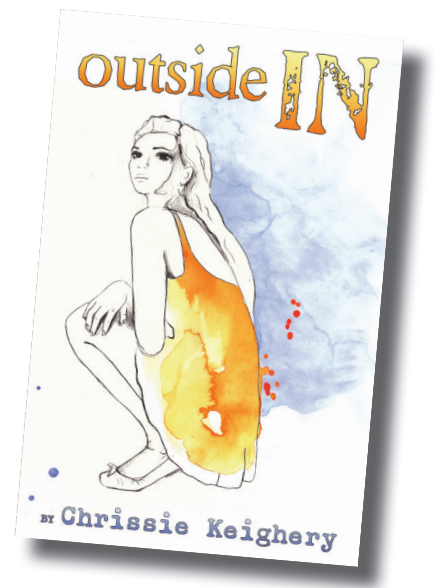


outside IN

Teachers Notes for *Outside In* by Chrissie Keighery

This engaging, frank novel centres on the lives of a group of school friends, Jordan, Meredith, Cecilia, Lee, Jack and Sam. Each tells their own story, though they also appear in the others' chapters. We are given snapshots of their lives, and in many ways, this novel is like a play in which the scenes occur in limited settings. This link to the play form is enhanced by an outside commentator who observes the group of friends, though with incomplete understandings. She acts as a single voice version of the Greek chorus, which traditionally comments on the action or events in the play often expressing to the audience what the main characters could not say, such as their fears or secrets. Although each chapter is focalised through a particular character, each is in the third person, not the first. Each character is initially unwilling to reveal themselves to others, even to their best friends. We follow them on a journey to understanding and self-acceptance.





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Following are three possible approaches to responding to the novel:

The novel in the form of a play

Identify the settings for the scenes: how does the author create the settings in a few details? Consider that there is very little physical description. For example:

- o Jordan's father's flat
- o The canteen at school
- o The English classroom
- o The 'slope' at lunchtimes

Story is carried through interactions and dialogue, for instance:

- o Jordan and her father
- o Jordan and Jack at the flat
- o The scene at the school canteen
- o Jordan and Lee in the girls' toilets
- o The school at lunchtime – the slope

Have students identify other key scenes.

Renee (at last on page 174 we are given a name) as 'Greek chorus'. Why has she remained nameless until this moment?

- o What is her role in the story? Do we trust her? Does she finally have agency? Is she altruistic? Nosy? Interfering?
- o Did you know that the name Renee means 'reborn'? Why do you think the author chose this name?
- o P 59 She describes the school 'tribes' the nerds, the sporties, the shiny group. Is school made up of 'tribes'?
- o P148 She is not a reliable commentator, is she? She thinks 'I can just imagine Jack's perfect home. The perfect home, the perfect venue for a party for the perfect boy.'
- o P149 She thinks she has identified cracks in the perfect group and she has, but not all of them. What is her motivation? Why does she want to find the cracks? How different would the story be without her observations?
- o p168 What gives her the courage to identify herself as the writer of the poem? Does this signal her shift from commentator to player?



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Following are three possible approaches to responding to the novel continued:

As the events are told through the various characters, another approach to the novel could be through a – Focus on characters:

- how we view characters from the inside
- as commented on by their friends
- in interactions with their friends/family
- what the observer says about them

Character profiles can be drawn up by small groups of students, perhaps on a wiki and can be added to as the reading of the story progresses. Students might like to create images of each person from the images they have conjured in their imaginations.

Jordan is the first to let us know what is happening to her. Her parents have recently separated. She is reluctant to talk even to her friends about her feelings until she meets Jack, a boy from school whose parents are also separated and whose father has a flat in the same building as her father's.

- What are your impressions of Jordan at the end of her chapter? What sort of person is she? How does she feel about herself, her friends?
- Trace her changing attitudes towards her father. Initially she is cynical and unforgiving, such as on page 10 'What a Committed Daddy. Give the man an Oscar.' Page 15 'I shall frolic joyfully in the sunshine.' In stages she accepts her new life with her father – second school uniform, the map, invites Jack for dinner as her father had suggested.
- At the end she takes Zebra to her father's new home. What and/or who has made her change her mind about feeling at home there? Consider the shared experiences she recalls with her father; the shared understandings with Jack.

