

GIRL DEFECTIVE
Simmons Howell

Teachers' Notes by Shanyn Limpus

These teaching notes will be useful in addressing the Australian Curriculum: English for students in Years 9 and 10. Please note: this novel contains coarse language.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will have the opportunity to:

- Present an argument about a literary text based on initial impressions and subsequent analysis of the whole text (ACELT1771)
- Evaluate the social, moral and ethical positions represented in texts (ACELT1812)
- Compare and evaluate a range of representations of individuals and groups in different historical, social and cultural contexts (ACELT1639)
- Explore and reflect on personal understanding of the world and significant human experience gained from interpreting various representations of life matters in texts (ACELT1635)
- Analyse texts from familiar and unfamiliar contexts, and discuss and evaluate their content and the appeal of an individual author's literary style (ACELT1636)
- Analyse and evaluate text structures and language features of literary texts and make relevant thematic and intertextual connections with other texts (ACELT1774)
- Create imaginative texts that make relevant thematic and intertextual connections with other texts (ACELT1644)
- Use comprehension strategies to interpret and analyse texts, comparing and evaluating representations of an event, issue, situation or character in different texts (ACELY1744)
- Plan, rehearse and deliver presentations, selecting and sequencing appropriate content and multimodal elements for aesthetic and playful purposes (ACELY1741)

SYNOPSIS

This is the story of a wild girl and a ghost girl; a boy who knew nothing and a boy who thought he knew everything. And it's about life and death and grief and romance.

All the good stuff.

Set during summer in St Kilda, 15 year old Sky Martin and her socially awkward brother Gully live with their dad in a flat above his record shop. Sky is looking forward to learning how to buy vinyls for her father's store, but Bill has hired a new employee, the tragi-hot Luke, leaving her to watch out for her younger brother. Sky would rather be out finding her people and having adventures with her older, free-spirited friend Nancy than following Secret Agent Gully on his mission to find the person that bricked the shop. When Nancy goes AWOL, Sky finds herself on a mission of her own to find out the truth about the missing girl from the posters who haunts her dreams.

Girl Defective is a warm and edgy coming-of-age novel that captures the feeling of family, adolescence and finding your place in the world. Readers will love the quirky characters and enjoy the mysterious narrative.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Simmons Howell is an award-winning short story writer, screenwriter and small press publisher. Her short film *Pity24* was awarded the 2004 AWGIE and has screened at highly regarded film festivals such as the London Australian Film Festival and Los Angeles Shorts Fest. She is published around the world and has a dedicated following of readers.

THEMES

Family

Sky and Gully live with their father Bill 'The Patriarch' Martin. Sky's mother changed her name to Galaxy and left for Japan when Sky was 10. The only interaction Sky has with her mother is the occasional international phone call and viewing her website. The family eventually learns to cope with the situation, but the absence of

their mother has affected each of them in different ways—Bill is an alcoholic, Gully is socially awkward and wears a mask and Sky feels isolated. Without a mother, Sky has taken on the parental role of looking after her younger brother. Sky loves her family, but she shows her anger and frustrations with them and at times rebels. Despite Bill's failings as a single parent, he tries his best to maintain family traditions including Friday fish and chips and Sunday family breakfast at the gardens. Bill's relationship with Eve brings with it some family gatherings that make Sky and Gully feel like they have a happy family.

Friendship

Sky's best friend is 19 year old Nancy. Sky reveals to Nancy that she is lonely and Nancy promises to fix that. Nancy isn't as available as Sky would like and often abandons Sky for more exciting adventures involving men. Sky would love to take the advice of her mother and be out 'finding her people', but she struggles to make friends. Sky eventually forms a connection with the school pariah Quinn, and as time passes her friendship with Luke turns into a romantic relationship.

Fitting in

Sky looks normal on the surface, but underneath she has her own problems: dealing with the absence of her mother and struggling to find her place at school and in her family. Sky feels isolated and defective in her own family because she is the only girl, and believes her father and brother have a special bond that she can never be a part of because of her gender. She is an outsider and admits that she hasn't made any friends at school because she doesn't fit in. Like any teenager, Sky is also struggling to deal with her hormones; she has complicated feelings for Nancy, but also has a crush on the new employee Luke. Sky loves her brother, but she finds it hard to be the one responsible for him when she just wants to act like a normal teenager and have fun with Nancy.

Loss

Characters in *Girl Defective* deal with loss in different ways. Sky and Gully have learnt to accept that their mother abandoned them to be a performer in Japan, but there are still signs that it affects them. Gully continually wears the pig mask his mother sent him and Sky still holds on to the last letter her mother wrote before she

left and all of her mother's vintage clothes. Luke is dealing with the death of his sister Mia. He sketches pictures of her and put the posters of her up around St Kilda. He came to St Kilda to find some answers about his sister because he feels like he never really knew her. With the help of Sky, Luke is able to find some closure for his sister's death.

