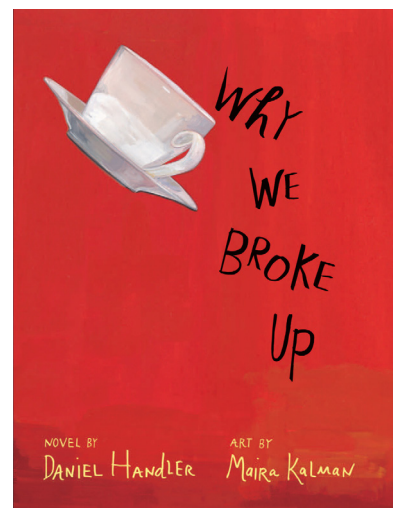


WHY WE BROKE UP

Author: Daniel Handler
Illustrator: Maira Kalman

Teachers Notes

By Bec Kavanagh



Why We Broke Up is a letter from Min Green to her ex boyfriend Ed Slaterton explaining the reasons they broke up. Written a car journey to his house, but taking place over the course of their relationship, the letter outlines their shared history and is accompanied by a box of objects (represented by artwork in the novel) saved from significant moments throughout their relationship.

This is a lovely snapshot of a relationship, and more specifically of first love – where trust is still implicit and the highs and lows seem extreme. Through Min’s letter, the reader experiences everything from when Min and Ed meet, their first date, their first kiss, their first “I love you” to the moments things start to go wrong, the differences, the delays, and finally the heartbreak.

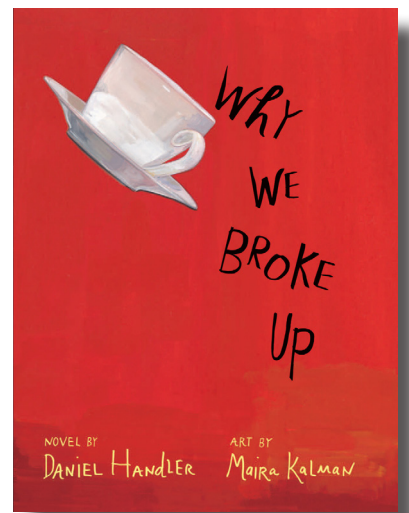
Min’s letter is beautifully written, giving a real sense of humanity to each of the characters. Even her shifting relationship with her friends is one that will be familiar to readers, as she begins to spend more time with Ed, and her interests become less ‘hers’ and more ‘theirs’. The relationship itself is told frankly, as one might when putting on a candid but somewhat-distanced face to an ex friend or partner, and as a result the overall book avoids an overly sentimental tone, keeping its appeal open to both male and female readers.

Because the sense of time is so removed throughout the story – the letter is being written after the breakup, but as we read we are invited into the ‘now’ of the relationship, there is a real sense of looking through a photo album (which is heightened by the accompanying artwork) and having someone narrate the stories behind each image. The author invites you to flick through this collection of memories, stepping into Min’s shoes as you begin to understand her dilemma and share her catharsis as she analyses her failed relationship in order to let it go.

This is an ideal book to read as a class, not only because of its appeal to a wide readership, but because of the variety of mediums it lends itself to, making it perfect for thoughtful creative projects and collaborations between students with varying skills and interests. The author’s use of tone, language and narrative style to tell the story of this intensely personal journey between the two characters opens up discussions on writing technique and the online extension of the book (<http://whywebrokeupproject.tumblr.com>) is a brilliant example of stories such as this having the ability to resonate with readers and connect them outside the pages.

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.

Narrative Style

Why We Broke Up is written entirely in the form of a letter from Min to Ed. Daniel Handler manages to escape the traditional boundaries of a letter by including scenes that are almost flashbacks, describing events in the present tense before tying them back to the point in the letter.

Make notes on the narrative technique. Include observations on the following.

- Tense – Does it shift? When? How?
- What different types of pronouns are used throughout the text?
- What changes do you notice in the narrative when it is describing a flashback rather than the present?