What others say about her:

- Lee thinks on page 34, 'Jordan was amazing, the way she was always so cool.'
- P46–47 Lee says that Jordan is absorbed in herself. 'So shut up inside her own world that she didn't share the real stuff of friendship with Lee.' And says to her 'You don't notice much, unless it's about you.' Is that fair? Accurate?
- P60 The new girl observer says of her 'Exotic beauty, effortless flair...Jordan has perfected the art of not giving a shit, and it becomes her.'
- P100 Meredith thinks about her 'Jordan could be quite annoying like that. All private, private...' Is there irony here, as isn't this exactly what Meredith is doing in her own way – keeping herself private?
- P126 Jack says she has 'a whole language without the words.'



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Jordan's Father: what is your sense of him? P22 Jordan says of him 'he used to be a stirrer'. We only get her view of him, and see him through what he does. We have to infer his feelings and motivations. How do his actions invite us to see him? Why does he buy Jordan Wonder Woman pyjamas? (p29).

- Write the scene where the two little boys come knocking from his point of view – what he is feeling and thinking? (P23–24).

Lee feels that she is ordinary and average, with her frizzy blonde hair and pale skin, and longs to be more. She likes Jack and tries to convince herself that the feelings are reciprocated, but has to accept that he likes Jordan. She seems to be a follower rather than a confident individual. On page 38 she is not sure of Mr Moulton, but because he is everyone's favourite teacher she decides he is hers too.

- P43 Lee hides her true feelings and her pain, but wishes she could show her emotions. She wishes she were Lee Number Two, the Drama Queen.
- P50-51 She makes the cards for Cecilia so we know she is thoughtful and kind.
- P55 She has no self-confidence. 'Lee made sure she had her head down in case he asked her.'
- P57 Cec's poem allows her to see herself as others see her and understand that it is enough to be just Lee.

What others say about her:

- P2 Jordan thinks that '...she cared about everything. Exhausting.' But that she was '...quick to hurt. Quick to forgive.'
- P48 Jordan says of her that she is strong. 'You just sort of adapt ...You cope. That's part of the reason why everyone loves you.'
- How do you reconcile the completely different views of Lee – Jordan's and Lee's view of herself?

Sam sees himself as socially awkward, unsure of what to say, not cool in comparison to Jack, and as a bit of a geek.

- P70 In response to Meredith's comments about his bum fluff, he shaves, but there is no marking of his first shave, this marker of maturity. 'It almost felt like everyone had forgotten his birthday.'
- P71 In his uncertainty about his feelings for Meredith Sam turns to Google to find out how you know if you like somebody.
- P72–73 Discuss what Sam finds – the symptoms of liking someone. Does the class agree? Make up another list and guidelines.
- P76 What about Lauren's advice to Sam: 'if you're gonna like someone make sure it's someone who likes you too.' How easy is that?



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- P77–78 What does the class think about Sam’s idea of stirring Meredith? Good idea? Have a class vote.
- P82–84 Sam is amazed that Jack asks him about whether Jordan likes him. It allows him to see himself differently, as less of a geek – ‘Sam was now a guy to ask advice from.’
- P88 After the shave and the kiss, Sam thinks ‘finally, it felt like he was starting to get it. This strange life stuff’. How important are these ‘rites-of-passage’ that we go through? Should they be marked or celebrated more?

As others see him:

- P26 Jordan thinks, ‘Poor dorky Sam, trying to cope with feisty Meredith.’
- P91 Meredith thinks, ‘Sam was so sweet.’
- P135 Jack thinks, Sam ‘deserved something back.’

Meredith is the joker, the stirrer, with plenty to say, but uses this exterior personality to hide her sadness at being abandoned by her mother when she was in grade six (p94), a sadness and feeling of inadequacy that she is not yet ready to share with anyone.