Love

Love is dealt with in a variety of ways during the novel. Nancy teaches Sky that love is fiction. Nancy's relationships with men are fleeting and mostly based on sex and she usually has an angle. Before Nancy, Sky didn't know a lot about sex or relationships, and Sky desperately wishes she could be Nancy and have the same attention from boys. Sky develops a crush on the new employee Luke. She watches him on the shop's CCTV and daydreams about him. She has never had a boyfriend or been kissed before, so she asks her Aunt Vesna and Nancy for advice. Sky learns that her relationship with Luke is different to the way Nancy talks about love because Sky has feelings for Luke—something Nancy have never described. Sky's dad Bill also starts a new relationship with Eve, an old friend. Their relationship mirrors Sky and Luke's as they also act like a couple of teenagers. Sky and Luke's relationship isn't overly developed in the novel, but you get the sense that their relationship is a symbol of Sky growing up over the summer before she leaves St Kilda.

Theme Questions

1. Find specific examples in the text where Sky is affected by the absence of her mother and explain why.
2. Re-read the last paragraph on page 3. What does this reveal about Nancy's relationship with Sky?
3. What makes Nancy so appealing to Sky? In what ways does Nancy fill the role of Sky's mother?
4. Identify ways that Sky is a better friend to Nancy than Nancy is to Sky. Why do you think Sky continues to be friends with Nancy despite her ways?
5. What do Sky and Quinn have in common?
6. Can you find any examples of where Sky gives in to peer pressure to fit in?
7. Why do you think Sky becomes obsessed with the posters of Mia? In what ways does her quest for Mia have to do with her quest for her own identity?

8. How do the relationships in the novel affect sky's development over the course of the summer?
9. Find all the passages where Nancy talks about love. What impression is she giving Sky about love and relationships? How has Nancy's past affected her ideas about love?

BEFORE READING

Judging a book by its cover

Look at the front cover of the book and predict what it might be about. Why can you assume about the character on the cover?

Superheroes

We were like inverse superheros, marked by our defects.

- Make a list of superheroes and list their assets.
- Now make a list of human faults or imperfections and assign inverse superhero names.
- Choose your defect and create your own inverse superhero.

Rituals

Girl Defective is a coming-of-age novel that deals with adolescent themes and rituals of growing up. The Martins also have their own family rituals.

- In small groups, list the rituals that make up the experience of traversing from childhood to adulthood.
- What rituals or traditions does your family have?

Friendship

They don't tell you how to make friends at school. How one day, if it's the right person, you can open up and empty out and they can pour their story into your space, and this shifting of components goes on until you're mixed good. (p. 233)

- Write your own definition for friendship and choose the top 5 attributes of a good friend and a bad friend.

- List three famous friendships from books or movies and identify what makes those characters good (or not so good) friends—for example Harry, Ron and Hermione (*Harry Potter*), Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn (*Huckleberry Finn*), Sherlock Holmes and Professor Watson (*The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*).
- Create a brochure on friendship. Include information on how to make friends, how to keep friends and how to know the difference between good and bad friends.

STRUCTURE

Girl Defective has a four part structure (see chapter list at end of notes).

1. How does the author hook the reader in the prologue?
2. What is appealing about the author's writing style?
3. Discuss the use of first-person narration and what this writing style does for characterisation. Does using Sky as a narrator limit the storytelling in any way?
4. Re-write a scene or chapter of the book from another character's perspective.
5. What is the purpose of incorporating Gully's memos? Are they effective?

Extension: Read Simone Howell's other novels *Notes from the Teenage Underground* and *Everything Beautiful*. Compare the novels and argue whether Simone Howell has a specific writing style and makes use of similar devices (such as urban settings and larger-than-life characters). What sets *Girl Defective* apart?

WHILE READING

Soundtrack

Music was everything: the whole stinging ringing pulse of being human was in here pressed against each other (p. 183).

Music is a huge part of Sky's life. Keep a list of all the songs mentioned throughout the novel and discuss the soundtrack of her life.

- Create a soundtrack for a section of your life, such as your teenage years. Share your list with the class.

Characters

Simmons Howell creates quirky characters and realistic dialogue.

- Make note of any quotes that sum up each character.
- Once you have finished the novel, choose one quote that best describes each character.

Sky Martin	
Gully Martin	
Bill Martin	
Nancy Cole	
Luke Casey	
Quinn Bishop	

Similes

The author uses imaginative similes throughout the novel.

- Make a note of any similes that really stand out.
- Create your own similes for the main characters and similes for how the other characters would describe Sky.

AFTER READING

Young Adult

Girl Defective is categorised as Young Adult, which is a very general genre.

