



as
happy
as
here



*Two weeks
can change everything*



JANE
GODWIN

TEACHERS RESOURCES

as happy as here

JANE GODWIN

Teachers Resources by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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INTRODUCTION

'I reckon it's kind of like a spider's web. This big web we're in, that we didn't build, but we get to, like, spin and mend our strands in the middle.' Lucy sounded tired. 'I don't know,' she said, 'Dad reckons it's completely random. That we just have to be here, as happy as here, and do our best to deal with whatever comes along.' (pp 257–8)

Evie Woodfield, Lucy Sky and Jemma McPherson-Wild find themselves sharing a hospital ward after three separate health crises. They are also three very different girls from very different backgrounds. The two weeks which they are forced to spend together change each of their lives irrevocably.

When the girls witness suspicious behaviour in the park below their window, they bond over trying to interpret two men's actions, and then in attempting to solve a series of crimes. It's difficult not to think of the classic Hitchcock film *Rear Window* when reading this novel. It's a mystery crime story in which the restricted glimpses the girls have of two men exchanging parcels and messages in a local park is just as intriguing as the action in that classic mystery thriller. Things get serious, though, when the girls decide to leave their enclosed space in the hospital and to venture forth in order to prevent a third crime occurring.

This is also a very philosophical novel about why things happen and how we might each have contributed to, or prevented some things happening at all. Questions of fate, premonition, individual responsibility and the influence of one's home environment all come into play when unravelling the sequences of events which lead to any outcome – and most significantly, to any person's life.

These three girls are coming to terms with who they want to be as they mature into adults. They have begun to question the attitudes of the adults who have been their guardians and to ponder alternative ways of looking at the world.

Fate or Random Accident? Nature or Nurture? To Be or Not to Be Happy? These are the three major themes in this richly profound novel.

'And after a while, a thought appeared. Maybe "Why?" was the wrong question to ask. Maybe what mattered now wasn't why things had happened, but what Evie would do now that they had.' (p 260)





THEMES AND CURRICULUM TOPICS

Several themes are covered in this book which might be related to the Australian Curriculum, including:

- **STUDY OF HISTORY, SOCIETY AND ENVIRONMENT**

FATE OR RANDOM ACCIDENT

KEY QUOTE: 'What are the chances? What were the chances that the piano would hit Evie? If she'd left training five minutes later. If the piano had been secured properly. If the guy driving the truck had stopped for a coffee. If he'd gone a different way, turned down a different street. If she'd heard it coming. And was it chance that Lucy had leukaemia? If chance had not been kind to you, then the idea of chance would probably scare you. No wonder Lucy liked logic. No wonder she didn't like guessing.' (p 125)

DISCUSSION POINT: Discuss with students the seemingly random accidents which have happened to them and why they think they happened? Was someone responsible, was it an accident, or simply 'fate'?

DISCUSSION POINT: 'Don't punish yourself, Evie. You've been through enough. Things happen, good things and terrible things, really unfair things that we can't make sense of, it's random.' 'That's what Lucy's dad thinks,' said Evie. 'But my parents don't. I don't think they believe in random. I think my parents are afraid of random. Like, they really *want* my accident to be my fault with the earphones.' (p 264) We live in a society which demands 'answers'. Even when an obvious accident occurs, people will pursue justice and demand that someone take responsibility. Are we as a society 'afraid of random' as Evie's parents are?

DISCUSSION POINT: 'Lucy was a pessimist. Evie came to understand that for pessimists, things can be doubly bad, because they are always expecting bad things to happen. So, there is the imagining bad things, then the happening. And then the thinking about it afterwards. For a pessimist, sometimes it's almost a relief when a bad thing happens, because they sensed it would all along.' (p xi) Is Lucy's attitude to life a bad or a good thing, in your opinion?

DISCUSSION POINT: 'It's a course that Paulie and her friend did. Called The Choice. It's, like, choosing to be happy. That's what she needs.' Jemma





pointed to Lucy's bed. "She needs to choose to be happy." ' (p 29) Is Jemma's attitude to life really as happy as she makes out?