Themes

The theme of falling in love and heartbreak is prevalent in *Why We Broke Up*, 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 Min receives a sweet note from Ed.*

Quote: *“And this note was a jittery bomb, ticking beneath my normal life, in my pocket all day fiercely reread, in my purse all week until I was afraid it would get crushed or snooped...” (p69)*

Link to theme: *The description of the way the note makes Min feel describes the feeling of falling in love – holding onto a treasure or keepsake.*

Link to theme:

Example:

Quote:

Link to theme:

Example:

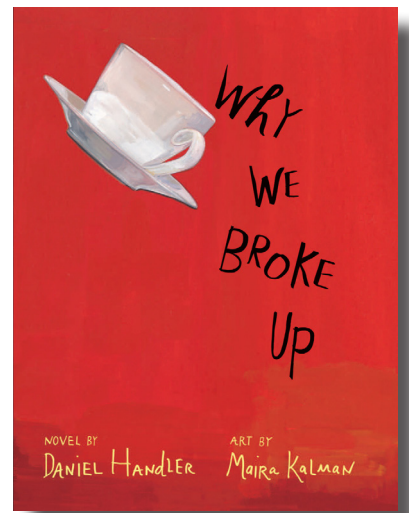
Quote:

Link to theme:

Example:

Quote:

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- **Friendship**

Example: Between Min & Al

Quote: "Because, Min," Al said, "the keys were right in my jacket, where you said they would be"(p9)

Link to theme: It shows that Min knows Al well enough to guess where he left his keys.

Example:

Quote:

Link to theme:

Example:

Quote:

Link to theme:

Example:

Quote:

Link to theme:

- **Heartbreak**

Example:

Quote:

Link to theme:

Example:

Quote:

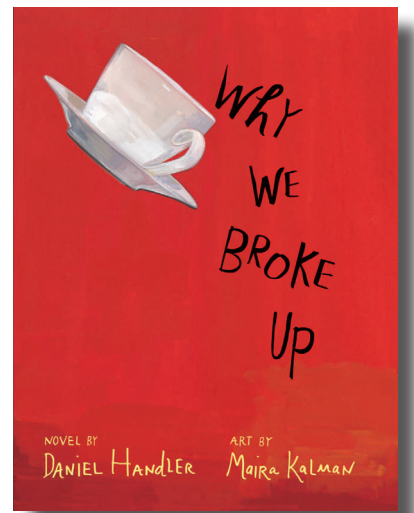
Link to theme:

Example:

Quote:

Link to theme:

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- **Betrayal**

Example:

Quote:

Link to theme:

Example:

Quote:

Link to theme:

Example:

Quote:

Link to theme:

- **Honesty**

Example:

Quote:

Link to theme:

Example:

Quote:

Link to theme:

Example:

Quote:

Link to theme:

- **Identity**

Example:

Quote:

Link to theme:

Example:

Quote:

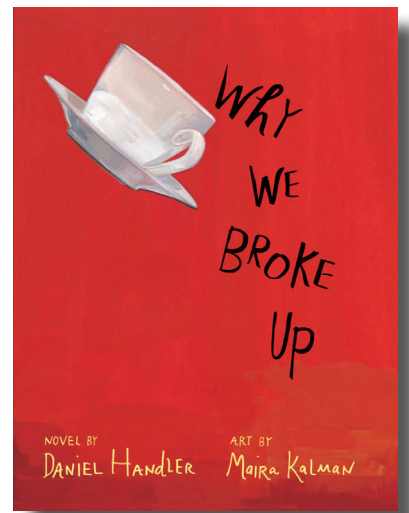
Link to theme:

Example:

Quote:

Link to theme:

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Characters

Ed and Min are clearly the central characters in this story, however all of the supporting characters – Al, Joan, Lauren, Annette to name a few are extremely important to the outcome of the story and also add depth and colour to the novel.

Alongside Ed and Min, pick one of the other characters from the novel and complete the following list for each. Provide quotes and page numbers where possible.

Ed

Physical features:

Personality traits:

- How does Min see him?
- How do other people see him?
- How do you see him?
- Does your opinion of him change as you are reading the book?
- How does he relate to other people?

Min

Physical features:

Personality traits:

- How does Ed see her?
- How do other people see her?
- How do you see her?
- Does your opinion of her change as you are reading the book?
- How does she relate to other people?

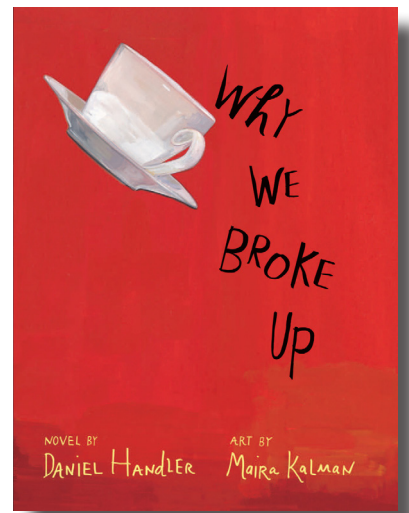
Other

Physical features:

Personality traits:

- How do they relate to Ed/Min?
- How does Ed/Min feel about them?
- Does your opinion of them change as you are reading the book?
- How do they relate to other people?

