

TEACHERS NOTES

BY JILL HOLT



Alex Tessa Duder

FOR THE TEACHER

Note that this could fit in with social history curriculum. It reflects changes over the last forty years in teenage life in Auckland. It could be a starter for discussions about gender because, despite general occupational changes, some of the stereotyped expectations of girls/boys remain the same. The written forms of procedure (instructions) and biography are suggested for writing.

USING CLUES

In pairs

You may well have heard of this book, which has been published overseas in five languages and is now regarded as a New Zealand classic. First published in 1987, it may have been around longer than you have! But read it not only for its closely focused account of a swimming champion's life, but also for its quite detailed social history of the late 1950s.

Before reading the book, study the paratexts, that is, the cover, title, back cover blurb, dedication and anything else that is not the story itself. Now predict two possible happenings and guess the ending of the story. Record these so you can check your predictions after completing the novel.

FOLLOWING THE STORY

It is helpful to work through most activities **in pairs**.

Prologue and chapter one, pp. 1–15

This book shows swimmer Alex trying to fit an ambitious swimming programme into a life that includes boyfriend, ballet, drama, study, piano and a large family.

1. In the prologue we hear Alex talking to herself – her inner thoughts. Where is she and why does the writer begin like this?
2. The beginning is largely scene-setting. List the activities Alex is involved in at that time pp. 3–23.

Chapters two to six, pp. 16–72

1. What happens that requires Alex to give up swimming for two months, and what exercise does she do at home, pp. 58, 64?

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2. List three good things and three things which upset Alex about the dance pp. 36–47.
3. Constructing questions for a partner is helpful for your own understanding. Work out a question for a partner covering pp. 48–71.

Chapters seven to eleven, pp. 73–126

1. What happens on the trip to the hot pools, and what does Alex do about it on the return journey, pp. 73–80?
2. Just what is going on in the family while Alex is driving herself so hard, pp. 90–92?
3. What trick is played on Alex one night in the school production, and how does she respond to this, pp. 92–97?
4. Constructing questions for a partner is helpful for your own understanding. Read Chapters nine to eleven and construct two relevant questions for your partner, then swap over and answer your partner's question.

Chapters twelve to sixteen

1. On page 127 Alex recognises she is happy. List four things she identifies in this self-recognition.
2. Alex has to face real tragedy. How does she deal with this, pp. 130–138?
3. Alex makes an effort to think of other people. Find an example in chapter 13.
4. Construct two questions for a partner covering chapters 14 and 15, then swap over and answer your partner's question.

CLOSE READING: THE NARRATOR

Discuss in pairs or small groups.

This story is told in Alex's 'voice' – she is the narrator. The action takes place where she is, and it is from her point of view that we learn about other characters. In this first-person narrative, Alex's emotions and knowledge govern what we read. Despite this, Duder gives the reader further insight into Alex through the use of italicized sections. What is the purpose of these sections?

ANALYTICAL READING AND DISCUSSION: SETTING AND TIME

This novel is set in the 1950s. Try to identify ways of doing things that are usually done differently now. I give you some page references but you may find others. The first is done for you.

<i>Page reference</i>	<i>Example of differences</i>
Page 26	hanging around milk bars - not a 2004 occupation for teenagers.
Page 21	
Page 22	
Pages 37–39	
Page 50	

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Page 89	
Page 109	
Pages 118	
Use other pages if you wish.	

ANALYTICAL READING AND DISCUSSION: SOCIAL HISTORY, GENDER

1. **In groups**, brainstorm all the ideas about girls and boys, and list expectations of them in terms of sport, school and ways of behaving as shown in the novel. Then get the book and see if you can add to this list.
2. **Divide into pairs**. Take the character of Julia. One person should write a three-paragraph biography of Julia's life as if she had chosen to be a nurse. The other person should write Julia's biography as if she had trained to be a doctor.
3. Swap over with your partner and see if you want to change anything in the other person's version.
4. A biography follows a specified pattern – full names, date of birth, names of parents, education and training, family relationships, community achievements, date of death and descendants on the death of your subject.
5. You should now repeat this exercise (perhaps just orally) for an imaginary boy at the time who becomes either a nurse or a doctor.
6. Any comments?

DISCUSSION/WRITING

Ideas about the best way to train in different sports change over the years.

1. **In your groups**, brainstorm to create a list of general guidelines (these might include some advice which Alex needed!). This is a generic list including all sports.
2. Add anything important you personally know about particular sorts of training. In your group, choose an individual sport and locate as much information as you can. Use the internet in a selective and restrained way. You will have to decide who is creating the site and whether they would be sensible people to listen to. You also have to be aware of commercial interests.
3. Note **the internet address which was most relevant** and explain why. Note this in your introduction the manual.
4. You could then either in the group, or in pairs, compile a manual *Training Safely* for a particular sport. It could be a manual for swimming, rugby, or whatever sport interests your group. Or you might choose to do a manual for voice training, violin playing or another skill that interests you.
5. This manual could be in the form of an instruction manual, which would be following the form of **procedural language**. Remember to use the language characteristics of clear headings, sub-headings, short sentences, perhaps numbered sentences, active verbs beginning sentences and an accurate sequence.

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VISUAL LANGUAGE: ESTABLISHING CHARACTER

Form groups of three or four

- A. We don't know much about Alex's relationship with her brother James.
1. Compile a brief list of facts and characteristics that you think *could* be associated with James and a best friend. You are extending the range of the novel and showing your appreciation of Alex's character.
 2. Create one scene when James and his friend come home and they try to get the family dinner ready with Alex. Work another character or two in if your group is larger.
 3. Ad lib that scene after you have established what your main characters are like.
 4. Present to class as a freeze frame or act out the scene.
- B. Julia is a strong character, who by the end of the book has gained her parents' permission to train as a doctor.
1. Take the scene where she forces her father to agree to this, described on pp. 119–120. The agreement is that she will keep quiet about the cousin who attempts to molest her if her father gives his permission. You will have the father, the cousin Mario, Julia, possibly the mother at the end of the scene, and you could work someone else in if you need five characters.
 2. Compile a brief list of facts and characteristics that you think *could* be associated with Mario and Julia's father and the other characters. You are extending the range of the novel.
 3. Recreate the scene vaguely described on pp. 119–120.
 4. Ad lib that scene after you have established what your main characters are like.
 5. Present to class as a freeze frame or act out the scene.

LOOKING AHEAD

What does the future hold for Alex? Do you know? Can you guess?

This is the first book of a series. Track down the other titles and enjoy the story of Alex through her pre-Games training (*Alex in Winter*), Alex going to the Olympics (*Alex in Rome*) and the tumultuous six months following her return (*Songs for Alex*).

You could also visit Tessa Duder's website for the author's comments on the Alex Quartet and her other books (www.tessaduder.com)

A DVD is also available of the 1993 film *Alex*, adapted from the novel, directed by Megan Simpson and starring Lauren Jackson as Alex.