DISCUSSION POINT: The final page (p 273) is a beautifully crafted scene of a possible imaginary future for the three girls in which Jemma didn't die and they all became friends. What feelings does this scene evoke for you? You might also view the film *Sliding Doors* (1998 Dir. Peter Howitt) which relates to the accidents which often determine our lives.

NATURE OR NURTURE?

KEY QUOTE: 'The poor girl,' said Evie's mother, sitting by her bed. 'She's obviously fallen through the cracks. What a neglectful mother. Some people don't deserve to have children.' Evie's mother was checking her phone, shaking her head. But how do you know? Evie couldn't help thinking, which people didn't deserve it? (pp 250–1)

DISCUSSION POINT: Jemma's lies and erratic behaviour are gradually revealed to stem from a deprived and neglected upbringing. The boy they witness in the park seems intimidating when he visits Evie's room, but when the police catch him outside Bill's house, he bursts into tears: 'He was crying like he had nothing left at all.' (p 233) Discuss the facts that we glean about Jemma's life and the impact that her upbringing has had on her behaviour.

DISCUSSION POINT: 'Later, Evie thought about what her mother had told her about the bath. How far back would you have to go to change the course of your life? How far back would you have to go with Jemma? Back to before her mother left her in the flat? Before she was three years old? Before she was born? Back to when her own mother was a child? It was as if Jemma had brought her whole life into the hospital, carted it in with her. And the crying man or boy or whoever he was? Where had he come from, where were his parents, had he been given a fair go like Evie's dad always said? What had made him who he had become? And Evie?' (p 252) With her background, how difficult would it have been for Jemma to alter the course of her life? This quote also raises an alternative question. How is it that some people with a similarly deprived background manage to grow into balanced adults with fruitful lives? Is 'nature' or 'nurture' more important, in your opinion?

DISCUSSION POINT: Evie's dad's expectations are a constant pressure on her (p 129). Both her parents obviously care for her but their 'helicopter parenting' leaves Evie with a lack of self-confidence and with doubts about who she is and what she wants to be. Is there such a thing as too much parenting?





DISCUSSION POINT: 'Although Evie was afraid, something in her felt sorry for that guy who'd looked only a bit older than Patrick. Patrick, who went to school each day, and slept in a warm, clean bed each night. Where did that guy sleep?' (p 170) Evie begins to realise that often petty criminals have been given little option in their lives, and that perhaps they act out of fear rather than malice.

'Her dad said, "In Australia everyone gets a fair go, and if you work hard, you make your own luck." He was always saying it to Patrick. And Evie hadn't really thought about this too much, she'd just accepted that most things her parents said were kind of right. That things generally were mostly right. But this was getting harder to believe. What happens if you were born with not much luck in the first place?' (p 170) Jemma had little luck and nor did the boy they were watching. Maybe Paulie and Steve had had no luck either?

DISCUSSION POINT: The novel includes descriptions of potentially criminal offences. For example, the man appears at Evie's bedside (p 108) looking for a stolen thing and effectively threatens her. The girls enter private property to spy on the two thieves. Discuss the nature of crimes and how sometimes people, like the boy, commit crimes out of desperation rather than evil intent; or out of a desire, like the girls, to prevent something bad happening.

DISCUSSION POINT: Evie is considered a 'naturally gifted athlete' and is pushed by her father to be highly competitive. Discuss the issue of 'natural' ability versus rigorously honing skills, and children being pushed too hard rather than being encouraged to achieve in a more supportive way?

TO BE OR NOT TO BE HAPPY? SELF-AWARENESS & SELF-IDENTITY

KEY QUOTE: 'It made Evie feel nervous. In her family, Evie was the sporty one. Patrick was the academic one, Tim the musical one and Rosie the cute one who was good at ballet. No one had told Evie this, she just knew it was the way her parents understood each member of the family. So, if she couldn't be the sporty one anymore, what would she be?' (p 41)

Being 'happy' in life is very much determined by how one feels about oneself and how one matures and develops self-awareness. These three girls struggle with this process in different ways:

EVIE

DISCUSSION POINT: Evie's hospitalisation is the first time she has truly been away from her parents and she begins to have doubts about some of the





things that they've always suggested to her were 'facts'. Is this sort of doubt one of the first steps in really growing up?

