



Chasing Boys
by
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Teacher Notes
prepared by **Joy**
Lawn, Literature
Consultant

Readership: Lower to
Mid-Secondary

Genre: Fiction

When Ariel Marini started school, her mum's advice was, 'Mind your manners, listen to your teacher and don't chase boys.'

And then life got complicated.

Dark-edged and funny, Chasing Boys is about what happens when everyone around you is moving and you're standing still.

I add another thing to my list for Leonard. What does it mean, Leonard, I would ask, if a boy, a boy that you don't like, gives you something — say a piece of paper with his mobile number on it — and instead of showing it into the bin you hide it in your underwear drawer?

About Chasing Boys

Ariel prefers to be called El. She has had to change schools from a private school to Blair Secondary College because something has changed in her family's circumstances. She has a problem with her father but we don't know what has happened. We are given hints throughout, until we find out at the end. Her family — mother and older sister - is pretending that their previous life didn't exist. El can cope with her new school because she meets 'school hottie', Eric Callahan, on her first day and makes friends with Margot and Desi. After a while she hears that it's actually 'Angelique and Eric' together, not her ideal pairing of 'Eric and El'.

El gets to know Angelique, while Gaston — a new student, who looks great in jeans — sometimes seems to want to get to know El. There is a 'literary mobius strip' as El watches Gaston watching her watch Eric.

El has counselling sessions with Leonard, who is some kind of '- ologist', but she doesn't speak to him. She sees the seasons passing from his window.

Readership

- This novel is aimed at girls in junior to senior secondary school. It can also be enjoyed by mature readers in upper primary.
- Class study – literature circles or class novel
- Independent reading

Genre Rites of passage, with comedy, tragedy and romance

Title - Chasing Boys

When she starts school, El's mother advises her, 'Mind your manners, listen to your teacher and don't chase boys'. (page 52) Describe how El has or hasn't followed this advice.

1. Could the title be changed to Chasing Girls?
2. What would have to be changed in the book to make this possible?

Writing

Even though this novel is gripping and easy to read, the writing is crafted carefully. The mystery about El's father unfolds gradually and this is one way of maintaining the

readers' interest. The characters and their relationships also hook the reader – 'Will El ever go out with Eric?' 'Who does Gaston really like?' 'Will El and Margot make up?' ...

The novel is written as a first person narrative in present tense although the author didn't find this easy to maintain.

'I found myself reverting to past tense mid-paragraph and there was one chapter, a recount, where my editor asked me to revert to past tense so as to keep the distinction clear between present and past accounts.' (Karen Tayleur)

1. Find the chapter in the novel that is the recount in past tense.
2. Select part of the story, such as the end of a chapter, and write more – inventing a continuation of the scene. Write in present tense, using first person.

Structure

The structure and format make the novel accessible and easy to read. Note the

- Short chapters
- Amount of 'white space'
- Line drawings

1. Contrast these with other novels for young adults.

Imagery

The imagery and symbolism is mainly generated by the changing seasons, viewed through Leonard's window. This is also represented by the motifs at some of the chapter beginnings. How do the seasonal motifs and images reflect what is happening in the novel? (See also Major Themes: Hidden Feelings)

Binary Oppositions

Binary Oppositions is a term from literary theory, simply translating as 'opposites'. Many of the characters have opposites or foils (binary oppositions). The author describes this as 'black and white'. The author wants the readers 'to consider that what first appears to be black might be white and vice versa.' (Karen Tayleur)

1. List these.

For example

- Angelique and El (page 139 and elsewhere)
- Margot and Desi (page 113 and elsewhere)

2. Also list the characteristics that make these 'opposite' characters different from each other.

As well as characters being binary oppositions, other aspects in the novel, such as the old and new life (page 96), girls' and boys' basketball (page 75, and elsewhere) are binary oppositions.

3. Look at these examples closely enough to be able to state how they are different and may show opposite ends of a spectrum. Then find other examples.

Humour

1. Find examples of humour in the writing. In small groups, re-enact some of these scenes.

Sarcasm and jokes

When Gaston goes to El's house for a meeting about the geography assignment that she has forgotten about, she is wearing pyjamas.

'Are you sick?' he says.

'No,' I say, pulling the doona up towards my chin. 'I always lie around on Sundays in my PJs.'

'Oh', says Gaston, looking around.

'That was a joke,' I explain, just in case he didn't get it.

'I thought it was sarcasm,' he says lightly. (page 104)

1. What is the difference between sarcasm and a joke? Define from the dictionary.
2. Is El's statement a joke or sarcasm? Find or make up other examples of sarcasm.

Major Themes

Peer Relationships

Consider:

- boys + girls
- girls + girls
- boys + boys
- the 'In' Group

Missing Parent

The absent parent is a common theme in Young Adult literature. The parent may be divorced, dead or away. The blackness in El's life is related to her father but we don't know what has happened to him until very late in the book. He is somehow responsible for the family's deteriorating finances and bankruptcy is finally revealed, but has he absconded, divorced or died? Bella, El's older sister, visits him but El refuses. Also read page 68.

Hidden Feelings

Characters in the book are keeping their feelings, including grief, to themselves for different reasons.

1. What does the mention of the elephant in the corner of the room (page 162) refer to?

There is an elucidation of this in *The Grief Book: Strategies for Young People* by Elizabeth Vercoe and Kerry Abramowski, published by Black Dog Books, on page 67.

2. Select a character in *Chasing Boys* who is grieving. Choose a symbol that represents their grief. This could be something from the natural world (perhaps an animal or bird) or the man-made world (perhaps a barbed-wire fence). Write a poem about the character's grief, incorporating your symbol. (See also Writing: Imagery)

Characters

Sociogram

Compile a sociogram showing the relationships between the characters who are at school. The beginning of the book will be a helpful starting point.