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Artwork

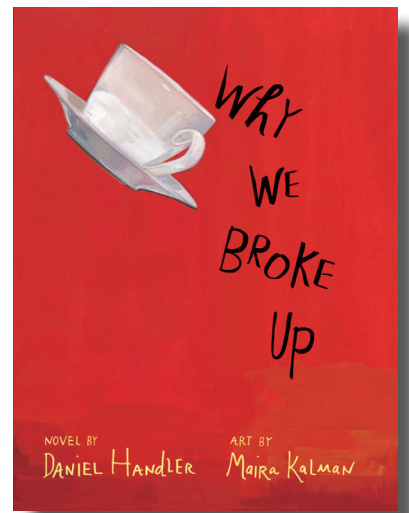
Why We Broke Up is a clever collaboration between artist and writer. In many ways the illustrations enhance the personal feel of the book – making it seem more like a diary and inviting you further into the story. As you are reading it might be worth noting your initial impressions of the illustrations (and possibly making a list of the items shown).

- What is the object?
- How does the object fit into the story?
- How is the object addressed?
- Why did Min keep the object?
- What does the object remind her of?

COMPREHENSION

- How does the author break up the text so that it is not 'just' a letter?
- Why do you think Daniel Handler chose a letter form for the story?
- Is the artwork illustrating parts of the text or filling in for parts?
- Why did Min end up leaving Ed?
- How did Ed betray Min?
- How did Min betray Al?
- How did Annette betray Min?
- Why does Joan often seem disappointed in Ed when Min is around?
- Where does Min write the letter to Ed?
- Do you think that Min is 'different' as she is often described in the book? Why is it Min that is different and not Ed and his friends?
- How do Min and Ed meet?
- Why don't Min's friends like Ed?
- Al often says that he has 'no opinion' of something but what does it really mean? How do you know?
- What is Min like before she meets Ed?
- What is she like once she starts dating him?
- How does Min discover how Al feels about her?
- How are classic movies used in the book?
- Why does Min follow the old lady from the cinema?
- What does Min change about Ed?
- Why does Joan like Min more than Ed's previous girlfriends?
- What does the author do instead of breaking the book up into chapters?

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DEVELOPMENT

Activity 1 – The Connection with Movies

*This activity can be done either individually or as a class.

Old films are used heavily throughout the book. Make a list of the films that are mentioned in the book and go through and find out which ones are real. See if you can find one or some to watch either on your own or in class.

Work on an oral presentation (either individually or in groups) comparing one of the films to the book.

Think about things like

- similarities between the characters in the film and the characters in the book
- the context that the film is mentioned in the book – has watching the film changed your interpretation of a particular scene?
- Are there other similarities between book and film?

Activity 2 – Making a Film

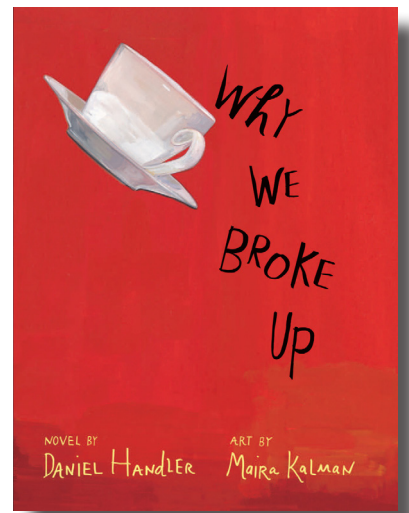
Given that film is so heavily used in the book, it seems natural to take a scene from the book and turn it into a film.

*If you want, or if you don't have access to filmmaking facilities, this can be done as a theatre piece or if you don't want to choose a single scene you can make a book trailer for the whole book.

Take a scene from the book and turn it into a film. Your final assignment should include the following elements.

