



Walker Books Classroom Ideas



Mika and Max

Laura Bloom
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*Notes may be downloaded and printed for regular classroom use only.

Walker Books Australia
Locked Bag 22
Newtown, N.S.W., 2042

Ph +61 2 9517 9577
Fax +61 2 9517 9997

These notes were created by Steve Spargo.
For enquiries please contact:
educationwba@walkerbooks.com.au

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Outline:

When 13-year-old Mika is forced to attend a music festival with her family, she resigns herself to hippies, heat, and embarrassment. But nothing could prepare her for Max, who's almost 10 and has autism. When the two of them join forces, a series of unexpected and life changing events unfolds.

Author/Illustrator Information:

Laura Bloom is the author of a number of novels for children and adults, including *Augustine's Lunch*, which was shortlisted for the NSW Premier's Awards and shortlisted for the Young Australian Readers' Awards, and *In the Mood*, which was shortlisted for the ABC Fiction Awards, and was a bestseller in France. Her horse-series for children, *Dream Riders*, is also being published by Walker Books Australia.

How to Use These Notes:

This story works on many levels. The suggested activities are therefore for a wide age and ability range. Please select accordingly.

These notes are for:

- Primary years 5-6
- Secondary years 7-8
- Ages 10-14

Key Learning Areas:

- English

Example of:

- Novel

Themes/Ideas:

- Change/Growing Up
- Being Different
- Responsibility
- Communication/Finding your voice
- Relationships



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Discussion Questions and Activities:

Discussion Questions

Why does Mika walk off stage during the performance? How is this related to why Matt didn't want to teach her piano? How is this related to how she is feeling about school and her life in general? What does Mika discover/admit to herself about how she wants to live, and what kind of music she wants to play?

Body image/changing

Is Mika feeling comfortable or uncomfortable about her body changing? Find quotes from the text to illustrate your answer. Why is she still trying to squeeze into her old clothes? Why is she being so self-critical? Have you had moments like Mika? Do you think other young people around her age might be? What would you say to a friend who is feeling this way?

Encourage students to repeat this activity whenever they are feeling uncomfortable and self critical. This can be a private activity. How have Mika's feelings about herself changed by the end of the story?

Being Different

This story has a lot of examples of people 'being different'. Give examples. What's Mika's attitude towards standing out and being different at the start of the novel, compared to the end?

Responsibility

When Mika and Max are alone on the bus alone and on their adventures following, how is Mika responsible for Max? Discuss the choices she makes while Max is in her care. Do you agree or disagree with them? What lessons does she learn from their adventure?

What happens to make Max behave more responsibly, and to find the way out for him and Mika, when they get out of the river? What does this say about how much Max is choosing to be irresponsible, earlier in the novel? What about the way other people, especially Colette, are treating Max, might be contributing to that? Give examples.

Communication/Finding your voice

Max is nonverbal, because of his autism, but throughout this story, he and Mika are 'talking'. How does Max communicate with Mika? How does Mika 'hear' him? What do you think is most important when you are communicating with someone who doesn't speak your own language? In what ways does Mika become more self-expressive in this story? How does this affect the way Mika communicates with her mother?

As Mika and Max become closer, they become better at communicating with one another. Do you think the way you listen to someone can affect how well they can communicate? Who in your life makes you feel as though you can really express yourself? Do you think you are a good listener? How can you become a better listener?

What do you think the author is saying about having a voice? How does Mika become a voice for Max? How does music become a voice for Mika?

Relationships/Social skills

What social skills does Max have? What social skills does Mika learn in this story? How do these change her relationships? What is the author saying is most important in relationships? Mika has never met anyone like Max before, but do you think Max has ever met anyone like Mika? What might be different for Max, about Mika? What do you think it's going to be like for their friendship, going forward?

How do the following relationships change, from the beginning of the story, to the end:

- Mika and Max
- Mika and her brother and sister
- Mika and Chloe and Pearl and Perry
- Mika and her mum and dad
- Max and his mum and dad
- Mika's parents with Colette and Sam.

Autism

People who have autism are born with brains that are wired differently. Sometimes the writing is a bit different, and sometimes it's very different. You can't tell by looking at a person how different their brain's wiring is, or even if they have autism. There have always been people with autism and there always will be.

Class activity: do the sensory activity Mika does on page 44 of the novel. Close your eyes: What can you hear? What can you smell? What can you see? (even though your eyes are closed) What can you feel? Now, imagine there's a volume knob on all of your senses, and turn it all the way up. Imagine the sounds are louder, the scratchiness of your jumper is more, etc. What might it be like if you felt this way, all the time? How is this related to the way Mika feels about music?

Colette talks about 'stims' on p.55. What are the connections the author is making between water for Max, and Mika's phone? Do you have stims? When are they good, and when are they bad?

How is the way Mika feels about music connected to the way Max feels about water?

In 'A conversation with the author' at the end of the novel, we find out that the character of Max is based on the author's son, Leo, who has Level 3 autism, which means he requires a great deal of support. (People with Level 1 autism, for example, might not need much support at all.)

What kinds of support do we see Mika getting? Do you think Mika needs extra support? If so what kind? Do you think she is going to get it by the end? Why?



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Think of times in your life when you have needed support. (as a baby, at school, emotional support – eg physical, educational, emotional) Think of examples when you might need support in the future. (eg when you're old, when you're learning something new, or starting a new job; if you have an accident, or when you go through a challenging time) Think of examples when you have given support.

What can be good and what can be bad about giving and receiving support?

What kind of extra support do you need? Write a letter to someone in your life, asking them for support.

Writing

In an interview, Laura Bloom states that “The character of Max is based closely on my son, Leo, who is non verbal and has autism. I wanted to tell a story where the autistic character has as much agency, personality, and charm, as anyone else in the story, because that’s been my experience with Leo.”

How do you think Laura Bloom has drawn on her personal experience in writing *Mika and Max*, considering not only the character of Max, but her experience as child/teen and that she lives in Mullumbimby (the setting of the novel)?

Mind Maps

At the beginning of the novel, what expectations and pressure is Mika putting on herself? How does this affect her? How does she change this by the end of the novel?

What expectations are being put on Max? How does this affect him? How has this changed by the end of the novel?

On the board or on large sheets of paper, create character mind maps for both Mika and Max. Add the following information to your mind maps:

- Describe this character’s personality
- Describe their appearance
- Describe their likes and dislikes
- How do they express being upset?
- How do they express being happy?
- Key relationships with other characters
- Changes they are experiencing
- Their wants
- The expectations of their parents
- A key change they experience in the novel

Why do you think Mika and Max develop such a strong bond so quickly? What does Max see in Mika? What does Mika see in Max?

Examine the cover of *Mika and Max*. Discuss the symbolism of the cover illustration elements and how they relate to the story:

- The piano pathway, starting from the bottom as neat and ordered then loosening and becoming free and abstract.
- The silhouettes of the characters behind trees and grass
- The bunting and explosions of psychedelic shapes
- The use (or lack of) colour

Other Great Titles From Walker Books:



Dream Riders: Storm
Lauren Bloom and
Jesse Blackadder
9781760650537 PB
Classroom ideas available



The Promise Horse
Jackie Merchant
9781760650568 PB
Classroom ideas available



Pie In The Sky
Remy Lai
9781760651626 PB
Classroom ideas available



Catch A Falling Star
Meg McKinlay
9781925381207 PB
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