DISCUSSION POINT: 'So often, Evie had thought about what she wasn't. She wasn't as clever as Patrick, or as cute as Rosie, she wasn't focused in the way her parents wanted her to be, she wasn't incredibly popular, she wasn't any of those things. She probably wasn't ever going to be a champion runner now. But like Lucy said, she had been there, on that road with Jemma, and somehow that felt like something that she was.' (pp 256–7) Being 'good' at something too often defines our lives, when instead moments of real emotion and feeling can have far more impact. She tells Chris: ' "And it felt . . . for a moment it felt as if the whole world was spread out before me, as far as the horizon. And I felt as if I could run forever, that I had my own power, that I'd never get tired, even though my ankle had been hurting before that. The sea was so smooth, it was silver, and there was a mist, it was, like, I don't know . . ." Evie stopped, suddenly embarrassed. "Anyway, that's what I love about running." ' (p 152) What has Evie realised about her own interests?

LUCY

DISCUSSION POINT: 'Lucy hesitated, staring into the jar. "I don't like guessing." "Why not?" asked Evie, the bold Smarties colours making patterns before her eyes. "I'd rather work something out." Lucy was staring into the jar, moving it around. "Using information I already know. Not guessing." Lucy only spoke when she had something interesting or thoughtful to say. She was so different from Evie's school friends. They spoke all the time, all at once, about everything.' (pp 95–6) Lucy has spent much of her young life unwell and has also lost her mother. And yet she is a very self-assured person. What is the source of her strength?

JEMMA

DISCUSSION POINT: ' "Life happens everywhere," said Evie quietly. "Yeah, but it's better in America." "Why?" "Because of like I said, all the cool people are there. Like the Kardashians," said Jemma, concentrating on Evie's cast. "Not like here. Where heaps of people are, like . . . dumb, and poor, and ugly." She laughed, a high-pitched, crazy little sound. "Finished!" ' (pp 135–6) Jemma's thoughts about life reflect a common problem when people become fixated on the desire to escape the reality of the world they live in. Much of Jemma's behaviour is deliberately duplicitous, as if in creating a new reality for herself she is escaping the pains of the real world she lives in. Does Jemma learn anything about herself in this novel or does she lack self-awareness?



- **ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERACY**



The text of this novel might be studied in relation to the following:

NARRATIVE PERSON

DISCUSSION POINT: This novel is written in **third person limited** so that we are privy to the feelings of the three main characters via Evie's point of view. It's as if the narrator is looking at the world just over Evie's shoulder. Occasionally the psychic distance pulls back a tiny bit and the voice is slightly ironic, but it's basically Evie's perspective only. How different might it have been had the three girls told the story in alternate first person? Invite students, for example, to re-write the opening scene describing Evie's accident in first person.

GENRE

DISCUSSION POINT: This is effectively a crime novel as well as a novel of character. The girls recover the buried newspapers from the park and discover secret messages written in each of them which eventually they decipher to mean addresses and times of potential robberies. But what have they actually seen? 'Once, Evie had watched a TV documentary about people who are eyewitnesses to a crime, and how individuals report what they see completely differently. Like, someone would be sure that the criminal was wearing a hat, when he wasn't. Or that he shouted out something, when he didn't speak at all. Or that he carried a bag, when in reality he had nothing in his hands. Memory was unreliable.' (p 66) Consider this quote and what it suggests about eyewitnesses. Test your students with a simple memory game, by showing them briefly a picture of a view from a window and then have them write down what they recall seeing. Then discuss the various versions of the scene that each student describes.

LANGUAGE AND STYLE IN DESCRIPTION

DISCUSSION POINT: Description used in this novel appeals to all our senses. Discuss with students how the following passage appeals to sight, sound, smell and touch. Invite them to create a description using all their senses.

