



Life in Outer Space Teacher's Notes

Written by: Melissa Keil

Published by: Hardie Grant Egmont, 2013

Life In Outer Space is the first book commissioned by *The Ampersand Project*, Hardie Grant Egmont's initiative for emerging YA writers and is author Melissa Keil's first YA novel. It is a charming romantic comedy about a movie geek who never expects to find love, and the quirky, perfect girl that he accidentally falls for.

Sam Kinnison is the guy in films who doesn't get the girl. He's the guy who gets picked on by the in-crowd, the guy whose best hope is to cruise through school with his head down, and who dreams of leaving it all behind at the end of year twelve. Enter Camilla Carter. Sam doesn't know it, but his whole life is about to change and his final year of high school is going to get a whole lot better.

Camilla is beyond cool. She's got the kind of street cred that allows her to belong to whichever crowds she wants to, and somehow (like some sort of reverse demon spawn) manages to take Sam and his friends along for the ride. Until Camilla came along Sam thought he knew his life, and the cast of it, pretty well. But Camilla's entrance seems to spark something in the school, and suddenly no-ones acting the way Sam expects them to, including himself. His best friend is going through some sort of private crisis, the school bully is being (if not nice) at least bearable. Sam himself is going from being the guy most likely to choke on a face-full of purple glitter to being the guy most likely to punch one of his best friends, get beaten to a pulp in his first ever karate class, and to fall head over heels in love with the most interesting girl he's ever met.

Life in Outer Space has the perfect home in Melbourne (although the local references won't alienate readers from elsewhere) and makes good use of local cinemas and hidden geek hang-outs. Keil has a natural, easy dialogue that will resonate with the books teenage audience.

This may be a romance at heart, but with themes of stereotyping, identity, family dysfunction and a strong sense of place, there's plenty to study in the classroom. With huge scope for imaginative activities and plenty of ways to lend itself to the study of English, *Life in Outer Space* is not only great fun to read, but will make a great addition to classroom novels.

Recommended for readers 15+

I have divided these notes into three sections – reading (tools to help you during your reading of the text); comprehension (some basic questions to assist your understanding of the novel) and development (longer assignments to extend and develop your understanding of the novel)



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READING

There are certain elements of the novel that will impact the way you view the story. I have outlined some key elements below with space for you to note your thoughts and examples so that you can refer back to them later.

Place

Place is a key theme in the book. As an outsider, place is important to Camilla as it gives her a sense of home. Which places are important to the following characters and why?

- Sam
- Mike
- Allison

As well as the notes below under the heading 'Themes', take notes on where and how various places are used in the book.

- Keep a list of references to specific places mentioned in the book (eg Astor Theatre, Bowen Lakes Secondary College).

Choose one or two of the places you have noted and answer the following questions

- Is it real or fictional?
- How is the place used to create a frame for the story and characters? (is it used to give a sense of belonging, to create atmosphere, or for another reason)
- Which particular characters are involved with, or mentioned in reference to, this place?
- Do you think it matters if you don't know the place? How does the writer lead the reader to make particular inferences about the place even if it's not familiar to them?



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Themes

The theme of first love is prevalent in *Life In Outer space*, but there are many other themes running through the novel that tie together and strengthen the story overall. Look out for the themes below – I have given a few examples to start you off, but find at least three other examples for each during your reading that you can refer back to later. For each example add a quote, a page reference and a note as to how it relates to the theme.

- **First Love**

Example: When Sam finally realises that he's in love with Camilla.

Quote: "...all I can think is that never in my almost-seventeen years have I wanted someone so badly that their sneeziness and feverishness and tears isn't even a small deterrent." (p246)

Link to theme: This scene is a pivotal moment in Sam's realisation for his feelings to Camilla.

He's never felt like this before, so it's taken him so long to figure out what it means, but this quote particularly sums up why he finally realises that he's in love with her.

- **Stereotypes**

Example: Mike's stereotyped as a geek by the girls at school.

Quote: "Maybe I do look like a pre-pubescent girl with my shirt off. But Mike – well, Mike looks exactly like he has spent the last four years at the gym.

Link to theme: This scene shows up the stereotype that everyone had created for Mike by showing them another side to him – in this case his physicality which doesn't fit with the 'geek' stereotype.

- **Family**

- **Identity**

- **Friendship**

- **Home/ belonging**



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Characters

Although Camilla and Sam are the central protagonists for *Life in Outer Space*, it is very much an ensemble book, with a well developed cast of characters, each with their own story. During the book, we learn almost as much about Adrian, Allison and Mike as we do about Camilla and Sam (and there's also Julie (Sam's mum), Henry (Camilla's dad) and Justin among others, whose lives are shown to us briefly through windows in the overall story.

Pick one other character from the novel and fill out the follow list for Camilla, Sam and your chosen third character. Provide quotes and page numbers where possible.

Camilla

Physical features:

Personality traits:

How does Sam see her?

How do Sam's friends see her? Her family? The popular group?

How do you see her?

Does your opinion of her change as you are reading the book?

How does she relate to other people? What does she do to fit in?

Sam

Physical features:

Personality traits:

How does Camilla see him?

How do his friends see him? His family? Camilla's music friends?

How do you see him?

Does your opinion of him change as you are reading the book?

How does he relate to other people? How does he grow more confident during the book?

Other: (name of chosen character)

Physical features:

Personality traits:

What is their relationship to Camilla? To Sam?

How are they treated by other characters in the book?

Does your opinion of them change as you are reading the book?



