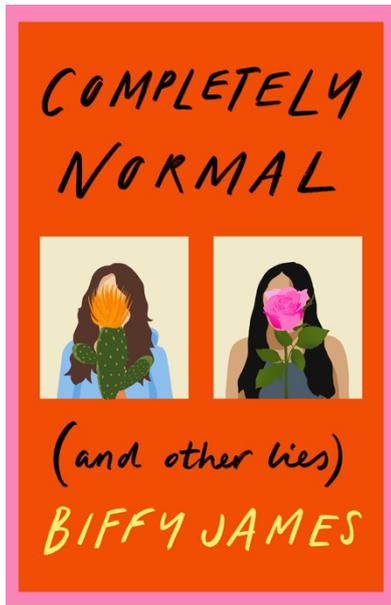


Teacher's Notes



*Completely Normal
(and other lies)*

Written by **Biffy James**

Teacher's Notes by Bec Kavanagh

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LEARNING OUTCOMES

RECOMMENDED FOR

Years 9–10 (Reading age 12+)

KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- Learning areas: English
- General capabilities:
 - (Language for interaction) ACELA1551 & ACELA1564
 - (Text structure and organisation) ACELA1553

- Literature and context (ACELT1633)
- Examining literature (ACELT1643)

THEMES

- Depression
- Friendship
- Grief
- Change
- Identity
- Love
- Body Image

SYNOPSIS

When Isaac Calder is killed in a car accident, the whole school grieves. Everyone loved Isaac, including Stella Wilde. But Stella, whose friendship with Isaac was a secret and precious thing, can't share her grief with anyone – so she buries it deep inside, along with all of the other feelings that she doesn't want to deal with.

Stella's mum, worried about her daughter's emotional state, insists that Stella goes to therapy. And even though Stella claims that she's fine, when she talks to a counsellor she finds that it does help to open up about her feelings. However, it opens *her* up to other things as well – like the things she's unhappy with in her friendships, her family, and herself.

Stella's life is about to change. And it's going to hurt. Stella is starting to realise that sometimes happiness isn't found by following the rules.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Biffy James holds a Masters degree in Creative Writing from RMIT, and has previously worked as a boarding school house mother. She writes realistic and contemporary fiction that captures the heartbreaking and hilarious day-to-day life of the modern teenager. *Completely Normal (and other lies)* is her first YA book and was shortlisted for the 2020 Ampersand Prize.

THEMES

Biffy James deals with a number of significant themes in the novel, including:

- Depression
- Friendship
- Grief
- Change
- Identity
- Love
- Body Image

Underpinning all of them is an authenticity, and a determination to show that people and feelings can be unexpected and messy. By refusing to fall into cliched versions of depression, love and friendship, James invites her readers to engage with these themes more deeply and more honestly than they might otherwise. Yes, there is bitchiness in some of the female friendships in the novel, but there is complexity too – Reena's motivations aren't the same as Emma's, for example, and Grace reaching out to Stella at the end is an outright rejection of the cliched idea that romantic relationships are more important than friendship. By giving her characters the scope to be complicated and surprising, James gives readers the same opportunity to think about their own experiences, and normalises them, no matter how different they might be. This novel creates space for meaningful discussions in the classroom and beyond about many of the challenges teenagers face.

WRITING STYLE

There are several versions of Stella in the novel – the Stella who narrates the whole book, the Stella at home and in her friendships with Reena, Sophie and Emma, the Stella who is in love with Isaac, and the Stella at the end, who perhaps is the most authentic version we see. Each version of Stella is true, but has a different voice, different ways of behaving, and is perceived differently by those around her.

- Think about the reasons why we become different versions of ourselves. What makes Stella change these aspects of herself? Is it a conscious choice, or driven by something else (and, if so, what)?
- Draw up three columns for each 'version' of Stella, and make a note of some of the differences between each. Comment on the following – behaviour, voice, the way she is perceived by others. How does the writer distinguish between these selves? How are they reconciled towards the end of the novel?
- What does Gretchen mean when she says 'hey, this girl is cool, why isn't she like this all the time?' (p226). How does Stella respond? How does this conversation shift the way Stella sees herself and her situation?



COMPREHENSION

- 'Grief has rules. So does high school' (p5). Is this true? What are some of the 'rules' Stella is referring to here? Where do they come from?
- How does Stella describe Reena, Emma and Sophie? Why does she stay friends with them if she feels like this?
- Why does Stella's mum think that she needs therapy? How does Stella feel about this?
- How do Isaac and Stella become friends? What do they get from each other that they don't get from other people?
- Why did Stella stop sewing? What makes her start again? Why does her mum take this as such a good sign?
- How would you describe the relationship Stella has with her family? How do you think she feels when she finds out that her stepsister has been named after her brother, but not her?
- Do you think Isaac respects Stella? Why/why not?
- Why does Stella feel that she needs to hide her emotions?
- Are Reena, Sophie and Emma good friends – to each other, and to Stella? What do you think they're looking for in their friendships? How is this different from what Grace or Gretchen or Stella want? What qualities do you look for in your friends?
- Do you think that Grace and Stella will be able to be friends? Does it surprise you when Grace reaches out to Stella, even after everything that's happened between them? How else does Grace surprise you, or defy expectations?
- What are some of the cliches or stereotypes that Biffy James pushes back against in the novel? Why do you think she does this? Do stereotypes make anyone feel good?
- Who made the group chat that shared Stella and Isaac's messages with the whole school? Why? Is there any justification for her behaviour?
- Choose three of the characters and comment on the way that they have each changed over the course of the novel. What has made them change? Is it a positive change? Do you think it will last?

WRITING EXERCISE

What does Isaac see in Stella? Do you believe that his feelings for her are genuine? Choose one of the following prompts, and write a scene that takes an element of the novel in an alternate direction.

- Imagine that Isaac didn't die. What would have happened next?
- On page 101–102 Grace comforts Stella when she's upset, but Isaac does nothing. Write an alternate version of this scene.
- What might have happened if Stella told Grace the truth about her relationship with Isaac as soon as they became friends?



CREATIVE ACTIVITIES

- Stella is surprised by some of the questions her GP asks her to figure out if she has depression. In particular, she's surprised to learn that apathy – the absence of feelings or emotions – can be a sign of depression. Did this surprise you as well? Make a list of all of the symptoms you know. Are there other unexpected symptoms to look out for? How can you support someone who is depressed?
- Choose one of the other characters in the novel – Grace, Mickey, Stella's mum, Reena – and rewrite a scene from their perspective. When you've finished, write a short paragraph that compares your version with the original. What insights do you get by imagining how someone else experiences this same situation?
- What kind of book is this? How would you describe it to someone? Write three sentences about the book for a 'blind date book cover' (where you wrap a book in brown paper and let someone choose it based on your recommendation alone, without seeing the cover or the blurb). You might compare it to something else you enjoy (eg – if you loved *THIS* you'll love this!), or describe the genre, or hint at something interesting that happens in the story (no spoilers!).
- Think about the book's title – *Completely Normal (and other lies)*. What do you think some of the 'other lies' are? Write about, or share in groups, a lie or a myth that you believed when you started high school but you don't believe anymore.

RELATED READING

- 'The Surprising Power of a Good Dumpling' by Wai Chim
- 'It Sounded Better In My Head' by Nina Kenwood
- 'The Learning Curves of Vanessa Partridge' by Clare Strahan