'Evie closed her eyes and breathed in. There was traffic, but she could hear birds above the car noise. She could smell something sweet. Flowers sat in buckets on the footpath, spilling out from the hospital florist. Was it Erlicheer? The beginning of spring. Evie wanted to stop, rest, breathe, but she couldn't do that. She shuffled down the ramp and onto the footpath. Cars were all around her – horns beeping, revving engines, black tyres so close that she could see each little stone stuck in the grooves. Now she





could smell rubber, mixed with the tar of road and engine. She hadn't noticed how close cars are to the footpath, and how much noise there was in the street. She was unsteady, she needed to get this over with.' (p 205)

CHARACTERS

ACTIVITY: The **major characters** in this novel are Evie, Lucy and Jemma. Write a brief character study of each of them.

DISCUSSION POINT: Which of the minor characters did you find most interesting and why? **The minor characters** include:

Lucy's dad, David;

Evie's mum, Felicity; dad, Sam; sister, Rosie; brothers Patrick and Tim;

Jemma's foster carer, Paulie, and her friend, 'Uncle Steve';

Nurses: Sharon, Marika, Holly, and Hadi;

Chris Haddad, Evie's physiotherapist;

Arjun, who brings their meals;

Narali and Denise, teachers at the hospital;

Bill, a hospital inmate;

Tom and Alanah, Lucy's friends;

Liv and Amma, Evie's friends;

Louisa, Evie's surgeon;

Dr Tay, Lucy's specialist;

Tina, a policewoman.

ACTIVITY: Write an **acrostic poem**, using the letters in the word 'happiness', inspired by this novel.

ACTIVITY: Test your students' **comprehension** by asking them questions about the text. [See also **Author's Notes** below.]

• VISUAL LITERACY

ACTIVITY: The **cover** of a book is an important part of its message. What does this cover say to you? How would you have designed a cover for this book?

ACTIVITY: On p 269, Evie thinks that the hospital window they looked out of to spy on the thieves could be looked at in three different ways:

'Evie stood there for a long time. The light faded but she didn't move, taking in the view as if it were a beautiful painting. It hadn't occurred to Evie until now, but when she looked out, she saw three ways: there was





what was through the window, the park, the world outside; there was her own reflection; and there was the window itself: dust on the outside surface, a spider's web, and on this side a fingerprint, a smudge on the glass.' (p 269)

Draw a picture of a window in these three different ways.

ACTIVITY: Create a graphic novel/comic version of a scene in this book. [See **Bibliography**.]

- **CREATIVE ARTS**

There are many creative activities suggested by this text:

1. **Write a letter** to her imaginary brother as if written by Jemma.
2. **Write a song** about these three girls.
3. **Create an image** of the three girls using collage techniques.
4. **Create a poster** to advertise this book.
5. **Create a book trailer** to promote this book. [See **Bibliography**.]

- **LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES**

ACTIVITY: Research the themes above online.





FURTHER TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH

- Research the work of Jane Godwin. Compare this to her other books; in particular her YA novel *Falling From Grace*.
- Compare this book to other young adult novels such as those listed in the Bibliography. Create a classroom display of YA fiction titles which your students suggest might relate to *As Happy As Here*.
- Investigate any other topic not covered in these notes which you consider is suggested by this text.

CONCLUSION

This is a delicately nuanced novel which is firmly entrenched in its astute and very moving characterisation. These portraits of three very different girls are subtly woven into the fabric of a crime mystery. Fate and random chance, luck and intuition, planning and predicting – these are factors which determine these girls' lives, as they do the lives of anyone. Acceptance of what life throws at you is also part of the journey to a contented life.

Live fully in the moment.

Be as happy as here.





AUTHOR'S NOTES

Jane Godwin discusses the writing of *As Happy As Here*: It's a coming-of-age story for 12–14-year-olds, so upper primary, lower secondary school would be the readership. It's a story set in a hospital ward. I was thinking about the story many years ago, before the genre of 'hospital lit' or 'sick lit', as we call it, came about. My son had broken his collarbone and he had to have surgery and he was confined to his apartment, which was on the second storey of a building, and he was just looking out at the world around him. His life had a sort of Rear Window quality to it for a while there. I too as a child had had an accident that had rendered me immobile for a period of time, and also I remember that feeling of being trapped and looking at the world around you. So I wanted to write a story about someone who was trapped: in her body, in the hospital, by the timidity of the world in which she lives, and trapped by the expectations of those around her.

