WAKING ROMEO

By Kathryn Barker

RECOMMENDED FOR: Ages 14-18 years old

Young adult fiction, suited for Year 8 - Year 12, SECONDARY and SENIOR SECONDARY

THEMES: Time travel, true love, *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare, *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë, destiny, fate, sustainability, climate change
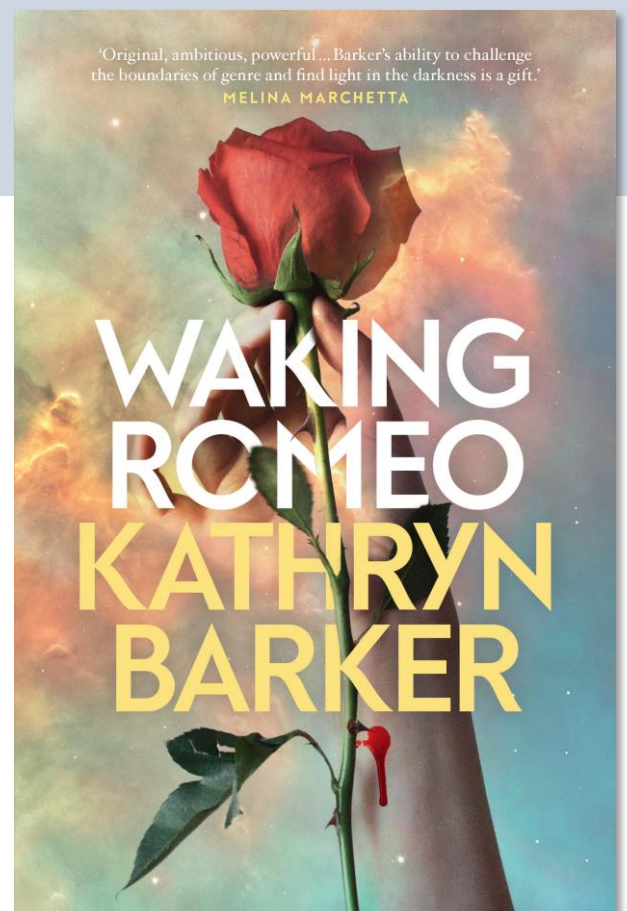
CURRICULUM LEARNING AREAS:

- **ENGLISH**
- **LITERATURE**
- **HEALTH and PHYSICAL EDUCATION:** Personal, social and community health
- **SUSTAINABILITY**

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'Original, ambitious, powerful...Barker's ability to challenge the boundaries of genre and find light in the darkness is a gift.'
MELINA MARCHETTA

CONTENTS:

INTRODUCTION

Kathryn Barker has written a remarkable piece of fiction that will stay with readers long after reading. *Waking Romeo*'s dual narrative features explicit intertextual references – drawing on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* – to tell a dystopian time travel story that will enthral readers and encourage them to think deeply about the nature of true love, gender roles, fate and destiny.

Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR, KATHRYN BARKER

1. What themes do you think capture the essence of *Waking Romeo*?

The book explores the concept of love and romance, contrasting traditional ideals against modern realities. In essence, it deals with how we can be true to our self, to love and our ideals – but also that the world in its entirety is worth fighting for. A central theme is that everything is connected, that there is a circularity in our journey.

2. What do you see as the outstanding features of the book?

The idea that one can travel only forwards in time and that this causes us to constantly evaluate the present against our vision of the future, is explored. This linear thinking forces us to confront the reality that if we don't make today work, there is no viable future to travel to.

In the story, Jules (Juliet Capulet) embarks on a journey and explores her view of herself and the world at different stages of her life and in different eras and circumstances. Her attitude to love is deeply connected to her attitude to herself and her situation. The romance of the main characters spans across generations, cultures and different eras of humanity.

3. What was your inspiration for writing this story?

The aim was for a compelling story of a world in crisis, a fast-paced, action-packed 'save the world' narrative that is still able to shine a light on the personal struggles around love, meaning, belonging, hope and unity.

The great love stories of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Wuthering Heights* are woven into this tale of love, hope and the fight for humanity. I've tried to reimagine them in a way never seen before.

One source of motivation came from wishing to reimagine the works of William Shakespeare and Emily Brontë. To reframe the stories against the modern world and its challenges. I was inspired to write a novel where we find the courage to fight to protect our planet and our humanity.