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COMPREHENSION

- What is Sam's biggest dream before he meets Camilla?
- How does his life change after he meets her?
- What nickname does Sam have for the popular kids?
- Why doesn't he like them?
- How does his attitude towards them change after Camilla arrives?
- What other changes coincide with Camilla's arrival?
- What movie does Sam quote from the most?
- What is the 'extremely gay weekend'?
- Who knows that Mike's gay?
- How does Sam know when his mum's sad?
- What makes her sad?
- What does Sam do to cheer her up?
- What does Camilla make Sam do while she's away?
- Sam is not just sad that Camilla has gone away, what else has happened?
- Why does everyone think that something's wrong with Mike? What do they think it might be?
- Why does Sam punch Al in the face?
- Why is Mike annoyed with Sam?
- How does Sam describe the effect Camilla has on the rest of the class?
- Why do you think Melissa Keil has chosen to have chapter headings?
- What is the screenplay that Sam is writing about?
- Who has seen the screenplay?
- When does he decide to show it to Camilla?
- What does Camilla do that gives her stage-fright?
- What does Sam first think when Camilla asks him to play World of Warcraft with her?
- Why do Sam and his friends normally hide out in Alessandro's office during lunch?
- How do Sam's friends respond when he asks them to have lunch with him in the dining hall?
- What two cinemas are mentioned in the book that are in Sam's top 5?
- Sam describes Al as the cousin who came to a bbq and never left. Why does he describe Al like this?
- How does he expect other people to react to Al?
- How do they react?
- What genre of film does Sam watch the most?
- What do Sam and Camilla call each other when they're fighting or annoyed with each other?
- Where do these nicknames come from?
- Why doesn't Sam like Camilla's dad?
- Why do you think the book is called *Life In Outer Space*?



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DEVELOPMENT

Activity 1 – Changing Stereotypes

Sam bases many of his first impressions of other characters on stereotypes without really knowing them. Discuss the meaning of stereotypes in class. Make a list of where our ideas of particular stereotypes come from. How are Sam's shaped by the films that he watches?

Activity 2 – Writing a Screenplay

- Look at the way the film is used in *Life in Outer Space*.
- Make a list of the films referenced in the book.
- How are they mentioned?
- How much information has been given about the film?
- Why do you think particular films have been chosen for particular scenes?
- Choose one of the films mentioned and watch it after reading the book. Now reread the scene where it was mentioned. Does watching the film add to your understanding of the scene? Try to imagine that you are the character in the scene and that you are watching the film for the first time. What would your reactions be? Why has the film stayed with you?

Write a short piece about a film that has had a similar significance in your life. What was the film? Where did you watch it and who with? How old were you? What parts do you specifically remember and why do you think they've stayed with you?

Find a screenplay from a film, and try to turn your short story into a screenplay (if you have the facilities these pieces could be workshopped and turned into actual short films). Keep a diary of the difficulties you face when turning your writing from short story into a screenplay. What things do you need to change/add/cut?

Sam finds Camilla's feedback useful when writing his book, pair up with someone else in the class and share your diaries and screenplays. Offer advice on each others work and see if working with someone has made the screenplay better.



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DEVELOPMENT

Activity 3 – Facing Your Fears

At some point everyone has to face their fears. In *Life in Outer Space* even confident Camilla has to face her fears during the book.

- What fears do each of the following characters have to face – Mike, Camilla, Sam, Julie and Allison?
- How do each of them get over their fears?
- Do you think some of their fears are more valid than others?

Camilla helps Sam overcome some of his fears by encouraging him to be more confident and to do things he hasn't done before.

- Divide into groups or pairs and talk about the list she leaves him when she's away. How does this help Sam grow in confidence? What other times does Camilla make him face his fears or step outside his comfort zone?
- In the group, discuss your fears, or times when you've felt outside your comfort zone. Come up with a list of activities that you can do (together or separately) that will help you face aspects of your fears (these should be activities that you can actually do).
- Choose an activity from your list and do it after school or on the weekend. Come up with a creative response to your experience (a comic strip, a video diary, a short story or a blog) and share it when you return to class.

Activity 4 – Subtitles to Life

Not all books now have chapter headings, but *Life in Outer Space* uses comic headings or phrases to open each chapter. Discuss how these are used, and whether you think it a successful way of breaking up the chapters.

Think about Sam, narrating the story, who is essentially sharing a part of his life with the reader. Why do the headings of each chapter make the story more personal than chapter one, chapter two, chapter three...

- Imagine that you're sharing a part of your life in a book. Try to divide the last week of your life into stories you could write about, giving each point a short heading. The dot points can almost become a story on their own (the picture book *Diary of a Wombat* by Jackie French can be used as a good example of short points that describe larger events).
- Choose one of your headings and turn it into something longer (this can be any sort of creative response – a screenplay, a diary entry, a short story, a comic).



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RELATED MATERIAL

Books – (I've chosen these books because of similar themes or writing styles. They are aimed at similar ages and would make suitable companion texts to *Life in Outer Space*)

Love Shy by Lili Wilkinson, Allen & Unwin, 2012

Why We Broke Up by Daniel Handler, Little Brown Books, 2011

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian by Sherman Alexie, Random House, 2007

Online

Interview with Ampersand editor Marisa Pintado <http://www.downunderwonderings.blogspot.com.au/2012/10/interview-with-ampersand-project-editor.html>

The Ampersand Project

<http://theampersandproject.tumblr.com>

More about the author

Melissa Keil was born and raised in Melbourne, Australia, and has been a giant book nerd for as long as she can remember. By day she is a children's book editor and spends most of her life reading, writing, and watching YouTube. *Life in Outer Space* is her debut novel.

-Taken from <http://melissakeil.com/about/>