- P90 Meredith gets her first period, later than most of her friends. Just as his first shave is a marker of moving to adulthood for Sam, so is Meredith’s period for her. How does she feel about this transition? What about her friends’ reactions (P96–98)?
- P94 The way that her school friends respond to her when her mother leaves, Meredith describes as ‘the curse of kindness’. What do you think that means?
- P95 She becomes the clown to hide her sadness. Why?
- P99 Meredith thinks about how important her friends are to her. They are ‘her Patchwork Mum’. This is an evocative image to discuss.
- P105 Meredith feels that life is good and then Jordan’s remark about her making a joke of everything stings her. Explore issues of vulnerability.
- P109 She feels betrayed and that her friends are using her and locking her out. Is it her fault? After all she set out to do this – to make a joke of everything, didn’t she? Is she being fair to them?
- P111–113– Is this a cathartic moment for Meredith? (‘...the boulder on her chest was gone.’) Explore the idea of catharsis in this novel and in wider society.

As others see her:

- P63 The new girl thinks Meredith requires more attention, but her friends don’t notice. ‘That one is always laughing. It makes me wonder why she is so sad.’



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Jack: the basketball player is popular, mature (had an older girlfriend) desirable and appears confident. He is insightful of, and sensitive towards other people, but that is not what others expect of him.

- P125 He sees Jordan's unhappiness and her strength on the outside: 'knew too well what she was going through'. Wants to help her.
- P127 Jack really is in love, but makes mistakes with Jordan – Jordan was 'difficult'. What does he mean by 'difficult'?
- P130 He is distracted by Jordan during the basketball game, and does not play well even with the NBL scout watching, until she leaves.
- P131 Basketball 'was his life. It had been his shrink when his parents had split... It had kept him sane'. How does sport provide this support and focus?
- P133 Jack is upset by Jordan seeing him as 'super Jack. Super Jock'. Not how he sees himself. How do you see him?
- P135 Jack feels like 'the crappiest friend in the universe' to Sam. Do you agree?
- P137 Jack's dad is a drunk and not interested in his son or his achievements.
- P141 Jack is signed for the state team and wishes the praise from his coach was from his dad.
- P145 His basketball success and relationship with Jordan centre him.

As others see him:

- P19 Jordan observes that he likes that Frank spoils Wanda. What does this suggest about Jack?
- P20 Jack's interactions with Frank show that he understands Frank's loneliness. Why is Jordan amazed? 'She could hardly believe this was basketball Jack. The Bouncing Jock.' On what basis do we make assumptions about people we don't know? Stereotype? Prejudice?
- P61 He is 'masculine, athletic and a little touch of zing', according to the observant the new girl.
- P147 The new girl says he will be a role model. What are her reasons do you think?

Cecilia is the talented dancer, an A student who is seen by her friends as a perfectionist. Before we meet her in her own chapter there are hints of an eating disorder, pages 52-53, for example.

- P150–154 She appears to have an obsessive-compulsive disorder, and a distaste for her body and its female functions. She cannot cope with change – in her friends, in her body, and doesn't understand her reactions herself.
- P154 She disguises her eating disorder in a web of lies. Despite her achievements at school and in dancing, she has low self esteem. Talk about why students think this might be.
- P156 Cecilia feels the burden of being an only child and her responsibility in the family. She considers herself to be an 'investment' by her parents – 'a loan with



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interest'. Do you think this is fair, or is this a symptom of her skewed view of reality?

- Pp156 her rituals – the internet café, the shopping to buy food. Why does she choose the particular foods that she does? What do you know about bulimia?
- P160 Cecelia thinks about her focused parents: 'They both knew nothing about her'. Do you think this is the case? We only see them through her eyes. Do you imagine that they are ignorant of her condition? Role play a conversation between them, about their daughter.
- P160-163 On these pages we are given a graphic description of bulimic behaviour. There is no glamourising of the condition but an understanding of why it might happen. Discuss reactions to this.
- P164 Cecilia's friends invade on the pretext of homework and set help for her in train. Is that what you would do? Why do they bypass adult help?
- P171 Cec says 'her friends should mind their own business. They shouldn't be judging her'. Are they judging her? Why does she think that? And if that is so, why does she act to help herself as a result?
- Is her solution that easy? What supports us when we are troubled?