4. What do you hope young readers will take away with them after reading this book?

I hope that readers will reflect on what they think love is and how we define it individually and as a society.

Importantly, I hope readers will consider that our perspective on love may change and grow over time. Hopefully they may realise that our view of ourselves and our place in the world have a huge impact on how we view love. That our ideals of love are formed early in life but they are not fixed and we are not a slave to those ideals.

I also hope that readers will consider the message about our planet and the ownership and pride we can and should take to protect and preserve our planet. The preservation of our environment goes hand in hand with the preservation of our humanity (in this case, staying in the present and building societies based on love, respect and collaboration).

5. In literature from previous centuries (like *Romeo and Juliet* and *Wuthering Heights*), are lessons about life, love and relationships irrelevant/antiquated in today's world? Or are there still things we can learn from those stories?

I think that absolutely they are relevant. Although the world has changed, the challenge of finding one's place (and love) in the world remains universal. *Wuthering Heights* is interesting because it explores concepts of the masculine and the feminine but within the confines of the patriarchy and the class structure of the times.

Romeo and Juliet is also bound by the hierarchical constraints of its time – the paramountcy of the family and its status.

In both cases there is minimal direct exploration of the female perspective.

In *Waking Romeo*, we explore the female perpective as well as the general concept of finding love in a society with significant constraints.

6. Are there any other plays or 19th century novels that you think you might like to use as a frame for a similar novel to *Waking Romeo*?

I am interested in *The Little Mermaid* (the original story by Hans Christian Andersen). It contains themes around identity, love, pain, sacrifice and the female perspective in a masculine world that are similar to those I explore in *Waking Romeo*. A reimagining of the story to focus on the perspective of the mermaid (she doesn't even have a name in the original fairytale) would be really exciting.

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STORY SUMMARY

YEAR: 2083. LOCATION: LONDON. MISSION: WAKE ROMEO.

It's the end of the world. Literally. Time travel is possible, but only forwards. And only a handful of families choose to remain in the 'now', living off the scraps that were left behind. Among these are eighteen-year-old Juliet and the love of her life, Romeo. But things are far from rosy for Jules. Romeo is in a coma and she's estranged from her friends and family, dealing with the very real fallout of their wild romance. Then a handsome time traveller, Ellis, arrives with an important mission that makes Jules question everything she knows about life and love. Can Jules wake Romeo and rewrite her future?

A highly original mashup that delights as it disorients … and asks what would have happened if two great literary love stories were somehow intertwined.

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

BEFORE READING *WAKING ROMEO*

Before reading *Waking Romeo*, ask students to consider the title and cover design.

- What visual techniques has the designer used? Consider font, colour, image and composition to create a mood for the story to come.

- Compile a list of words to describe the mood that the cover evokes.

- Why do you think a rose was chosen as the dominant image here? What famous quote about roses comes from another story involving a Romeo?

- Do you think it is significant that a thorn on the rose has caused blood to run down the arm?

ENGLISH

Intertextuality

- Research the term 'intertextuality' and write a paragraph about the similarities and differences between the play of *Romeo and Juliet* and the opening chapter of *Waking Romeo*.

- How does this final line in the opening chapter of the novel subvert the well-known quote from the play?:

    '*O Romeo, Romeo – why did you leave me to deal with this shit on my own?*' (page 11)

- What musical theatre production (and then later movie) does this line reference?:

    '*This house has seven bedrooms, and mine is the smallest … it's on the top west side storey.*' (Page 66)

    [Potential film study – view film adaptations of *West Side Story* and *Romeo and Juliet* and compare and contrast elements in both.]

- Can you spot any references to other plays by Shakespeare in the opening chapter?

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- How does the Wall in Jules's world relate to a very famous wall in Verona, the town where Shakespeare set *Romeo and Juliet*?

- Unlike with *Romeo and Juliet*, the novel's relationship with *Wuthering Heights* is more subtle and takes some time to become obvious. How does Kathryn Barker foreshadow that Ellis is Heathcliff from Emily Brontë's novel before Chapter 8?

- Just as Jules is very different to Shakespeare's Juliet, Ellis is nothing like Emily Brontë's Heathcliff:

    … *'I am* not *a good guy,' I say again, thinking of the fictional 'me' in Emily's book.* (page 116)

  Compare and contrast each character's traits in *Waking Romeo* with their original literary version.

