



Fish Out of Water

KATE HENDRICK

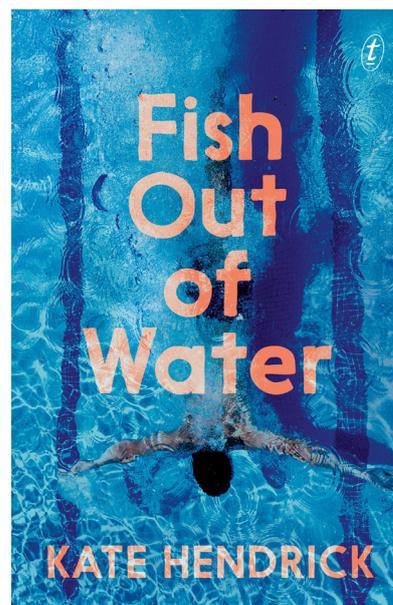
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Fiction

RECOMMENDED READING AGE: 14+

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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 an audience, purpose and context. They encompass a range of forms with a focus on language, literature and literacy. Where appropriate, they promote the integration of ICT and life skills.

SYNOPSIS

Finn feels more at home in the water than anywhere else. But when a race goes wrong Finn's confidence is completely shaken. If he's not the star of the swim team, what is he? It's not long before everything is falling apart.

Finn avoids training for a few days, but quickly realises that he can't survive without swimming—his body is made for the water. So, he returns, only to find that a new star swimmer has arrived. Loki is charming, funny, easy-going and FAST. Finn could be jealous, but he warms to Loki easily and they start to hang out. Finn has never really had a friend outside of the team before—he's surprised by how quickly he starts to rely on Loki's friendship. But soon the strength of his own feelings start to frighten him.

Finn is shaken—by what happened at the race, by the way he feels around Loki, and by what's happening at home. Finn's dad has been AWOL for years, but Finn still struggles to move on. When he starts talking to Aaliyah, one of the few girls at school who isn't star-struck by him, she pushes him to question whether his

dad was really the good guy everyone thought he was, or if Finn's just choosing to see it that way to avoid a far uglier truth. Finn feels like he's losing control of everything he thought was real, and he starts lashing out. But will he be able to stop himself from going too far? Or is he more like his dad than he'd care to admit?

Fish Out of Water is a story about the impact of trauma and abuse on children and young people, and the people and moments that define us.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kate Hendrick is a high school Visual Arts and Photography teacher whose novels *The Accident* and *The Finder* are published by Text. She lives in Sydney with her husband and two children.

BEFORE READING

1. Discuss the phrase 'fish out of water'. What does it mean? How do you think it will relate to the story? Have you ever felt like a fish out of water?
2. What does a respectful relationship look like to you? What can we do if someone we know is being abused or not treated with respect? Read this booklet by the Domestic Violence Resource Centre and discuss the ways we can support people in abusive relationships: <https://www.dvrcv.org.au/sites/default/files/Relationships%20the%20good%20the%20bad%20and%20the%20ugly%20%28booklet%29.pdf>
3. Share a place where you feel most able to express yourself. What kind of place is it? Who is there with you? What elements create those feelings of safety and comfort? How would you feel if that place was taken away?



WHILE READING

1. What does Finn find hard about breaking the routine of swimming?
2. Is Finn's family supportive of his swimming? Why does his mum have mixed feelings about it?
3. Why does Aaliyah think Finn should be second-guessing his decision to quit swimming?
4. How does Connie feel about Finn? Why do you think she drives him to swimming?
5. Finn is challenged frequently by Aaliyah, Connie and his mum. Does supporting someone always mean agreeing with them? Why is it sometimes necessary to challenge or push back to show support to someone we care about?
6. When do you realise that something has happened to Finn's dad? What do you think has happened to him?
7. What is Finn's first impression of Loki?
8. 'A one-off failure is statistically insignificant,' says Finn (p. 8). What does he mean by this? Do you agree that failure isn't a defining thing? If that's true, why do you think people get so upset when they fail?
9. How does the writer explore themes of trust in the book? Who does Finn trust and why/why not?
10. Why do you think Finn is so determined to prove himself to Aaliyah? Why do you think she agrees to the competition?
11. When Finn's mum accuses him of turning out just the same as his dad (p. 87), do you think she means it? What choices does Finn make in the book that make you think he is like his dad, and what choices does he make that suggest that he isn't?
12. How does Finn use science to make sense of what's happening in his personal life?

