

GRACE NOTES



KAREN
COMER

TEACHERS RESOURCES

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Teachers Resources by Ernest Price

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INTRODUCTION

Grace Dalfinch is developing her identity as a musician, using the many talents that she has developed in hours of classical training to find her way into the contemporary music scene. James Crux is a passionate artist who is trying to find ways to develop his skills as a street artist while staying on the right side of the law. Their worlds collide when Crux is inspired to create his most popular work – a portrait of Grace playing her violin. The popularity of her playing and his artwork set the two on the path to each other. Will they find each other, despite the best efforts of well-meaning parents and Covid-19 lockdowns?

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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 lives in Melbourne. *Grace Notes* is her debut novel.

BEFORE READING

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

- Ask students to consider the connotations of the title *Grace Notes*. They should consider the various definitions of grace, as well as the technical definition of a grace note. What predictions can they make about the text based on these understandings?
- The work is set in Melbourne 2020. Have students consider:
 - The political climate in Melbourne during 2020
 - The legal framework for the lockdown of the city
 - The lived experience of lockdowns, particularly for young people
 - Their personal memories of lockdowns, if they experienced them
- Have students consider the verse novel as a form. Have they read another verse novel? What preconceptions do they have about the form?

Ask students to investigate the [history of street art in Melbourne](#). What do they like about the form? Why do they think it is so prevalent in Melbourne?

Play students a range of music arranged for the violin, including both classical and contemporary tracks. What are their impressions of the music?

AFTER READING

1. THEMES

A. VOICE AND CREATIVITY

Karen Comer explores the role of creativity in the life of an individual and the society. Her protagonists are fuelled by their creative impulses, a vibrant energy running through them and motivating their engagement with the world.

Comer shows the young artists finding their voices. They are developing their own creative practices, with Crux beginning to work in the streets and Grace playing contemporary music and performing publicly.

Grace Notes reflects the way that social norms constrict a person's creativity. Both Crux and Grace struggle with the ways that the law restricts their art, and whether or not art is not considered 'essential' in the midst of a pandemic.

B. FAMILY EXPECTATIONS

Grace Notes reflects the ways that familial expectations can shape our experience of the world, for better or worse. There are numerous iterations of the family in the text, but they all serve as a guiding force in the lives of the characters.

Grace and Crux have complex relationships with their families. They are loved, but this love comes with expectations that can weigh heavily on the characters. For example, Grace's mother wants to provide the safety and security that she lacked as a child.

Comer does not romanticise the family unit. Crux's family navigates the domestic violence evident in the house next door. The darkness that occupies that household is emblematic of the pressures placed upon family units during the pandemic.

C. SAFETY

The text is a meditation on the very human need for safety, and the ways this impulse can restrict creative endeavours. Against the background of a developing pandemic, the characters grapple with the ways that the family unit can provide solace in times of social upheaval.

Conversely, as Crux's neighbours demonstrate, the nuclear family can be a place of extreme pressure. When the family unit fractures, it can expose the extremely tenuous nature of this sense of comfort.

Grace Notes also reveals that the pursuit of safety can take the colour and joy from life, whether it be through Covid-19 restrictions, developing a career Plan B, or sticking too closely to a parent's rules about your art.

D. RESILIENCE

The text's backdrop, Melbourne's series of lockdowns, asks a lot of its characters. They must cope with severe, and constant disruptions to the social and economic patterns of their lives.

Grace and Crux reflect the pressure that these restrictions create, with their artistic practice disrupted by the arrival of the pandemic. As Crux learns, this is part of the process embedded in creative life; artists fail but must remain committed to their craft.

All around the protagonists are characters learning what it means to be truly resilient. There are nurses, doctors, teenagers struggling with their mental health and businesses failing. The text demonstrates the dark side of resilience too, as some characters fail to recover from significant struggles.

E. LOVE AND BELONGING

Grace and Crux are young people learning what it means to love and be loved. Their romantic connection provides them with a chance to feel truly seen and understood by someone else, a gift that many people search for their entire lives.

The characters also find a sense of belonging in their artistic communities. As they are moving towards adulthood, they begin to experience the shifting sense of connection that comes when you find friends who share your interests.

The characters also grapple with the nuances of familial love, as they seek to balance their connection with their families and their developing independence. Some adults, like Grace's Ettie, support their dreams wholeheartedly. Others, like Grace's mother, have more

complicated approaches to the young characters. Crux and Grace must work to find the right balance between chasing their dreams and understanding the difficulties of the adult world that they are beginning to inhabit.

