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TEACHERS' RESOURCE KIT

Invisibly Breathing

Eileen Merriman

A moving story about unconventional love, bullying and being true to yourself.

'I wish I wasn't the weirdest sixteen-year-old guy in the universe.'

Felix would love to have been a number. Numbers have superpowers and they're safe – any problem they might throw up can be solved.

People are so much harder to cope with. At least that's how it seems until Bailey Hunter arrives at school. Bailey has a stutter, but he can make friends and he's good at judo. And Bailey seems to have noticed Felix:

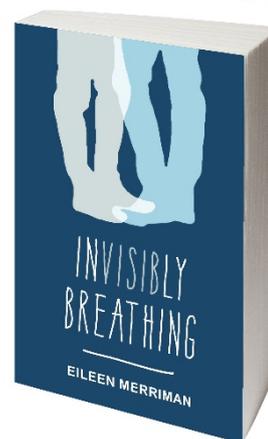
Both boys find they're living in a world where they can't trust anyone, but might they be able to trust each other, with their secrets, their differences, themselves?

About the author

Eileen Merriman works full-time as a consultant haematologist at North Shore Hospital. She is the author of *Catch Me When You Fall* and *Pieces of You*, which reviewers called 'compelling, challenging and heartbreaking.'



Pieces of You was named as a 2018 Storylines Notable Book, and both *Pieces of You* and *Catch Me When You Fall* were shortlisted for the NZ Book Awards for Children and Young Adults.



SPECIFICATIONS:

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RESOURCE KIT CONTAINS:

- Before reading
- Characters
- Themes: Questions and Activities
- Writing style and language activities
- Further research and creative response

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Invisibly Breathing is a moving story about unconventional love, bullying, and being true to yourself. Set in Wellington, the story is told in first person by both the two main characters and addresses themes of self-expression and identity, bullying and prejudice, and family relationships.

Before Reading

Before reading, skim and scan the book for first impressions/clues as to what the story might be about. Consider the following:

1. The cover image, title, and blurb. Think about the fonts, colours, and style of cover illustration and what they tell you about what sort of book this is (genre).
2. Skim the chapter headings to see if they offer you further clues.
3. Discuss your findings in small groups and list up to five questions that you have about the book. After reading, check to see if you have found satisfactory answers to your questions.

Main Characters

A feature of this text is that it is narrated in first person by both the two main characters: Felix Catalan and Bailey Hunter. The dual narration allows us to alternate between – and understand – both their points of view.

1. Read Chapters 1 and 2 and make note of your first impressions of each character. Consider the following:
 - Physical appearance
 - Interests/hobbies
 - Strengths/qualities
 - Anxieties/concerns
 - Attitudes towards school
 - Friends and peers
 - Home life
 - Similarities/differences between Felix and Bailey.
2. We first read of “Freak-out Felix” on page 9. Why do you think the author mentions this name calling for an event that happened the previous year? Why might it be an important character and plot detail?
3. Bailey has a stutter. What do you know about this condition? In groups of 3–4, see if you can come up with three things you already know and three questions about stuttering. Share with your class and see if you can find the answers for your questions.

Themes

Patterns, Rules, and Ordering in the Sciences

“If I were a prime number, I’d want to be a five.”

- Felix (p. 7)

Author Eileen Merriman has included the language of maths, physics, astronomy, and geometry in the book to great effect – not only as a clever and evocative language feature but also to show character and inform the plot. Make note of these as you read, especially anything pattern related, including mathematical and astronomical motifs.

Questions

1. Felix counts his steps on the way to school. Why do you think he does this? What happens when he loses his count?
2. Felix and Bailey discuss Alpha Centauri (see, pp. 60–61). What do you know about the triple star system? What else would you like to know? How does Alpha Centauri become significant for Felix and Bailey as the story progresses?