- Try the same exercise with Romeo and Emily/Cathy.

- If you could combine two classics of literature, what would they be and what kind of story would you create?

Dystopian Novels

What is a 'dystopia' and to what extent do you think this term describes Jules's world in Chapter 1 and Ellis's Wasteland in Chapter 2?

Point of View

Waking Romeo is told in alternating points of view (POV). Why do you think the author has chosen to do this? How would the book be different if it were told entirely from Jules's POV, or from Ellis's POV? The structure is also split into five Acts. Why do you think the author chose to do this?

Reflect on Characters through Hot Seat Roleplay

Based on their previous discussions and close study of the novel, volunteer students can take on the role of characters from the novel (especially Jules, Ellis, Frogs and Romeo). In small groups, students can prepare questions to ask the characters, and consider possible answers. Then conduct a hot seat roleplay. See:

http://www.dramatoolkit.co.uk/drama-strategies/hot-seating
http://dramaresource.com/drama-strategies/hot-seating/

During the roleplay, audience members should feel free to ask follow up questions and be prepared to challenge the students-in-role (particularly if they pick up discrepancies from the book).

LITERATURE

Genre

What does the term 'literary mashup' mean? Would you say that this term describes *Waking Romeo*? Is it possible to label *Waking Romeo* as a 'genre' novel or would the term 'genre bender' be better? (e.g. romance, science fiction, thriller, action, mystery, dystopia)

Literary References

Read the scenes in the library of No 11 in 2056. How many references to Shakespearean plays other than *Romeo and Juliet* can you find?

Secrets of Successful Teen Fiction

Students read this article from *The Atlantic*: 'The 8 habits of highly successful young adult fiction authors':

http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/10/the-8-habits-of-highly-successful-young-adult-fiction-authors/280722/

In this article, two bestselling young adult authors explore some key elements for writing successful fiction for teenagers.

- Working in groups, students should summarise the ideas contained in this article, and discuss: Do they agree with these views? Would they change or add anything anything to these elements?

- Next, based on their evaluation of the article, students can compile their own set of criteria for 'good' young adult fiction.

- Finally, using these criteria, ask students to evaluate (and substantiate) the success of *Waking Romeo* as a young adult novel.

HEALTH

Consider these excerpts from the text to answer:

- How is the idea of 'true love' as portrayed in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* interrogated in *Waking Romeo*?

   'In my story I made Juliet thirteen, instead of sixteen. I wonder what it says about me that I felt like her choices were better suited to someone younger. And the fact that I made her fall in love on the spot, without that critical factor – time.' (page 296)

- Would you describe Juliet's journey to becoming Jules within *Waking Romeo* as a feminist story? Why?

   'I believed I was half of a whole, despite how it made me smaller. Like so many things, I was mistaken. No. I let myself be mistaken. I never looked inwards when clearly I should have. I was the lion, the scarecrow – a coward, no mind of my own. I was the virgin, the martyr, the daughter, the lover, the wife.' (page 238)

- Jules and Ellis have various thoughts about love throughout the book. Which of these statements below do you agree with, and why? Use examples of relationships in the book to illustrate your argument:

   'But of course, all that 'endless love' is just a racket. And my own parents are clearly case in point.' (page 255)

   'Besides, love is begun by time, but time doesn't qualify the spark and fire of it. He is with me always… from this day to the ending of the world.' (page 259)

   '… she was in pain when she met [him] … She let a boy 'save' her; she let love be her solution. She fell into the exact same trap that I did. (page 260)

   'But love is what happens on the inside; there need not be even a touch to steal a heart.' (page 292)

   'Learning to love herself was at the heart of everything.' (page 323)

Worksheet 1: Taking Responsibility

In small groups, students can reflect on the nature of personal and collective responsibility (refer to Worksheet 1). Students can summarise their thoughts before and after reading *Waking Romeo*.

SUSTAINABILITY

Climate Change

All living things depend on healthy ecosystems, so to a large extent what Jules suggests in the excerpt below is true:

> *'Darkened with the smog of pain, polluting. Oh wretched grief, a poison to thy soil.'*

> *Jules has used metaphor to link human suffering with damage to the natural world, as though people and the planet are not separate. As though* all *is connected.* (Pages 175-176)

- Consider the ways in which exploring and understanding our environment and the values of care, respect and responsibility are essential for achieving sustainability.