AFTER READING

CHARACTERS

1. Finn has built his whole identity around swimming. How does he feel when he makes the decision to give it up?
2. When Finn starts to become friends with Loki, he describes him as 'funny. But incredibly patient' (p. 33). Compare this to the way that Finn describes Madeline when he starts to spend time with her. How would you describe his behaviour towards each of them?
3. How does Finn's perception of himself change over the course of the book? Discuss the way his choice to roast a chicken for dinner so significantly represents this change.
4. Would you describe Finn as a likeable character? Why do you think the author has chosen to write

him as a character who is at times very likeable and at others incredible arrogant or self-absorbed?

STYLE AND STRUCTURE

1. The book opens with the line 'most people don't know it, but we humans are bioluminescent' (p. 1), and closes with 'I can feel myself glow' (p. 269). How does the last line echo the first? What has happened to allow Finn to see the light in himself?
2. In the first part of the story, Hendrick uses misdirection to explain Finn's dad's disappearance. Connie and Finn assume that he has run off on their family. Finn's mum thinks that Oscar has killed him to protect her. Oscar thinks that Finn's mum killed him in self-defence. What happens in the novel to make you realise that they are all wrong? Why is misdirection useful in a story like this?
3. Hendrick has chosen to write the story in first person point of view (POV), which is common for young adult novels as it's a very immediate, intimate POV. Finn is accused several times of being too self-absorbed—how does the POV add to this? Would we see Finn differently if the story was written either from the perspective of another character, or in another POV altogether?

THEMES

Identity

1. Finn has built his whole identity around swimming. 'Swimming has always done that for me. Made me feel focused, given me a sense of direction both figuratively and literally. It's the one thing in my life that's always made perfect sense' (p. 12). How does he feel when he makes the decision to give it up?
2. How does Finn's relationship with Loki make him question his identity? How does he behave to Loki as a result? Is this fair? How could he have handled things differently?
3. Finn seems to believe that identity is a choice, even though he is physically unable to stay away from swimming. Why does Aaliyah get so angry at him when he tells her that she should just choose to take her headscarf off if she doesn't want to wear it? What does the scarf mean to her in addition to its religious significance?

Friendship and respect

1. Finn doesn't have any close friends at the beginning of the book. Describe his relationships with Loki, Aaliyah and Madeline. How does their friendship help Finn navigate his trauma and confusion?
2. Finn says that the reason he doesn't socialise much with the guys from swimming is because 'I like having some time to myself, away from it all' (p. 27). What do you think 'it' is here? Is he unusual for wanting time alone?
3. Finn 'resents' Madeline for sending him messages after he's already been the 'dutiful boyfriend' (p. 145) that day. Does his behaviour suggest that he



respects her or not? Why does he treat her this way? What would you say to Madeline if you were her friend?

Abuse and trauma

1. Why did Finn's mum feel that no-one would believe her if she told them about the abuse? Why doesn't Finn believe her?
2. How has Finn handled the trauma of what happened to his dad? What happens that makes him confront things? Once you know what has happened, how do you reflect on his behaviour differently?
3. How do Connie and Finn's mum react when he accuses them of overreacting or being dramatic? Why do they react this way? In small groups, discuss the term 'gaslighting' and why it can be a form of emotional abuse.
4. Why do you think Finn feels so conflicted about his dad? Is it possible to see someone as good and bad at the same time? How do you think this makes Finn feel?

at me' (p. 86). Write a short creative response that attempts to describe what Finn's mum is seeing and feeling in this moment.

5. Prepare a flyer that you could share in your school on how to support people who might be experiencing abuse. Make sure that it is well-researched, and includes a list of professional support services (including links to a school counselling service if you have one).

RESPONDING

1. Finn has a moment early on in the book where he thinks about what his life might be like if he gives up swimming—'a different path: terrifyingly, exhilaratingly unmarked. Two choices. Finn the Swimmer. Finn the Winner. Finn who works hard and pushes through and never gives up. Or just Finn. And whatever Finn could be' (p. 4). What choice does he end up making here, and why? This moment could be a turning point in his life—what other moments in the story are significant turning points? Choose one of these and write a paragraph about what making the opposite choice could lead to for Finn.
2. Hendrick makes use of several metaphors to explore Finn's emotional journey. The idea of a fish out of water is one. Identify at least one other. Come up with your own metaphor for one of the following emotions, and turn it into a short story:
 - Fear
 - Nervousness
 - Exhilaration
3. How does Aaliyah see Finn? Is she right? She accuses him of being 'the classic golden boy, offspring of doting parents who want to give their child the world. You don't need to ask. You just need to expect, to blithely step out, because you know they'll give you whatever you need' (p. 14). Finn doesn't understand why she's so angry at him in this scene. Is she being too harsh? Is he being naïve? Rewrite this scene from Aaliyah's perspective and discuss the way this changes the way you see Finn.
4. In one scene where Finn is fighting with his mum he says, 'but what I'm actually thinking is that she's staring right at me like she's never seen me before and I can't remember the last time she really looked