Activities

1. Anagrams. Felix first attempts to make an anagram of Bailey’s name on page 13. An anagram is a word or phrase made by using the letters of another word or phrase in a different order. Make an anagram using the letters of your own name or that of a classmate.
2. Palindrome. Bailey notes that “now it’s twelve twenty-one, a palindrome, the numbers reading the same left to right as they do right to left” (p. 223). What words do you know of that are palindromes? In pairs, aim to come up with four examples.

Bullying and Prejudice

“That’s when she said the words that have been festering inside me ever since.”

- Bailey (p. 70)

Felix and Bailey are both bullied by peers and family members. Some of the bullying is because they are different (especially Felix) or as a result of family dysfunction (Bailey). Also, the prejudicial attitudes of other characters in the book prevent Felix and Bailey from making their relationship public, which, in turn, creates obstacles between them.

Questions

1. On page 25 we read that mathematician and cryptanalyst Alan Turing killed himself because of the personal persecution he faced despite being very successful in his professional life. Same-sex marriage is now legal in many parts of the world. However, this wasn’t the case until relatively recently and, in some countries, homosexuality is still illegal. What are some of the changes that you are aware of

over the past 100 years around how same-sex relationships are viewed and acknowledged? When and how did this happen?

2. At the beginning of Chapter 8 (pp. 87–88) Bailey is trying to focus on his American Civil Rights homework. Do you recognise any of the names he lists? What parallels are there with American Civil Rights history and the theme of prejudice in the story?

Activities

1. Obstacles. Felix and Bailey face many obstacles to maintaining and making their relationship public. How would this be different if they were a heterosexual couple? Create a diagram or table to illustrate the obstacles faced by Felix and Bailey. Include specific examples. Think about:
 - Family
 - Peers
 - Misunderstandings between them
1. When Felix comes out to his dad, his dad doesn't handle the situation very well at all (see, p. 219). Hold a hot-seating activity with your teacher in character as Felix's dad (hot seat). Ask him about why he reacted as he did, if there are other ways he could have handled the situation, and what he might do when he next talks with Felix.

Self-Expression and Identity

"This is when I'm happiest, when I get to act and look like the person I feel inside, without worrying about being humiliated."

- Felix (p. 15)

A theme of this book is the two main characters publicly expressing their true identities – as individuals and as a couple – and pushing back against stereotypes and prejudice.

Questions

1. Stereotypes. Wiremu tells Bailey that Felix is "some kind of maths genius" (p. 43), which is an example of stereotyping. What are some other stereotypes that exist at your school? Have you been stereotyped? Are stereotypes helpful? Where do they come from? Are there other stereotypes in the book?
2. Felix has nicknames for some of his teachers. Do you think they are fair? Funny? How are nicknames important for indicating a person's identity? How do you decide if a nickname is appropriate? Do you have a nickname? How did it come to be and how do you feel about it?

Activities

1. On page 151 Felix "suddenly got a really powerful urge to get something pierced, like my eyebrow." What have you done (or wished you'd done) at different times in your life as an act of self-expression? Create a timeline of your life up until now that documents times you have asserted your identity. This could include your

appearance, hobbies, or music/reading/viewing preferences. You could include ten years into the future with things you might like to do in years to come.

2. Felix says, "I've never seen a movie about two guys in love with each other, or two girls in love with each other" (p. 192). What movies and books do you know of that are about two guys or two girls in love with each other? Create a viewing and reading list for Felix.

Domestic Violence and Family Facades

"'Shit'. He wipes his hand on the back of his shorts. 'Blood nose. I have them all—"

- Bailey (p. 167)

Bailey's father's violent and controlling temperament is a source of much tension, trauma, and injury in their household. Nevertheless, Bailey is reluctant to tell anyone outside the family. Domestic violence is a serious issue that is often kept hidden because of fear of family shame or further instability. Also, some people don't fully understand that there are different types of family violence, including psychological and emotional abuse, as well as physical.

