



VIBES

BY AMY KATHLEEN RYAN

TEACHERS GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

'It isn't easy being able to read minds.' (p 1)

Kristi Carmichael prides herself on being both intuitive, and a non-conformist, despite the fact that she's a student at the ultimate refuge for non-conformists, a college called Journeys. She also believes that she has psychic powers! The daughter of a brilliant surgical administrator, and an absent doctor father who left her and her mum after being hit with a malpractice suit over a patient's death (p 70) and is 'working miracles' in Africa, Kristi's home life has been somewhat disrupted ever since. So, she avoids her mother, and any queries about her activities, and tries to show the world that she doesn't care about anyone or anything. However, despite her avowed 'loner-ness', she is secretly crazy about the gorgeous Gusty Peterson and has never really gotten over being dumped by his sister Hildie as her best friend. Thus, she's habitually sarcastic to everyone, but particularly towards the gorgeous girls Hildie and Eva. Life begins to look interesting when a new kid named Mallory arrives at school, until Kristi damages their friendship. And she's excited to find herself teamed up with Gusty for a character-building project, but makes some bad mistakes with him as well. Meanwhile, her other friend Jacob begins to change and to evince some characteristics which Kristi had never noticed were actually there all along. Then she learns that her dad is coming home (p 73) and things really begin to fall apart at the seams.

'No, Mom. I'm not a nut-job. I'm confused maybe, but I'm not crazy.' (p 211) Is Kristi crazy? Is she psychic? Is she ugly? Is she fat? Does anyone love her? Read this novel and find out.

BEFORE READING THE NOVEL

- Examine the **cover** of the novel. What does it suggest about the novel's themes?
- Read a general overview of psychic powers.
- Read about adolescent fiction in which the protagonist is an outsider.

THEMES

Five themes might be identified in this novel, and **sub-topics** within them:

1. INTUITION VERSUS PSYCHIC POWER

Sub-Topics to be covered in this **theme** include:

- **Intuition**

Activity: Read about intuition. Are some people more intuitive than others?

- **Psychic Power**

Activity: Read about psychic power. Is there any proof that it exists?

2. LOVE

Sub-Topics to be covered in this **theme** include:

- **Romance**

Question: Kristi likes Gusty; Mallory likes Kristi; Jacob likes Gusty; Mom still loves Dad; Dad loves Rhonda. Is romance always this complicated? Discuss.

Question: What does this novel reveal about gender differences and issues? What ideals of romantic love are depicted? Where do we glean our ideals from? e.g. Some say that fairy tales present such ideals which are thus embedded in our culture, hence the female quest for the 'handsome prince' (like Gusty) and the notion that girls must be pretty (Patterson-Neubert 2003). Discuss.

- **Familial Love**

Question: Kristi learns to appreciate her mother's strengths and to accept her dad's weaknesses. What does her mom learn about Kristi? What does her dad learn about her?

- **Friendship**

Question: Kristi has no female friends, and blames Hildie for abandoning her. But what does her lack of success with female friends suggest about her?

3. PERSONAL SELF-ESTEEM AND BODY IMAGE

'Well, it's true. I'm a bitch. And I'm ugly.' (p 1) Kristi's individuality is hinged upon her belief in her own psychic power, her poor self-image, her subversive humour and the clothing in her *'found' wardrobe* (p 6). She likes to think of herself as an oddball: *'her big-breasted, psychic, slightly freaky friend'* (p 3). But even Kristi is not immune to the temptations of peer group pressure so that when she is teamed up with the gorgeous Gusty for the assignment she uncharacteristically wears a *'super-tight denim skirt'* (p 52) and lots of makeup to impress him. Mallory's acne, which has ended his former life as a child model (pp 50-1), is another aspect of this theme, as is Eva's anorexia.

Activity: This novel makes many comments on the issue of beauty. For example: *'beautiful people are the last ones you want to befriend'* (p 2); *'I don't trust them to use their beauty for good rather than evil.'* (p 44) Locate other such quotes. Is it possible to be beautiful and nice at the same time? Despite Kristi's prejudice towards them, she finds that Gusty is actually not as confident as she'd thought and that Eva has an eating disorder. Is it just as difficult being beautiful as it is being ordinary looking? Discuss.

Activity: Discuss body image in contemporary life. Encourage students to research the subject by visiting sites such as 'Body Image' HealthInsite <http://www.healthinsite.gov.au/topics/Body_Image> or 'Body Image and

Self-Esteem' *Kids Health* <http://kidshealth.org/teen/exercise/problems/body_image.html> or 'Body Image' *Young Adult Health*
<<http://www.cyh.sa.gov.au/HealthTopics/HealthTopicDetails.aspx?p=240&np=298&id=2086>>

Question: How does the media influence what we view as normal in terms of body shape and style? Visit sites such as: 'Beauty and Body Image in the Media' *Media Awareness Network* <http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/women_and_girls/women_beauty.cfm>

Activity: Self-Esteem is influenced by both puberty and factors such as family life, relationships and scholastic achievements. Kristi's feelings about herself are partly influenced by her dad's departure. What else has influenced her self-image? Have you ever had feelings like hers? Do all teenagers feel that they are outsiders?

