



Kids Like Us

HILARY REYL

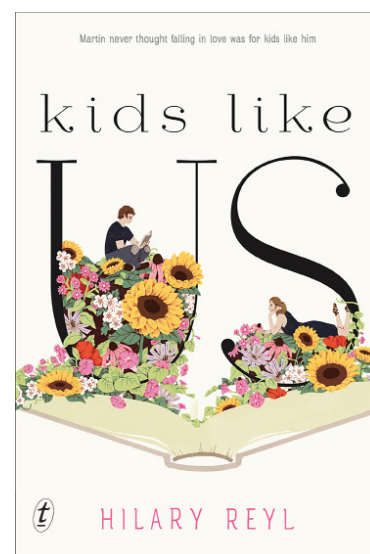
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Fiction

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 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

Kids Like Us is the delightful, heartwarming story of Martin, a teenager on the autism spectrum, who falls for Gilberte-Alice, a 'normal' French girl. While spending summer in the French countryside with his mother, Martin mistakes Gilberte for a character in a novel he is obsessed with—Marcel Proust's masterpiece *In Search of Lost Time*. He gradually realises she is not Gilberte, the fantasy girl, but a real person named Alice. Falling in love, in all its unpredictability, teaches Martin that he can in fact connect, can get out of his bubble.

Offering a valuable window into the mind of a high-functioning autistic kid, *Kids Like Us* is also the ultimate book about acceptance. Perhaps we are all in our own bubble; perhaps the line between reality and imagination does not have to be fixed. We meet Martin's adorable older sister, Elisabeth, his friend Layla and her very useful 'moth' theory. And there's lots of great cooking. The prose is sharp, original and brimming with empathy and humour.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hilary Reyl has spent several years working and studying in France. She lives in New York City with her husband and three daughters. Her adult novel *Lessons in French*, was an editor's pick on Oprah.com. *Kids Like Us* is Hilary's first young-adult novel.

BEFORE READING

- Do a perception exercise with your group of students. Ask students to observe the classroom around them and write down which aspects of the room they notice. After students have completed their list, ask them to consider the following:
 - What do these objects reveal about the school or the teacher in the classroom?
 - What messages do these objects communicate to you?
 - Do these objects evoke positive or negative emotion in you?
 - How and why might other people perceive this room differently?
- Give students a worksheet with a picture of a cartoon bubble. Ask that students fill the bubble with examples of what is included in their world. This should include family, friends, interests, hobbies, their culture and their beliefs. After students have completed their 'bubbles' ask them to share their 'bubble' with other students and note the similarities and differences.
- Ask students to reflect on their favourite literary character. After they have nominated a character, ask students to write a short story where they meet this fictional character in real life.



WHILE READING

1. 'This summer in France is a chance for you to become someone else. Someone you were meant to be.' (p. 4) Focusing on the first chapter of the novel and from your early observations of Martin, what kind of person do you think Martin aspires to be?
2. 'Maybe the actual place will unlock you.' (p. 4) Martin has travelled from Los Angeles to provincial France with his Mother while she shoots her latest film. What impact do particular environments have on our identity or sense of belonging? How do people respond differently to their surrounds?
3. 'Mom says new people can be optimistic when they first see my chiseled features, my controlled manners and my nice smile. Even if the nice smile is facing the floor.' (p. 8) Is Martin your average sixteen-year old? What do you suspect might be different about him?
4. Here in France, they don't know that there's anything weird about me. *Une madeleine, s'il vous plaît.* I wouldn't have to worry about my pronouns because there are none.' (p. 13) What is a pronoun? Why does Martin struggle with using them?
5. 'The therapists at The Center gave him the idea, and he ran with it. We would ask "Ça va?" and answer "Ça va," over and over to each other, but we would have to change how we said it each time to give it a different meaning.' (p. 16) How can words gain new meanings just by an individual adjusting the tone of their voice? With a friend, practise saying 'hello' but adopting different tones each time. On reflection, how is it possible to change the meaning of a word through the tone of your voice?
6. 'When I was six, a speech therapist told Papa that my thoughts were like the ingredients of a cake. I could line them up beautifully, one next to the other on the kitchen counter, measured, counted, and repeated, but I couldn't mix them together to create something new. Papa refused to believe I would never be more than a list of ingredients.' (p. 23) What is the speech therapist suggesting about Martin with this analogy?
7. 'Special is one of the words I have no picture for. It doesn't attach to anything in my mind. People call me 'special' a lot, and I can't understand it. When I hear 'special', I see blobs.' (p. 31) What does it mean to be special? What is your personal definition of 'special'? Why is Martin unable to understand what being special is?
8. 'Only I've learned that if I don't control myself and I play it over and over, they will take my music away, because too much music keeps me outside reality. So I keep my listening under control. My music fixation is as old as I am. Sixteen.' (p. 35) How does music instead bring Martin closer to other people?
9. 'Our exchange might look general-ed, but it wasn't. There is no such thing as general-ed.' (p. 234) Is Martin correct? Is there such a thing as 'normal'? What are the implications of defining some behaviors as normal and others as not? Who or what ultimately decides what is normal behavior?
10. 'The only way I can put it is this: we take our stories literally.' (p. 132) In what ways does Martin take *Search* literally? How does it shape the way he sees the world?

