytical and self-reflective. He suffers from anxiety and list writing helps him exert control over his world during times of stress (pp. 18).	
Ava	Despite Ava’s toughness, she is very self-conscious and unsure of herself. She is drawn to people who are sure of themselves (pp. 133).		

5. When Gideon and Ava write letters to each other, the audience reads the letters at the same time as the recipient, rather than as the letter is written. How does this shape the way the reader interprets the letter?

THEMES

Grief and loss

1. ‘I hate what Kelly did. I hate that she left me on my own.’—Ava page 15. Does Ava really hate Kelly? It is said that there are five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. These stages may not be experienced in a linear way. Can you identify moments in the text when Ava is experiencing any of the stages? Justify your response with quotes from the text.

2. Have students complete a plus/minus/implications for the following problem:
 - Ava's grief has become all-consuming. Her relationship with Gideon provides her with some solace and distraction during her grief, but is that healthy?
3. Ava is not alone in her grief. Other characters are experiencing grief and it is expressed in different ways. How does Lincoln and Kelly's mother express her grief?
4. At the end of the novel, Gideon experiences grief. His mothers are concerned his sadness will trigger past behaviours. Gideon has, however, learnt to express his grief more effectively. Explain the ways he does this.
5. Ava wrote a poem about Kelly. Gideon reads this at his graduation. The poem consists of five different sized stanzas. Each stanza has a different topic. Identify the topic of each stanza and what you believe to be the message of the poem. How does this poem help heal Ava?

Mental Health

1. Gideon writes and performs slam poetry. Select any of his poems from the novel and identify the aspect of his anxiety and depression that he is exploring through that poem. How does the poem use figurative devices to describe the way Gideon feels, cite examples.
2. In a recent speech, the author, Claire Christian, said, 'I wrote *Beautiful Mess* because I wanted to talk about mental health honestly and vulnerably.' In doing this, readers have access to the different points of view different characters have regarding the mental health issues explored in the novel. Ask students to complete an 'Other People's Views' activity, regarding the events and topics in the novel. Students need to consider the impact of events on each of the characters and why different people may have very different views about some events.

e.g. How do/would the following characters feel about Kelly's suicide—Gideon, Lincoln, Ava's father, Mrs Bryan.

3. Complete a PCQ (pros, cons, questions) table for the following topics and discuss student responses as a class:
 - All teachers should have mental health training.
 - Resilience building classes should be part of school curriculum, given the rise in youth mental health issues.
 - The Arts should be compulsory subjects for every student, as it is through The Arts that topics such as mental health, anxiety and depression can be explored creatively and in a supportive environment.
4. Using the information provided by the text, complete a Y-Chart for depression and anxiety i.e. Depression sounds like, looks like, feels like...

5. 'It was like my brain just got sick of me not listening, that it was just like, 'ENOUGH,' and it went off, flipping metaphorical tables and showing me how we actually felt.' Ava—page 264. Prior to saying this, Ava seemed very happy with Gideon, so why do you think that her brain called 'enough' on her behaviour?

Family

1. Both Ava and Gideon have 'unconventional' family structures. Consider the types of relationships each character has with their parents, and comment on how the novel positions the reader to embrace alternative family structures.
2. Gideon and his sister, Annie, are very close. Ava doesn't have siblings but she had Kelly. Using quotes from the text, compare Annie and Gideon's relationship with Ava and Kelly's. How did Kelly act in the same big sister role as Annie?
3. What messages does the reader learn from the descriptions given about Ava's connection to Kelly's family? What do you think the author is saying about what constitutes a family?
4. Pages 60-62 describe the Maori funeral held for Kelly. Explain the way that culture and family are connected and use examples from these pages to support your position.

Community

1. Discuss the different ways that various communities (school, TAPs, drama club etc) have either helped or failed Gideon and Ava.
2. How do Ava and Gideon demonstrate their belonging in particular communities?
3. Ava initially doesn't want to go to TAPs. Why doesn't she think it's the right place for her and what changes her mind?
4. Which moments in the novel best demonstrate your understanding of what constitutes a community?
5. Consider some of the funeral traditions that you know of. Conduct some research about funeral traditions in some of the communities that make up Australia's multi-cultural identity e.g. Indigenous funeral rites, Catholic funeral ceremonies. Using your research to justify your response, explain the ways that culture is maintained and expressed through funeral ceremonies.