Questions

1. The section from "Tea?" on page 161 to the end of the chapter includes examples of control and interrogation tactics, which are a feature of domestic violence. What are some of the specific tactics used by Bailey's father in this section? How does he work to emotionally manipulate and undermine his son so that it *appears* that Bailey is at fault? What is the truth of the situation?
2. Excuses and covering up by both perpetrators and victims are another feature of domestic violence, as can be seen on page 167. Where else in the book does Bailey or his father make excuses? What are their motivations for doing so?

Activities

1. Close reading. Read the first section of Chapter 14 (pp. 153–154) and examine how the author creates an atmosphere of tension and contrasts this with Bailey's memory of being up the hill. What language/words does Merriman use to describe the two settings? How are they similar and different? How would you characterise the two settings? What does each place mean to Bailey?
2. Felix's family isn't perfect and there are tensions in the Catalan household also. Compare and contrast Bailey's and Felix's home lives. Think about:
 - Arguments/verbal tensions/communication problems
 - Living arrangements
 - Finances
 - Physical threats

Writing Style and Language Activities

1. Find the definitions of the following words and use them in a new sentence:
 - Refracts (p. 8)
 - Insignia (p. 19)
 - Asymmetric (p. 20)
 - Ciphers (p. 24)
 - Expunged (p. 69)
 - Effervescence (p. 97)
 - Nemesis (p. 131)
 - Puerile (p. 151)
 - Minion (p. 166)
 - Redundant (p. 218)
2. Alliteration: “freckly face” (p. 8) is an example of alliteration, which is when the same letter occurs at the beginning of adjacent or closely connected words. Look for and note other examples of alliteration in the book.
3. Suffixes. With “new-kid-itis” (p. 19), the author has coined an amusing term using the suffix “-itis”. A suffix is a group of letters that are added to the end of a word to make a new word. Find the meaning of “-itis” and four examples of other words that use this suffix using the dictionary or Internet search tool.
4. Italics. Note how italics are used in the book. Do you notice a pattern of how and when they are used? Would your understanding of the story and its characters change if the text in italics was not included?
5. Flashback. A flashback to before Bailey and his family moved to Wellington begins on page 69. What do you understand to be the purpose of this flashback? What information does it provide us about Bailey that is important to understanding why he is living in Wellington? Does it give you any clues as to what might happen in the story?

Further Research and Formal and Creative Responses

1. There are sections in the book where both Felix and Bailey are placed under a lot of stress. The author uses specific details to describe each character’s physiological response to different forms of stress, including saddening or painful memories. For example, “Every time I look at it, my throat hurts” (p. 17). Write a paragraph describing how your body responds to a stressful event. Try to avoid clichés and instead focus on specific changes that happen to your body. Then think about how you can calm or release yourself from this state.
2. On page 19, Bailey points out that there are differences between Karate and Judo. In pairs, research these two martial arts and then create a poster (or other presentation) explaining the history, culture, and differences between the two forms.
3. Early in their relationship, Bailey and Felix find themselves in detention together (p. 41). How is detention held at your school? Do you think it is an effective punishment or deterrent? Do you know of alternatives to detention? Hold a class debate with the moot “Detention has no place at our school”.
4. Write and present a speech (oral text) on one of the themes from the book or another related topic. Make sure you use examples from the book as well as examples from real

life and/or other texts. Alternatively, this activity could be undertaken as a written response.

5. The book is set in the Wellington region. Create your own map of the area and mark as many of the locations in the book as possible, and key events that happened at the different sites. You may have to use some “creative license” for some sites and their names.
6. As a class or in a group, create a hanging mobile featuring different characters, events, and settings in the book with Felix and Bailey in the centre. Incorporate Felix’s love of shapes and patterns by making the pieces different geometric shapes.
7. Research Chaos Theory (see p. 86) and create a poster (or other visual text) which explains the theory. Alternatively, you could create a poster for one of the other scientific theories, phenomena, or figures referred to in the book. Make sure your poster is visually captivating and clearly and concisely communicates the key information about your topic.