F. LEARNING ACTIVITIES ABOUT THEMES

- Split your class into small groups. Assign them each a theme from the text and ask them to explore how this idea develops throughout the text. They should develop a presentation for the rest of the class, exploring scenes and quotations from the text that consider the issues and ideas associated with this theme.
- Have students reflect on their personal connections to the themes in question. Do they have a creative practice, or did they experience a Covid-19 lockdown? Give students space to consider these ideas individually, and then open the classroom to allow them to share and develop their perspectives on the themes.
- Students can develop an analytical paragraph in response to the following questions. Have them embed evidence in the form of quotations throughout their responses.
 - Why is creativity important to the characters in *Grace Notes*?
 - What opinions about family are evident in the text?
 - How does Comer explore the nuances of safety?
 - Which of the characters in *Grace Notes* display resilience?
 - Where do the characters find a sense of belonging?

2. TECHNIQUES

A. FORM AND STRUCTURE

Comer has **structured** the text around the incremental creep of Covid-19 in Melbourne. The **Covid Chorus** situates the characters' experiences within the broader social context, amplifying the reader's understanding of their anxieties. The **multimodal text** includes social media posts, framing the text's portrayal of the way that the pandemic polarised popular opinion.

The **layout** of the text reinforces the choices that Comer made in constructing her **verse novel**. The use of different **fonts** and a range of **line breaks** colours the reader's understanding of the characters' emotions. She intersperses **dialogue** throughout the text, using **italics** to deepen the reader's understanding of the characters' relationships.

B. NARRATIVE VOICE

Comer uses **alternating first-person narratives** to connect the reader to the journeys that Grace and Crux take throughout Melbourne's lockdowns. She **shortens** the distance between these perspectives as the text develops, and the two protagonists find and build a connection. She reflects the **parallels** that shape their lives, connecting their understanding of music and art respectively.

C. CHARACTERISATION

Comer uses these **first-person narrators** to develop rich and complex characters. They are **three-dimensional**, with passions, faults and flaws. Readers see their **relationships** on the page, replete with their capacities for kindness, jealousy and anger. Minor characters are allowed to speak for themselves, as Comer includes **dialogue** and **text message exchanges**. This develops readers' independent understanding of these characters, broadening the range of perspectives Comer offers on the text's themes.

D. FIGURATIVE LEVEL

Grace Notes is full of **symbols** that add nuance to the ideas, issues and themes of the text. For example, Crux's **cyanometer** reflects Grace's emotional complexity, and his **birds** reflect the range of emotions.

The rich **imagery** in the text draws on the lives of the characters, shaped as they are by music, art and Covid-19.

E. LEARNING ACTIVITIES ABOUT TECHNIQUES

- Split your class into small groups. Assign them each a group of techniques from the text and ask them to explore how these techniques develop the text's themes. They should develop a presentation for the rest of the class, exploring scenes and quotations from the text that demonstrate these techniques.
- Have students experiment with using some of the techniques that Comer employs throughout *Grace Notes*. Begin at the word and line level then extend to stanzas and poems as the students develop their skill and confidence.
- Students can develop an analytical paragraph in response to the following questions. Have them embed evidence in the form of quotations throughout their responses.
 - How does Comer use form and structure to develop the themes of the text?
 - How does Comer's use of narrative voice develop the reader's understanding of *Grace Notes*?
 - How does characterisation shape the text's themes?
 - How does the figurative level enhance the reader's understanding of *Grace Notes*?

3. CLOSE STUDY

For each of the following excerpts from the text, ask students to consider what is revealed about the text's themes and/or characters.

Quote	Analysis
'... I wonder whether there'll / ever / be space / for me.' (p. 1)	
'I didn't choose to play the violin. / The violin chose me.' (p. 11)	
'She's hit a dissonant nerve – / I'm so tired of playing the same pieces / over and over in orchestra, / waiting for everyone to catch up, / no room for expression, / no space for me.' (p. 19)	
'I don't want things, I want / POSSIBILITIES' (p. 22)	
'If our family / had to be labelled in a word: / over- / achievers' (p. 23)	
'A thousand stories right there.' (p. 28)	
'I ride home, / imagining the freedom / of painting and working, / with no school.' (p. 32)	
'I can't continue to / fit in the space of / Mum's vision for me.' (p. 52)	
'That chemical sniff of possibilities –' (p. 72)	
'Surely traditions have to evolve? / Surely daughters can choose their own happiness? / Surely our world can handle this new virus?' (p. 96)	