Love and Friendship

1. Reread Gideon's explanation of his name on pages 38-39. In what ways does the movie inspiration for his name mirror the relationship he develops with Ava?
2. *Neither Ava nor Gideon were emotionally ready for the impact of a sexual relationship.* Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Justify your position with examples.
3. The novels ends with the suggestion that Gideon and Ava will go back to being friends. Do you think that



a friendship is possible after a loving relationship? Why/why not? If they do manage to achieve this, what do you think that suggests about Ava and Gideon's mental health? Are they more stable now?

- The novel considers many different types of friendships and relationships, and the ways these bonds shape individuals. Select one of the relationships/friendships that either Gideon or Ava experience in the novel and discuss the way it has shaped who they are.

RESPONDING

- Kelly is a silence in the text—we never hear from her. We only know of her and her life through Ava. Using what Ava reveals to us about Kelly, write a diary entry, as Kelly, after any of these moments;

- After she kisses Faye (pp. 59-60).
- After Kelly is hospitalised (pp. 150-151 or 171 for reference).

2. HOT-SEATING ACTIVITY

Place a chair in front of the class. Individual students are to sit in the chair in role (as a character from the novel). The class then asks questions of this student. In role, the 'character' answers the question. Students must keep within the reality of the text i.e. they must answer questions in a way that maintains the narrative truth and build upon it realistically.

- Create a slam poem as either Ava or Gideon, which would appropriately summarise their feelings at the end of the novel. In pairs, share your poem and attempt to use the conventions of slam poetry (varied pace, rhythm, pause, modulation and volume) to present it to one another. Ask if there are any volunteers for presenting in front of the class.
- Write a book review for *Beautiful Mess*, to be published in *New Writers* literary magazine. Consider the audience of the novel when developing your tone. Mention character development, authenticity of voice, style and structure. Research the author and context of the novel within her body of work.
- Advanced Literary Response—direct students to the following website:

<https://www.google.com.au/amp/s/hannahmekeel.wordpress.com/2015/06/29/lit-theory-corner-interpretive-communities-explained/amp/>

Ask the students to read the article and then write an extended analytical response to the following question:

- What interpretive community/ities do you find yourself in and how have they shaped your interpretation of the novel?
- What's the problem—Cognitive strategy activity *adapted from Parnes' Creative Problem Solving Strategy. As a class, brainstorm problems that the text highlights i.e. teenage suicide, adolescent mental health, inflexible education systems. In

groups of approximately 5, have the students complete the six-step 'What's the problem' exercise.

- Step 1. Identify the problem.
- Step 2. List 10 or more sub-problems (problems that contribute to the larger problem).
- Step 3. Select 5 of these sub-problems (work as a group to decide which you think have the largest impact on the overall problems).
- Step 4. Create two solutions per sub problem.
- Step 5. Generate criteria to evaluate each solution against.
- Step 6. Apply the criteria and determine the best solutions.

After students have done this, ask them to present a multi-media presentation to the class (using presentation programs such as Prezi, Canva, Visme, Adobe Spark, LibreOffice Impress, Zoho Show, Google Slides, SlideDog, Haiku Deck), to show their processes and findings.

- Imagine that you are the author, and you are pitching to the publishing company a sequel to *Beautiful Mess*. Write a brief synopsis for the sequel, including the major plot events, where the characters start out emotionally and where they end up. Ensure that the storyline stays true to the discourses and characterisation utilised in *Beautiful Mess*.
- Debate the following topic in class: 'Social media is a major cause of adolescent mental health problems and it should always be heavily monitored by parents until children turn 18.' Divide the class in two and allow each side to plan their arguments. Encourage students to not only support their argument but to also refute the opposition's arguments.
- Claire Christian has spoken about why she hates the word diversity. She quotes Shonda Rhimes, the creator and writer of shows like *Grey's Anatomy* and *How to Get Away with Murder*, who said: 'I really hate the word diversity. It suggests something... other...As if there is something unusual about telling stories involving women and people of colour and LGBTQ characters on TV. I have a different word: NORMALIZING. I'm normalizing TV.' Create a persuasive speech explicating Christian's and Rhimes' perspectives.