Activity: Eating Disorders and teenage skin conditions are other aspects of this theme included in this novel. Choose one of them and research it further.

4. CONTEMPORARY LIFE & POPULAR CULTURE

Kristi is highly critical of many of her peers and of contemporary pretensions in general, and often her feelings and opinions about popular culture are cloaked in sarcasm. For example when she watches the news she summarises the clichéd often insincere journalism on offer, by channel surfing: '*Usually I start with CNN...*' and she ends with '*And finally I end up on Comedy Central, where I get the news.*' (p 34) She also makes fun of African help efforts: '*Or maybe they're just too polite to tell rich do-gooders from America when they're being condescending jerk-offs.*' (p 120) And she's highly critical of the theories espoused by her school (p 9), by Brian (the Principal) and David (the Explorations of Nature teacher), which teaches subjects like 'Story as Cultural Artefact', 'Exploration of Nature' and 'The Language of the Universe' (p 18) and sends students not to detention but to the Contemplation Room (p 24).

Question: Is Kristi too critical of contemporary life? Is it all so bad? What do you like/dislike about contemporary tastes, trends and ideas?

Question: What do you like/dislike about your school, and about your family?

7. COWARDICE

Gusty thinks he's a coward. And later Kristi discovers that she's afraid of anybody who gets too close to her.

Question: '*Cowardice is underrated.*' (p 56) Is being a coward always a bad thing?

CHARACTERS

Key characters include: Kristi Carmichael, the narrator; her mother, an ambitious and dedicated surgeon (p

39); Gusty Peterson, the school heartthrob, and *'cutest guy in school'* (p 2) who is also *'an underachiever, but he's very good at it.'* (p 108); Hildie Peterson, the extremely beautiful *'ex-best friend'* (p 3) of the narrator; Jacob Flax, her walking to school companion; Felix Mathers, a shy and rather weird boy; *'Eva Kearns-Tate, a.k.a. the Evil Incarnate'* (p 11); Mallory St. Croix, the new kid who is *'as dark and twisted as I am'* (p 41); Aunt Ann; and Kristi's rather weak dad.

Minor characters include: Brian, Principal at Journeys, David, a teacher at Journeys, and Katya, the girl in the World Bistro.

Activity: Draw up a **character chart** and find **key quotes** which give a clear picture of the natures of any of these characters, and isolate events which demonstrate their natures. *'I never let anyone too close because I'm afraid.'* (p 219) Then write a brief character study of the person using the quotes and events to illustrate the points made in your summary.

Question: What are the **values** evinced by each of the main characters in the novel?

Question: When Jacob announces that he is embarking on a *'Self-improvement project'* (p 16) the teachers decide to pair off the students to work on similar projects, and Kristi finds herself matched with Gusty. They are asked to make lists in order to develop their characters. Make a list of your own strengths and weaknesses. Which of the latter might you work on, in order to improve yourself?

Activity: Kristi describes Brian very unfavourably (pp 14-15) but in the course of the novel her view of him changes. Which other characters does she learn to *'re-assess'* during the time covered in this plot?

Activity: *'We always end up fighting because she has no sense of humour and she never listens to me.'* (p 37) Discuss what this statement by Kristi reveals about her.

Activity: Kristi is not kind to her former best friend Hildi. And the latter's brother Gusty doesn't seem to like her much either. What do you make of Hildi? Is she as bad as Kristi makes out?

Question: Kristi prides herself on being able to play excellent practical jokes. But when Mallory plays one on Katya, she realises how much such a trick can hurt someone. Is planning such games a skill, or a vice?

SETTING

This novel is largely set in an unnamed town in the United States. Students may wish to explore the following:

- **Macrocosm – Town and Country**

Activity: What details does the author convey about the setting? e.g. *'Pretty soon the nice part of fall will be over and the dark and cold will set in.'* (p 126) Find other clues to the environment like this one.

- **Microcosms – Places**

Activity: Journeys is the setting for much of the novel. Try to design a map of the school grounds and buildings

from the clues offered in the novel. Mark locations on it. e.g. World Bistro.

Activity: How would you imagine a drawing of Kristi's home might look?

WRITING STYLE

This novel might be studied in terms of a range of aspects of style:

- **Devices such as simile, metaphor, personification** are used.

Activity: Find examples of the effective use of these devices in this text.