AFTER READING

CHARACTER

1. 'I'm an excellent parrot.' (p. 18) How is Martin like a parrot? What experiences has made him this way? What are the implications of him behaving in this way? What problems does Martin face?
2. "'Martin, if someday you end up complaining to your shrink—or your girlfriend, or your wife—that I made you do too much therapy, then I will be satisfied that I've done my job.'" (p. 186) How does Martin's Mom support him with his autism? Do you believe she has supported him in the best way?
3. 'Like you are at the very beginning of your life. Things are always changing, but there is also a solid place that is you.' (p. 279) Select five characters from the novel. You are going to create a before and after picture, analysing the change in their character from the beginning to the end of the novel. In your response you will be required to illustrate the character at the start and end of the novel with annotations, highlighting aspects of their identity. Focus on uncovering how the characters change and develop over the course of the novel but also how they remain the same.
4. "'Martin has reshaped me, Sam.'" (p. 199) Martin has quite an impact on both his family and friends. How does Martin 'reshape' the characters in the other characters in the text? Is his impact on them greater than the impact they have on him?
5. "'She doesn't want you to move on without her. It's completely natural. But you don't belong in a bubble with her anymore.'" (p. 259) Why doesn't Martin belong in Layla's bubble anymore?

STRUCTURE

1. How does the perception of Martin shape how the narrative is told? How might the narrative be told differently through the eyes of Elisabeth? What factors ultimately shape how different narrators deliver a story?
2. Why are dates instead of numbers given as the name of each chapter? What does this reveal about the narrative structure but also the character development of Martin?



3. What kind of narrative structure does *Kids Like Us* follow? Create a comic strip that illustrates the key points in the plot.

THEMES

Disability

1. 'Autism is not a problem to be fixed. It's a way to be.' (p. 180) How does Reyl develop the conversation around autism in the novel? What do you believe she is communicating about autism? Is it a problem that needs to be fixed?
2. "[T]here was a French philosopher who said that mental illness is only real within a culture that recognizes it as such?" (p. 185) In France, Martin is able to go to a 'General-ed' school whereas back in Los Angeles he goes to The Centre. Do some cultures accept mental illnesses as part of normal life?
3. "'Autistic people who say that autism is a way to be in the world, like being gay. Not a disability. Not a disease. Some of us are offended at the idea that we need to be cured. Layla says it attacks us at our core.'" (p. 183) How does labeling autism as a disability attack an autistic person at their 'core'?

Friendship

1. 'I wanted to believe him that we were becoming friends, so that it was okay to ask for favors. Like it was a sign of trust. But he was ignoring the thing I was trying to ask *him*. We were both totally focused on our own favors.' (p. 91) Throughout the novel, Martin struggles with navigating being friends with both Layla and his new friends in France. What role do 'favors' play in a friendship? How do they help Martin develop his relationship with his friends but how do they also hinder them?
2. 'I'm stunned. I was trying to bond with another boy my age whose dad is also in jail. I was finding common ground. And for once my pronoun wasn't even wrong.' (p. 226) What are the defining moments that solidify Martin's friendship with Simon and with Alice? Are their relationships confirmed by 'finding common ground'?
3. "'I can't believe I ever wanted you to be someone else. I hate it when people want *me* to be someone else. I'm sorry.'" (p. 277) When making friends, we do we project parts of ourselves onto others? How does Martin project *Search* onto Alice and Simon? How important is it to see people for who they really are?

Reality and Perception

1. 'If there is one thing that *Search* has taught me, it's that there is usually more than one truth.' (p. 68) Martin's Papa commits fraud and is sent to jail. How is this crime perceived differently? What reasons do Papa, Martin, Mom and Elisabeth provide to justify but also condemn this crime?

2. 'Marcel realizes that people are "opaque" because we try to see them with our "senses" and not our "sensibility.'" (p. 75) What does this quote from *Search* reveal about the nature of perception? How is this idea explored in *Kids Like Us*?

3. "'[I]n order to understand the nuances of reality," you have to be able to "dive into fantasy." You can't have one without the other. "They set each other off.'" (p. 244) Why must we understand fantasy to understand reality? At the end of the novel, is Martin able to discern what is real and what is make believe?

RESPONDING

1. In groups of 4 – 5 students, you will create a film trailer for *Kids Like Us*. Your film trailer should highlight important aspects of the plot, key themes and characters. You should also consider who your target audience is and what genre of film *Kids Like Us* would fit into.
2. Read the madeleine excerpt from Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. How does this story connect with the way Martin perceives the world? What can we learn from this story about the way we live?
3. Select one chapter of *Kids Like Us* to write from the perspective of a different character. How does the narrative change with the narrator? What similarities or differences are there?
4. 'Emojis are an autistic kid's dream.' (p. 47) Explain the narrative of *Kids Like Us* by using only emojis. Share your list of emojis with a friend who hasn't read the book and see if they can understand the plot or themes of the text.
5. Martin's Papa is on trial for committing fraud. Facilitate a mock trial for this crime. Give each student a role in the trial. You will need to assign prosecutors, defence lawyers, a judge, jury members, Papa, Martin, Mom, Elisabeth and Papa's clients to play roles in the trial.
6. What is Affinity Therapy? Conduct research into this type of treatment for children with autism. Create a pamphlet that explains this type of treatment.
7. As an extension task, accelerated students will additionally read Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. Students will write a comparative text response essay comparing one of the themes of the novels.
8. 'The Center teaches us that questions are important.' (p. 47) Create a Kahoot quiz about *Kids Like Us* to test your classmates with.
9. What evidence is there to prove that Martin's personality has changed over the course of the novel? Compile a list of evidence to support your interpretation.
10. "'You tell me that you live in this different world because of your Proust book and how your mind works and everything. And you make it seem that



all of us here are kind of privileged because we don't have to live in your world. Like you might be trapped, and we are free. What you don't get is that you're rich and you live in America and you hang out with famous people and you don't even notice that that makes you lucky.' (p. 267) Who is privileged in the novel? Who is not? In an analytical essay, address this question with reference to characters from the text.