Ariel / El

El was described as 'exotic' at her private school because of her Mediterranean background but she's 'just another one of the crowd at Blair', where there are many different nationalities (pages 5,6). She would like to be like beautiful, talented Angelique and actually practises being her - 'I lock myself in the bathroom at home, and part my hair in the middle, in that Angelique style, and suck in my cheeks to find my un-Angelique cheek-bones.' (page 33).

Her big mouth slips out more than she wants about new student, Gaston -
'This has nothing to do with ... you know who. You're both ridiculous, getting excited about some dropout from another school who just happens to look good in jeans -'
Margot gives me a look that says I'm making a fool of myself.
'Is he a dropout?' she asks with an interested gleam in her eye.
Trust her to pick on something I made up. (page 63)

1. What can we learn about El by what she doesn't mean to say, and what she doesn't say?

The author, Karen Tayleur, selected Ariel's name from the The Little Mermaid. (She had to use the name from the Disney version because the Hans Christian Andersen original tale kept the mermaid nameless.)

2. Why do you think the author linked her main character with the little mermaid?
3. Also read the quote at the start of the novel spoken by the sea witch to the mermaid. How does it describe what Ariel/El wants and the sorrow it brings?

Another famous 'Ariel' from classic literature is in William Shakespeare's The Tempest. What is the meaning of this Ariel's name and how is this meaning similar and different to Ariel's in Chasing Boys? Consider that Ariel's role in The Tempest is to stir up the tempest.

4. What similarity does this have with Karen Tayleur's Ariel?

Gaston

Gaston is a new student who El thinks looks good in jeans. He always seems to be on detention and already seems to know Angelique and Eric. The author writes about him economically. We are only given clues to his personality, background and intentions, making him an enigmatic and very attractive character.

1. Compile some of the facts that you know about Gaston. Consider what may have caused his scar?
2. Using this information and keeping to the 'spirit' of the character, write a school report for Gaston. Keep in mind that he is a talented artist. (See also Visual Art)

Eric

Eric is described as physically attractive. Write a description of him for a modelling portfolio.

The author hints that he is less than perfect when El smells him.

I can feel the heat coming off his body in waves and his Eric smell, which is a mixture of mothballs, just-baked bread and liniment. (page 85)

El realises that 'her' Eric Callahan isn't real.

Eric Callahan, my Eric Callahan, would never hit on his girlfriend's friend. Especially when his girlfriend was sick in bed. My Eric Callahan would never badmouth his girlfriend while trying to nibble another girl's ear. That's when I figure out that my Eric Callahan doesn't exist. My Eric Callahan was a sainted god that I had endowed with amazing qualities, none of them particularly real. (page 221)

1. Write a dialogue between Eric and a basketball mate to reveal what Eric thinks about and finds important.

Angelique

Angelique is an 'in' girl. She is described on pages 134-134 and elsewhere.

1. What are her problems?
2. How popular is she? Is she surrounded but alone? Explain.
3. Would you prefer to be Angelique or El? Give reasons.

Leonard

Leonard is some kind of '-ologist'. El visits him regularly but doesn't talk to him. He, consequently, doesn't say much either.

1. Put a student in the role of Leonard and put him in the 'Hot Seat' to find out what he would like to say or is thinking about. Other students can ask him questions and say or read sections of the novel where El is with him, to elicit responses.

The Arts

Movies

The three girl friends, El, Margot and Desi, have Friday movie nights. They are so steeped in movies that they can refer to what's happening in their lives by movie titles. 'So what movie does this remind you of?' (page 132) El's family are also movie viewers. The following movies are mentioned in the text

The Breakfast Club pages 15, 31

The Night of the Living Mummies page 29

Black Water page 59

The Birds page 161

Sleepless in Seattle page 206

Meet Joe Black page 238

1. How do these movies match what is happening in the novel.
2. Brainstorm other movie titles that you know. Then write scenarios to match some of these titles.

The girls, especially Margot, analyse movies -

Between mouthfuls, Margot points out the inconsistencies with the film's plot line, the lead actor's lack of talent, and the poor music score which belonged more in a Disney movie than a suspense film. (pages 60-61)

3. In groups select one of the movies mentioned in the novel (see list above).
4. Show an excerpt to the rest of the class which illustrates its corresponding event in the novel. (The teacher will need to check movie ratings to see which are appropriate to include. Parental permission may be required.) The class can then critique the movie excerpt using Margot's criteria and others.

Angie wants El to write a review of her top five movies for the year (page 191).

5. Students write a review of their top five movies for the year.

Visual Art

El finds a crumpled piece of paper on the ground which she puts into her pocket. When she looks at it later -

It's another piece of artwork from Gaston. This time there are no flames or spider-webs.

The sketch is of a girl with wide eyes and a puzzled expression ... There is a smudge of shadow under each eye. (pages 132-133)

El discovers later that the picture is of her.

Previously Gaston had given El some of his art work.

It was just patterns, curling into each other with lines and circles, all done in blue pen. Among the circles is a long number that I assume is his mobile number. (page 54)

1. Either create a design which incorporates a mobile phone number, or sketch another student, highlighting certain features to give insight into their personality or interests.

Music

El likes the band Scheme. Read pages 19, 232-233.

Invent and write a publicity profile on them.

This should include the style of music, the band members and their instruments.

Also write some sample song lyrics. These could be either

- parts of several different songs, such as some choruses, verses (or parts of)
- the lyrics for an entire song

About Karen Tayleur

Karen Tayleur lives in the hills of the Dandenong Ranges with her husband and two kids who always leave their homework to the last minute. As well as being expert at year seven German and Chinese and holding down a four-day-a-week job, she is a writer.