- **The language is full of aphorisms** which are witty and relevant e.g. *'opera is the perfect soundtrack for the tragedy of Modern life.'* (p 43) *'I figure it's time my rebellion took on more conventional overtones.'* (pp 45-6) *'How many lives must Puberty destroy before it is finally stopped?'* (p 50) *'That's why I like dogs. They don't have motives.'* (p 110)

Question: Find other sayings like these in the novel. What do they reveal of the predominant themes in the book?

- The story is told from **First Person Narrative Point of View, in Present Tense.**

Activity: Imagine if it had been written from another perspective. e.g. From Gusty, Mallory or Jacob's first person perspective, or in third person? Try to re-write a scene in the novel from that perspective.

Activity: Write a letter as if it has been sent from Kristi's dad telling her what he's been doing in Africa.

- **Suspense is created by building impressions, leaving clues, sewing seeds of doubt and many other strategies employed by writers.**

Activity: Mark in the text any comments which suggest the future action in this novel.

Question: The question of Kristi's psychic power is a strong thematic 'thread' throughout the book. She tells the reader in the opening line, that *'It isn't easy being able to read minds.'* (p 1) And thereafter she constantly peppers her narrative with her 'readings' of people's minds. But things begin to unravel when Kristi finds out that her dad left them for a woman named Rhonda (p 187), not because he was ashamed of his loss of a patient. (This might prompt a reader to ask that surely with her psychic power she'd have known that? Is she really psychic?) Later she tries to get Hildie to admit that she's always been psychic, but Hildie responds: *'Those were just stupid games, Kristi.'* (p 194) And then the whole class, including the teacher David, think she's going crazy. Then she discovers that Jacob is *'totally gay'* (p 203). (Again, she would surely have known this if she was psychic? We discover too that most of the school knew he was gay so that Kristi's lack of knowledge is even more suspicious.) This all culminates (p 205) with her realizing just how much she's gotten wrong... and when her mum finds out about her supposed psychic powers, she is amused since she recalls that their Gammy too always thought she could *'hear thoughts'* (p 209). Discuss the strategies employed in order to tease the reader and maintain suspense.

- The **Structure** of the story can be analysed in terms of the key narrative features of abstract, orientation, complicating action, resolution, evaluation and coda outlined by William Labov.

Activity: Draw up a chart and identify these key points in this novel's narrative structure.

- This story falls into several **genres—romance, mystery, rite of passage**. [See also **Themes** above].

Activity: Examine the work as a romance.

Activity: Compare this novel to other novels in which a teenage protagonist is an outsider. [See Bibliography of novels below.] Most texts on YA fiction also cover this concept, if you wish to research it further.

Question: What makes this novel a mystery?

- **Humour**

Activity: Examine the role which humour plays in exploring the issues in this novel. For example:

'I have a mantra: *I am my own person. I am my own person. I am my own person I am my own person.*

That's why I don't have many friends.' (p 5)

When Mallory writes her a note: '*What is the deal with this school?*' (p 25) she answers: '*It's progressive. Like colon cancer.*' (p 26)

- **Exaggeration can be a device used to make a point too.**

Activity: The role of exaggeration in emphasizing aspects of character, theme or plot is another aspect of style which you might discuss with a class. For example, read Kristi's description of herself, beginning '*I feel like the scum.... Or die?*' (p 220) Then invite students to write a similar piece describing their feelings in a certain context using exaggeration like this.

- **'Reverse' or 'negative' analogies** can be effective in making meaning too.

Activity: Read for example, '*My walk to school isn't as bad as a perp walk to the courthouse for someone wrongfully accused of strangling her own children...doom*' (p 9). Were there any other pieces of writing like this in the novel?

- **This text contains a range of different forms of text.**

Activity: Quote from Aldous Huxley (p 16); Poem by Robert Frost (p 19); Notes from Kristi's mother (p 32); the lists (pp 61-2, 66); Gusty's notes to Kristi (pp 98-9, 167); Kristi writes a rather naughty free verse (p 97); poem by John Keats (p 239). Choose one of these texts to discuss in relation to the novel's themes.

- **Found Poetry**

Activity: Kristi refers to an activity called found poetry (p 6). Have students choose interesting words or phrases in various types in magazines or newspapers, and to make their own subversive poems. Create a classroom display of them.

CREATIVE ARTS ACTIVITIES

Music, film, art, drama, craft and rehearsed readings of poetry, prose and scripts might be used to enhance students' understanding of this novel and its messages. For example:

Activity: Kristi's clothes are one of the most entertaining aspects of this novel. Choose some 'found objects' or recycled materials and make an outfit like hers. Organise a class fashion parade of 'Kristi's Found Fashion'.

Take pictures of the outfits and create a catalogue of 'Found Fashion'.

