

Sunshine on Vinegar Street

By Karen Comer



A sweet and emotional novel about friendship, family and accepting change from a fresh new voice.

RECOMMENDED FOR

8 – 13 (Upper Primary and Lower Secondary)

THEMES

IVF, moving house, changing schools, friendships, families, basketball

ISBN (AUS)

9781761180132

SYNOPSIS

Twelve-year-old Freya speaks straight from her heart as she navigates moving from her familiar and beloved Eltham with two homes side by side, to an apartment with her mum in inner-city Abbotsford.

A change of schools and homes is not all Freya's navigating – she's also adjusting to a life without the day-to-day presence of her father. Being the new kid also means having to explain her unconventional family (her parents are friends, not a couple) to the people she meets. At least she has basketball, but not everyone is pleased to have a star new player on the team and Freya finds herself at the mercy of her jealous teammates who are quick to make fun of her difference.

But Freya finds friends in odd places, including Spicey the Mouse, Ashok the kind apartment manager and Audrey, the Skipping Girl on the sign above her apartment. It's standing up for these friends (and in the process, saving all three of their lives) that helps Freya find her balance again.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

'I have always liked a city's icons, the things that signal home to us. A friend loved Audrey, the Skipping Girl, as a little girl, and another friend's son used to stand on his garbage bin next to their fence to see her. I thought Audrey would make an interesting symbol of hope for my character, Freya, as she navigates life in a new suburb.

'I never intended to write a book about basketball, but I spent so much time watching my three kids play basketball that it just crept into my manuscript!

'I grew up in a family with a mum, dad and three siblings, and I have created a similar family with my husband for our three teenagers. However, I'm interested in different types of families - I cared for many families as an after-school-care coordinator years ago. I was also inspired by an article about a sperm donor who became very connected to his biological children, and this led to creating the thread for Freya to be a donor-conceived child.

'And I moved houses when I was eight years old, and my new house was an hour's drive from my old house so I did my best to stay close to my old friends while trying to make new friends.

'Lastly, I wanted to write a book which would reflect children's lives back to themselves – it can be challenging to belong in friendship groups and family circles, and there are many different types of families.'

Karen Comer



Credit Sophie Timothy from Sister Scout

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karen Comer is a freelance editor and presents writing workshops to children and adults.

Earlier in her career, she worked in educational publishing and was the editor for children's art magazine BIG. She writes middle-grade and young adult verse novels. Karen lives in

Melbourne. Find out more at

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IN-CLASS DISCUSSIONS AND ACTIVITIES

Pre-Reading Discussion:

- Define the terms *verse* and *prose*.
- How might a verse novel differ from a prose novel?
- What can a verse novel offer readers that a prose novel can't? Which would you prefer to read? Why?

During Reading Discussion:

- Read the opening pages of *Sunshine on Vinegar Street* [from *Power of three* until the end of the definitions of *Steals*]. Divide a blank page in two, one column labelled *Explicit Information* and the other *Implicit Information*. [Explicit being that which is stated plainly and implicit being that which is implied and not stated plainly.] Now list everything you learned about Freya and her friends from the opening pages. [Hint: An example of *Explicit Information* might be that the reader is told Freya is an excellent basketball player, while *Implicit Information* is that we can guess she is very upset to be leaving her friends by the way she describes her goodbye card as *worn* with *extreme* handling and reading.]
What can the reader 'infer' from the explicit definitions of the word *Steals*? Why do you think the author decided to include words with two meanings at key points in the novel? Are these pointers to what unfolds in the scenes that follow?
- Poetic Techniques: Read from pages 4 to 19 [*Summer hits* until the end of *Trapped*] and find examples of the following poetic techniques:
 - Alliteration
 - Repetition
 - Rhythm
 - Metre
 - Enjambment
 - Assonance

- Karen Comer refers to Freya's car radio as 'sizzling with summer hits' on page 4 and on page 6 Freya refers to summer as being 'already full of one hit... after another.' In the first example, *summer hits* refers to the songs played over long hot summer holidays and has a positive tone, while the latter references hits as something more physical or mental, and is negative in tone. What do we call this device? Might the book's title – *Sunshine on Vinegar Street* – be another example of the device?
- Verse novels generally have fewer words on each page and more white space, which sometimes means they present text in more unusual ways. One example of this is on page 15 when the words 'The ball rolls around the rim in slow motion' are shown in an arc, similar to the path taken by the ball. Did this technique make the scene more intense? Compare this example with one on page 33 where Freya is thinking about the saying she made up with her father about curiosity.
- On page 16, Freya begins to score her new experiences as if she is playing a game of basketball against her new suburb. Why do you think the author used this device throughout the novel? Did it work for you as a clever way to track Freya's successes and failures?
- Read pages 60–61. Why might the author have chosen the name Raptors for the basketball team? Highlight the words used to enhance the imagery of powerful and loud birds competing.
- *'Basketball is a metaphor for life.*
Be confident – take the shot!
Help others – as many assists as goals.
Don't be selfish – raise your team.' (p 77)

What is a metaphor? What does Ashok mean in this extract? Would you agree that metaphors make complex ideas easier to understand? How do you think they do that? Can you find other examples of metaphors in *Sunshine on Vinegar Street*?

- Little Audrey, the Skipping Girl sign, has a long history in Melbourne. Find out what year she was placed on top of the vinegar building. Draw a map showing where she is located.
- Define the term *symbolism*. What might the Skipping Girl be a symbol of in *Sunshine on Vinegar Street*? Might Spicey be a symbol for Freya and her experience of moving to a new environment?
- Retell the story from Val's point of view. Does seeing Freya's arrival in Abbotsford from Val's perspective make her actions more or less understandable?
- By the end of the novel, Freya decides the one word that describes what she stands for is BELONGING. Why do you think she chose this word? What word would you choose?
- **Visual Arts:** Sketch yourself as the Skipping Girl. Draw yourself holding something of importance and standing on a sign showing a word that means something special to you.
- **PDHPE:** What does the term phobia mean? What phobias do Freya and Val have? What scene in the story provided a clue as to why Freya developed a phobia of lifts? Can you name other common phobias people suffer from?
- **PDHPE:** Val is as good a basketball player as Freya but is not selected for the VGBT. What is the one thing that makes the coach choose Freya over Val? Can you think of some other instances when truly working as a team raises everyone up?
- **PDHPE:** Freya uses text messages and a group chat to communicate with her old friends, new friends and her grandpa. Find examples of positive and negative uses of social media in the story.