- Ask students to consider how what they experience at personal, local, national and global levels informs their world views and subsequent sustainability values. Can they provide examples from each of those levels? (e.g. friends/school, local community, their country, social media/news/other media)

Consider these excerpts from the text:

> *'Even before time travel, people failed to invest in the now,' I say bitterly. 'When they saw an issue, they refused to change. Instead, they passed the problem on to the next generation.'* (page 114)

> *'I decide that, if I ever write another play, it won't be a love story. It will be about action – taking action versus* not *taking action. Because standing on my balcony, looking out at the in-tatters world? It's becoming clear that we have to act. That we have to do it today, or tomorrow won't happen.'* (page 238)

- To what extent do you think the concept of time travel via pod is a metaphor for climate change? How does Kathryn Barker explore environmentalism and activism in *Waking Romeo*? Why do you think the author has included these themes in a story about a dystopian future?

- In *Waking Romeo*, people have the ability to travel forwards in time. The results of this ability are sometimes dire, as they strive to be faster, better, cleaner etc., they end up making things worse.

  If you had the power to glimpse into the future, what would you hope to see that had changed in the world? Then imagine (and outline) what you could actually do now,in the present, to ensure that type of future.

AUTHOR BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kathryn Barker was born in Canberra, started primary school in Tokyo and finished high school in the woods outside Olympia, Washington State. In the years that followed she went to university, became a lawyer, completed her masters in film production and worked in television. She currently lives in Sydney with her family. Kathryn's first novel, *In the Skin of a Monster*, was published to high acclaim and won the Aurealis Award for Best Young Adult Novel, was short-listed for two Davitt Awards and was a CBCA Notable Book. *Waking Romeo* is her second novel.

IN THE WORDS OF THE AUTHOR

'When I was a teenager, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Wuthering Heights* were positioned as the greatest love stories of all time. As I got older, I realised how problematic both narratives are in terms of romantic ideals, and the self-destructive examples they set.

'*Waking Romeo* actively deconstructs what love is, with specific reference to English literature's two most iconic love stories. It then offers a perhaps more modern and inclusive alternative.

'I hope that readers will enjoy the overt (and embedded) references to Shakespeare and Emily Brontë, set against a futuristic backdrop. I hope they will be carried along by the fast-paced, time-travel action. However, most of all, I hope that *Waking Romeo* will offer readers a new kind of love story. One which focuses on loving our planet, loving our differences … and loving ourselves.'

Kathryn Barker

CORRESPONDING LITERATURE

In the Skin of a Monster by Kathryn Barker

What if your identical twin sister was a murderer? Does that make you a monster too? A profound, intense, heartbreaking fantasy that tackles issues of fate versus free will, and whether you can ever truly know someone.

Romeo and Juliet by William Shakespeare

Wuthering Heights by Emily Brontë

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For something different and contemporary, students might like to study Greta Thunberg – she is a little like Jules in her passion for a better world, and a similar age too:

https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-49918719

WORKSHEET

Worksheet 1: Taking Responsibility

This activity will allow you to start exploring and thinking about issues raised in the novel *Waking Romeo* by Kathryn Barker.

Before reading: Read each of the statements below (see the first column of the table) and, individually, decide whether you agree or disagree (write 'agree' or 'disagree' in the second column). Then, in small groups, discuss your responses and the reasoning behind your decisions. Where possible, draw on examples from your life.

After reading: Return to this table and, in small groups, decide whether or not the author, Kathryn Barker, would be likely to agree or disagree with each statement. Provide evidence from the novel to support your decisions.

Statements	Before Reading	After Reading	
	Do you personally agree or disagree?	Do you think Kathryn Barker would agree or disagree?	Evidence from novel to support your opinion
We are responsible for our own actions and behaviours.			
We are responsible for the actions and behaviours of family members.			
We are responsible for the actions and behaviours of friends.			
I can personally prevent terrible things* happening in the world.			
It is important to understand events from the point of view of other people.			

* For example: wars, terrorism, massacres, climate change, mistreatment of refugees, bullying, an earthquake, a tsunami.

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