Activity: Make a list of some of the organic and ethnic food served in the cafeteria at Journeys. Make one of the recipes as a classroom activity.

Activity: The title of the book refers to Kristi's intuitive powers. What other title might this novel have had? Come up with a title and design an alternative cover to go with it.

Activity: Choose a scene in the novel and act it out.

Activity: Play some of Kristi's classical music in class, to set the tone for your analysis of the novel.

Activity: Mallory takes Kristi to a restaurant called Lou's (p 172). Make a list of all the famous people called Lou that you know of.

Activity: MGM has apparently acquired the rights to make this novel into a movie. Imagine if you were directing it. Who would play the lead parts? e.g. Miley Cyrus for Hildi? Design a Poster advertising your movie.

Quiz: Ask students a range of questions to test their comprehension with regards to the novel: 1. What is the name of Kristi's kitten? 2. What does Aunt Ann do for a living? 3. Who did Mallory used to be? 4. What sort of food did Mallory upend when he played the trick on Katya? 5. What sort of food did Aunt Ann serve when Dad came home? 6. What's the name of the restaurant where Kristi has her mini-breakdown? 7. What organisation is Kristi's dad working for? 8. What secret vice does Mom reveal when she finds out about Kristi's cat, and Dad's affair? 9. What is Dad's girlfriend's name? 10. What gift did Dad make for Kristi, but never finish?

Answers: 1. Minnie Mouse. 2. She's a hospital administrator. 3. The *Honey Nut* Wheat Puffs kid. 4. Borscht (a cold beetroot soup) 5. Spanish or Hispanic. 6. Pluribus. 7. Doctors Without Borders. 8. Smoking. 9. Rhonda. 10. A jewellery box.

FURTHER TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION & RESEARCH

1. Organise a unit reading other YA novels about self-actualisation, body image, non-conformism, and 'not fitting in' (such as those listed in the Bibliography below), and discuss them.

2. Mallory has been a child star –the *Honey Nut* Wheat Puffs kid (p 50). What sort of effect might this have on an individual? Discuss the problems which might arise with the onset of puberty. Debate the pros and cons of being a child star. Refer to real world examples. e.g. Michael Jackson.

3. Read the other novel by Amy Kathleen Ryan, *Shadow Falls*. Can you identify any similarities between the two works?

4. Conduct a unit on body image and self-esteem. Have students examine a variety of forms of popular media and analyse the images presented of female and male body image and behaviour. Create a collage of the pervasive themes and ideals presented with regards to gender relationships as well.

5. How do families cope with the stress of work and family life? What compromises are necessary? What can each member of the family do to make the household run smoothly? (e.g. Take turns at cooking the evening meal. Organise a roster of duties.) Make a list of ideas.

CONCLUSION

Kristi is an engagingly witty and entertaining heroine, albeit an often annoyingly self-absorbed one. Despite the humour, though, this novel has serious things to say about self-image, and about being a good friend, family member and team player. It's a book in which the 'vibe' is that we each need to be kind to others and to try and see things from another point of view. Kristi thinks she reads minds, but finds that she's actually been channelling her own feelings all along.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amy Kathleen Ryan was born in Jackson, Wyoming, and now lives in Colorado with her husband and a dog. She always liked writing stories and became a serious reader when she discovered *A Wrinkle in Time*, by Madeleine L'Engle. She then moved on to read writers like Susan Cooper, Isaac Asimov, and Jack London. Growing up she was also interested in acting and science, so that 'For a while, writing took a back seat'. She attended college in Omaha Nebraska and Madrid Spain before she ended up at The University of Wyoming, where she studied anthropology and Spanish language. During her last semester, she took a creative writing class and then rediscovered her first passion, and resolved to become a writer. She moved home and took a series of jobs while she honed her craft. Next she moved to Burlington, Vermont, which is where she got really serious about writing. She wrote the first draft of *Shadow Falls* and then enrolled in the Masters program at the University of Vermont where she was inspired by some wonderful teachers and learned a lot of theory about English literature. She revised *Shadow Falls* and was lucky enough to gain the interest of a literary agent, and then a contract with a major publisher. In the meantime, she was accepted to the MFA program in creative writing at The New School. She wrote *Vibes* because she 'wanted to try writing something more lighthearted and funny, but that still had some substance to it'. She says that 'Being a full time writer is a dream come true'. See her website for further details including some great advice about writing, and some books which Ryan recommends you might read: <http://www.amykathleenryan.com/>

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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. She also teaches writing for children and young adults at Griffith University (Gold Coast) where she gained her PhD for a thesis on the development of the Australian children's publishing industry. Her latest publications are *Paper Empires a History of the Book in Australia 1946-2005* (co-edited with Craig Munro) (UQP, 2006) and *Kookaburra Shells Port Curtis Literature* (*justified text* press, 2006).