The story has three main characters: Evie, Jemma and Lucy. They're really different girls – they're from very different walks of life and they really probably would not have met each other if they hadn't been stuck in this hospital ward together in Melbourne.

The hospital is loosely based on the Epworth Freemasons in Melbourne, which is a big hospital that overlooks a big park – Fitzroy Gardens, I think it is – and a laneway. The girls in their hospital ward also overlook a laneway and a park, and they witness something odd happening down below in the laneway, through their window. They bond over trying to work out what this strange occurrence is, and they try to solve what they believe is a crime that they've witnessed. Through this experience, each of the girls undergoes a profound change.

I'm interested in the time in life when we're leaving childhood behind and the ways in which we start to navigate our adult lives. The three characters are all at this liminal point in their lives, between childhood and adolescence. There's a grieving for the loss of your own childhood – of who you were then and who you are now. Another aspect of this time, I think, is that it's often the time when you start to judge the adults around you. They don't seem invincible anymore; they're revealed as fallible human beings who don't necessarily have all the answers and who make mistakes. That's something the girls are understanding, and making sense of, in the story.

For most of us, childhood ends gradually, through the passage of time, but it doesn't always feel like that. I think sometimes it feels like it's in fits and starts. And I know myself, I still feel that I'm growing up, through the experiences that happen to me in my life, whether they be positive or traumatic – each





one gives me an opportunity to grow up a little bit more and work out who I am.

I wanted to explore these ideas from the point of view of somebody who is very naïve – and Evie, the main character, is a naïve girl – and what happens when her world is opened up in quite a dramatic way and she is forced to make sense of things that she's taken for granted about identity, expectation, fairness, justice, society and perhaps most importantly, class. I also wanted to explore the notion of kindness. It seems to me that many young people are encouraged to achieve in an obvious, outward way – perhaps on the sporting field or in academic circles. I see a lot of examples around me where kindness isn't valued and where young people compete – or worse – on social media and notions of decency and respect seem to be seen as some anachronistic concept from their parents' generation. Evie is not a competitive person and she comes to understand that there are other aspects of self that are valued and should be valued.

Each of the characters is also considering the notion of happiness. Although we might all be searching for some elusive form of success or something that will make us happy – for a lot of young people it's being famous that they think will make them happy – what is it that really forms you as a person? Of course, the important and meaningful things in life can have happiness attached to them, but they have other emotions too. And, as Carl Jung said, it's meaning, not happiness, that makes a great many things enduring – perhaps everything. The story explores some big ideas about fate, fairness, expectation, personal identity, death, what makes us happy, what it means to grow up and how we choose to live as we do that growing. I hope the story will allow readers to vicariously experience what happens when one is suddenly removed from daily life and routine and for a time has to exist in a different place – in this case, the hospital ward – where there is no peer group, no family, few possessions, limited access to social media – none of those usual props. In this context, an opportunity arises for the characters to look at themselves and the other people in their lives in a new and different way. I hope the reader will be able to do the same through reading the book.





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jane Godwin is the highly acclaimed author of over 25 books for children and young people, across all styles and ages. Her work is published internationally and she has received many commendations. Children's Publisher at Penguin Books Australia for many years, Jane was the co-creator with Davina Bell of the Our Australian Girl series of quality historical fiction for middle readers. Jane's books include her novel *Falling From Grace*, and picture books *Go Go* and the *Silver Shoes* (illustrated by Anna Walker), *The Silver Sea* (with Alison Lester and patients at the Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne) and *Watch This!* (with designer Beci Orpin and photographer Hilary Walker). Jane is dedicated to pursuing quality and enriching reading and writing experiences for young people, and spends as much time as she can working with them in schools and communities and running literature and writing programs.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE NOTES

Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright operates justified text writing and publishing consultancy services, and is widely published on children's literature, publishing history and Australian fiction. In 2011, she was the recipient of the CBCA (Qld Branch) Dame Annabelle Rankin Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Queensland, in 2012 the CBCA Nan Chauncy Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Australia, and in 2014, the Queensland Writers' Centre's Johnno Award.