- A proposal or pitch for your film. What are its selling points? Who will watch it? Who would you cast? How much will it cost to make?
- A script. Using the text from the scene in the book, write a script for film or stage. Include cues, stage directions and dialogue.
- Notes from your role. For this, each person in the group should choose a role and research it – stage manager, cinematography, script writer, actor, director, producer, marketing manager. Write a job description for yourself and make notes on your ideas for the film. Have a meeting with the rest of the group and discuss your ideas – make sure the ideas of the individuals within the group come together to form a single vision.
- Make the film or stage the scene – ask for critiques from the rest of the class.

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Activity 3 – Letting Go

Even if you haven't been in love, the themes in *Why We Broke Up* are universal – everyone has experience losing a friend or feeling betrayed. Have a look at the *Why We Broke Up* project online. Read some of the stories that people have shared.

Initially as a class, discuss the stories you've read. Why do you think people feel inspired to share them? What has the project offered to people? Do any of their stories ring true for you? Does sharing these stories offer some sort of catharsis?

Choose a moment in your life that you can relate to one of the key themes of the book. (This can be a fictional exercise if you prefer) Put together your own box including the following elements.

- A short (1–2page) creative piece sharing your experience.
- A list of objects or keepsakes that you associate with the experience.
- Include them in some way (this doesn't have to be *actually* including them – it can be drawings, photographs or descriptions of the items)
- Think about who you would give the box to – do the items have meaning to them or would you need to describe their relevance (include the descriptions if so). Would it make you feel better giving them the box?
- In groups or pairs talk about the experience of making your own box – discuss how it has made you feel to break down the elements of your experience and give them back. How is the online project like a box for the people who have shared their experiences in it?

Activity 4 – Letter Writing

One of the popular forms of letter writing recently is open letters (you can find some great examples at McSweeney's or in *Women of Letters* both listed under related material).

The great thing about open letters is that the letter can be to an object, an idea or an unnamed person. This allows the writer to let loose in their writing, writing on a topic but without the fear that they will be judged by their reader. Open letters are often witty, but this doesn't mean that they are shallow, in fact many open letters allow the writer to cut to the heart of an issue and can end up being quite meaningful.

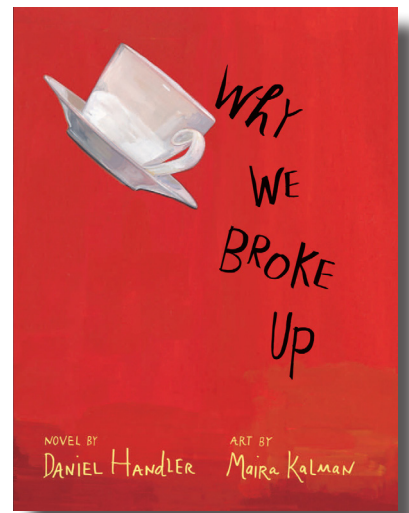
Using the resources below and any that you can find online, read some examples of open letters. Look for things that they have in common and try to get a feel for the style.

Using the experience you chose for the last activity or a new one if you like and write your own open letter. (if it makes it easier, a topic can be set as a whole class)

Eg. An open letter to assignment I failed.

Read them aloud or, if you would like to make this an online activity, start a class blog where the open letters can be displayed.

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RELATED MATERIAL

Theatre

52 Pickup, Theatre Simple

(segments of the play can be viewed here <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H37IGEjoTJM> and information on Theatre Simple can be found here <http://www.theatersimple.org/>)

Film

(500) *Days of Summer* (film) 2009, Dir. Marc Webb

Book

Kuipers, Alice, *Life on the Refrigerator Door*, 2007, Harper Collins

Green, John & Levithan, David, *Will Grayson, Will Grayson*, 2010, Text Publishing

Said, Aimee, *Finding Freia Lockhart*, 2010, Walker Books

McGuire, Michaela & Hardy, Marieke, *Women of Letters*, 2011, Penguin Books

Online

www.whywebrokeupproject.tumblr.com

<http://www.mcsweeneys.net/columns/open-letters-to-people-or-entities-who-are-unlikely-to-respond>

More about the author

Daniel Handler has written for grown-ups under his own name and for younger readers under the name Lemony Snicket. He was dumped at least three times in high school.

-taken from the *Why We Broke Up Project* tumblr

www.lemonysnicket.com

More about the artist

Maira Kalman, acclaimed artist and designer, has created many books for both grown-ups and children. Her heart was broken in high school by a boy who looked like Bob Dylan and shortly thereafter by one who looked like Leonard Cohen.

-taken from the *Why We Broke Up Project* tumblr

www.mairakalman.com