'Is it possible / to love and hate / your mum / at the same time?' (p. 109)	
'This song has a grace note / right before the chorus, / a tiny note that's there for embellishment / but can easily be ignored, / not played.' (p. 117)	
'it's the musicians, the writers, the artists / who take everything that's going on / and turn it into / ART. / Essential.' (p. 141)	
' <i>Art is dialogue</i> , Fendix tells him. / <i>Street art's a conversation / where everyone's invited.</i> ' (p. 142)	
'What is her music saying that she can't?' (p. 143)	
' <i>Art is hard work, / it's a practice. / You gotta show up.</i> ' (p. 144)	
'The impermanence of street art.' (p. 147)	
'A little sigh – / relief mainly.' (p. 162)	
'My imaginary crush on Crux / has crescendoed into forte' (p. 167)	
'... I always choose to play the grace note.' (169)	
'She had nothing, / and now she wants to give us everything. / But our definition of everything isn't the same.' (p. 188)	
'I know he is a little like me, / a lot like me, / only full of colour instead of music.' (p. 199)	
'I can't work out whether the mothering wall, / as Dad calls it, / is a display of love or control.' (p. 207)	
'Her eyes beam love so fierce and true / it heals sorrows.' (p. 218)	
' <i>we have to adapt like Tevye / to this new way of life, / to living with the virus.</i> ' (p. 221)	
' <i>It's like things just stopped for a bit, / and now everything is back to / normal.</i> ' (p. 232)	
' <i>You're just another rules person. / Covid rules, warehouse rules.</i> ' (p. 235)	
' <i>It's your gift – use it your way.</i> ' (p. 239)	
'We're so entwined / it's like we've swapped hearts / and mine is bursting with colour / and his full of music.' (p. 252)	
'We are at a stalemate / because all the angry words have been hurled / and no-one understands anyone.' (p. 253)	

'Shouldn't take long to cover up Mack's words, / and fix art Grace / even if I can't fix the situation with real Grace.' (p. 255)	
'We are a torrent of sadness inside.' (p. 273)	
' <i>There needs to be time to grieve deeply.</i> ' (p. 275)	
'No wonder they say the violin / is the closest instrument to the human voice – / it can hold all the feelings, / then release them.' (p. 276)	
'Nothing of beauty lasts forever. / Nothing grim lasts forever.' (p. 278)	
'Will the scars of Covid-19 / leave us decaying in beauty or rot?' (p. 278)	
' <i>You see, she calls to me. Restrictions / can't stop our music, can't stop us.</i> ' (p. 284)	
' <i>Don't judge her. She's doing the best she can.</i> ' (p. 299)	
'The world suddenly seems / a lot more complicated than it was before.' (p. 300)	
'I do not want want want her to ruin my life.' (p. 300)	
'When we finish, we don't speak / because music takes the place of words / sometimes.' (p. 318)	
'I am more than my parents' expectations. / I am my own possibilities, my own dreams, / and I'm going to be the one / to make them happen. / Rescue myself.' (p. 321)	
' <i>It's your ocean of emotion</i> ' (p. 326)	

4. EXTENDED ANALYTICAL RESPONSES

Students may be asked to respond analytically to *Grace Notes*. Some possible essay questions:

- *Grace Notes* shows the importance of finding your creative voice. Do you agree?
- In *Grace Notes*, family is a complex concept. Discuss.
- To what extent do Covid-19 lockdowns shape *Grace Notes*?
- *Grace Notes* demonstrates the importance of failure. Do you agree?
- Everybody finds a place to belong in *Grace Notes*. Discuss.
- Love is the most powerful force in *Grace Notes*. Discuss.
- The dual narrators shape the reader's understanding of family dynamics in *Grace Notes*. Do you agree?
- To what extent does *Grace Notes* show change in Melbourne?
- *Grace Notes* uses the verse form to show the importance of creativity. Do you agree?

5. CREATIVE RESPONSES

Students may be asked to respond creatively to *Grace Notes*. In writing their own verses, students should look to echo or respond to Comer's central themes and her key techniques. Some possible prompts:

- Ask students to choose their favourite verse, and to extend it by a stanza or two.
- Ask students to respond to a scene from the text from the perspective of another character.
- Find a silence in the text, and ask students to respond from a designated perspective.
- Develop the core facts of a contemporary scene, and designate a perspective for the students to adopt. Ask them to extend the text to this moment, adopting the perspective of one of the protagonists. For example, ask them to consider Grace in 2022, as she finishes high school. What are her dreams now?
- Have students write from their own perspective, responding to their experience of Covid lockdowns in 2020. What were their experiences of the text's key themes? Ask them to adopt some of Comer's favoured techniques.

CONCLUSION

Crux and Grace are just learning to be teenagers when Covid-19 lockdowns change everything that it means to be young. Against all odds, these two remarkable young people find each other, and what it means to be fully themselves.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE NOTES

Ernest Price is an experienced English teacher who has led English faculties in a range of secondary settings. He has worked with the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, as well as the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English, to develop curriculum and resources for teachers. Ernest has written teachers notes for numerous publications, including *The Hate Race* and *Foreign Soil* by Maxine Beneba Clarke. He is the author of a forthcoming novel, to be published in 2024.

NB: These Teachers Note were produced from an uncorrected proof copy of the book, and direct quotes may not be final.