- Based on the novel, write a definition for young adult novels.
- How well does *Girl Defective* represent the life of a 15 year old girl and the issues and feelings that come along with being a teenager? Discuss.

Girl Defective

My defects weren't the kind you could see just from looking (p. 2).

- Do you agree that Sky is defective or does she have the same problems as most teenagers? Explain.
- Write a list of Sky's defects and decide which of them are resolved and which are symptoms of Nancy—as discussed in the prologue.

Blending in vs. Standing Out

As far as I was concerned, the less stuff I had sticking out and drawing attention to me the better (p. 10).

- Write to Sky giving her your top 10 tips for teenagers to blend in.
- Create a class debate arguing whether it is better to blend in or stand out.

Identity

I couldn't help comparing Quinn's bedroom to mine. It was all her. It screamed Quinn Bishop. What did my room say? (p. 160-161).

- Describe your own bedroom and decide which parts of it define you.
- Design your own dream room—including a drawing—so that it best defines you. Swap your drawing with another student and ask them to describe you based on your picture. Compare their responses with your own description.

Place

The suburb of St. Kilda is a major 'character' in the book. The author has created a map of the novel which you can find at:

<https://maps.google.com.au/maps/ms?msid=200023569798672970380.0004e433d1c768dd442e2&msa=0>

- Describe the suburb you are from or a place where you feel you belong.
- Pick three locations from your suburb and try to connect them in a short story.

Groups

There are many groups of people represented in the text: vintage collectors, artists, lead singers, prostitutes, bullies, groupies etc.

- Evaluate how these groups and individuals are represented in the novel and make comparisons to how they are represented over time and in other texts. Discuss with the class.

Scriptwriting

The detailed setting makes the novel very vivid. It feels like you have visited those places described, and the inclusion of music gives the novel a soundtrack. For these reasons, *Girl Defective* could be very easily adapted to film.

- Choose 2-3 chapters and convert them into a script.
- Draw a storyboard, including camera angles and shot types for one of the chapters.
- Choose the most interesting scene to perform for the class using costumes, props, and of course the appropriate music.

Essay

Write an essay based on one of the following quotes from the text:

- *Nothing is random* (p. 53).
- *Music was memory too* (p. 183).
- *Grown-ups are just like kids but bigger* (p. 221).
- *No-one ever got anywhere by sitting still* (p. 265).

Postcards

You were a good friend to me. I'll send you postcards (p. 293).

- Imagine that Nancy has gone through with her travelling plans. Send a postcard to Sky from Nancy.

Pen Pals

Sky develops a surprising friendship with Quinn.

- Write a letter to Quinn from Sky describing her new life in Newport.

QUESTIONS FOR READING AND DISCUSSION

1. *I was fifteen and fumbling* (p. 2). Discuss some issues that all teenage girls struggle with. What circumstances make Sky's life more difficult?
2. What does it reveal about Sky's mother that she named her children after birds?
3. Discuss how responsibility is explored in the novel.
4. How is the issue of alcohol represented in *Girl Defective*?
5. Sky finds a naked photo of Nancy on the Internet. Sky and Nancy have different reactions to this. Discuss the consequences of privacy on the Internet.
6. Research Asperger's. Do you think Gully suffers from this? Discuss.

Prologue: Bill's Wishing Well			
1	2	3	4

7. Although this book is set in the present, it has a nostalgic feeling that makes it feel as though it could be set in the past. Discuss.
8. The setting in the novel almost feels like a character. Discuss.

Up Above the Weird	A Level of Discomfort	Otisworld	The Big Quiet
Retro Girls	Don't Engage	Let's Get Stinko	Sky's Wishing Well
Anarchy	A Dizzy Broad	Crazy People	A Dare and a Dream
The Old Punk Days	Fightin' Words	Under the Sea	Baby Elephant Trauma
Family Sticks Together	Black Heat and a Bad-ass Riff	Love Live Local	Cracking Up
Ritual Days	Recon #1: Council Offices	Recon #3: Lunar Park	Mugs and Marks
Life Lessons	Luke ok Fast Forward	A Real Good Time	Midnight Confessions
Ask me Anything	Recon #2: Vale and Greeves	Aftermath	The End of Vinyl
The Red Shoe is in the Grass	Ugly Mugs		Fallen Robins
A Sort of Sickness	The Whole Vinyl Experience		Bad Luck and Time Travel
Total Catnip	Matching Mohawks		The World is a Terrible Place
Barbarians	Catsuits and Whirlywinds		Everybody Hates Nancy
The Girlfriends of Otis			In the Jailhouse Now
Desperate Animals			The Grace of Bob
			Fade and Bloom

9. How do the Martins change during the novel?

10. *'I'm not bad, you know'* (p. 2013). Explain how each character is flawed rather than bad.

CHAPTER LIST