As others see her:

- P62 The new girl notices Cec not eating the Twisties and is the first to understand what it means, long before Cec's friends do.
- P120 The new girl also notices in drama, that Cec chooses a partner much bigger than herself – another hint that something is wrong.
- P167 Why does the new girl take action? Why does she send a note to Cec's friends? Why doesn't she talk to Cec herself? Why is she all cloak and dagger?



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Following are three possible approaches to responding to the novel continued:

Another way to approach the book is to look at the different presentations/interpretations of the pivotal 'Canteen scene'

- Outline the basic events: e.g., the gang is at the canteen. It is drizzling. Meredith stirs Sam about his bum fluff. He puts her in a headlock. They bump Jack who gets sauce from his sausage roll on his nose. Lee wipes it off. Jack says he has bought a collar for Wanda. Lee asks who Wanda is. Jack tells them she is a dog who lives at the flats where he and Jordan live with their divorced fathers.
- The following different perspectives are rich for drama: for instance, act out the one scene from the different perspectives.
- Jordan's point of view (P26–28). What does she notice? What is important in this incident to her?
- Lee's perspective (P32–36). What does Lee focus on?
- The new girl's perspective (P59–64). Consider that this much more filmic, moving from one character to another, but focusing in on the detail too in close up.
- Sam's perspective (P66–68).

Style of writing:

The prose is fresh and straightforward, and the dialogue catches the idiom and exchanges between the young characters and the adults well. This provides opportunities for Readers' Theatre' (e.g. pages 78–84).

Outside In is a good example of 'showing', not 'telling' and we the readers need to work with what we are given to join the dots and create meaning.

- Find examples of the author's style to talk about, such as the understated but evocative: 'The driver. The passenger. The father. The daughter.' (p29)



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Language: there is much to enjoy in the linguistic choices of the author

- Euphemism: what is it? What common ones do you know? Invent some e.g. for a team's loss at football; for failing an exam; for falling out with a best friend. Discuss why we use them.
- Strong images: 'supermarket-cheap' (p23) 'a plastic silver sword with a chewed tip.'
- Evocative similes – p 69 '...jumped back at him like a zombie in a horror movie'; p104 'It carried her up the slope like she was hanging onto a helium balloon.'
- P92 Personification – 'Rain tapped on the roof. Insistently. Like it was trying to get in.'
- P95 'Meredith could hide the black hole so no-one would know about the tender stretch of pink heart that covered its opening'. Consider how powerful this showing is, rather than just saying 'Meredith hid her feelings'.
- P127 'Jack's swinging heart smacked down on the gravel.'
- Invite students to find other examples that resonate. These can be used as rich examples for student writing.

Ideas:

- Parents are mainly in the background, apart from Jordan's dad. Discuss the various representations of the parents, such as the supportive single fathers of Jordan and Meredith and the not supportive father of Jack. Is there a gender issue here?
- Poetry – what is the function of the poems in the story? E.g. the reference to the AA Milne poem (P15), Cec's poem about Lee, Renee's poem.
- The students' poems are used as inspiration for art. Why is that connection a powerful one? This provides a ready stimulus for poetic and artistic response to the text.
- Discuss that the central idea in the book is about dissembling – disguising our true selves, playing a role, and then being able to confront the emotions that the dissembling hides.
- Also at the heart of the book is the enduring power of friendship, and the role that friends have when we can open up and reveal our weaknesses, failings, ourselves.
- Discuss: P135 'doing the opposite thing to what she wants to do . . . we all do that sometimes, hey?' Do you agree? Why and in what circumstances?

Related reading:

Paper Towns by John Green

Ginger Snaps by Cathy Cassidy

Broken Soup by Jenny Valentine

Just Listen by Sarah Dessen

Town by James Roy