

STARS IN THEIR EYES

JESSICA WALTON AND AŠKA

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YEAR LEVEL: Y6–10

ABOUT THE BOOK

At the fan convention, pop culture-obsessed Maisie can't wait to meet her favourite character – an amputee superhero! But being a queer, disabled teenager with chronic pain comes with challenges, especially when your mum doesn't seem to know what boundaries are. Can Maisie make it through the day without falling over, falling in love or accidentally inspiring anyone?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jessica Walton is a queer, disabled writer and teacher. She is the author of picture book *Introducing Teddy* (Bloomsbury, 2016), as well as a range of short stories published in anthologies for kids and teens. In 2017, Jess completed a Write-ability Fellowship with Writers Victoria focused on poetry about disability, cancer and pain. She is currently completing their Publishability Fellowship, also with Writers Victoria, which continues this work. She recently co-wrote an episode of *Get Krack!n* focused on disability, which aired on the ABC in February 2019.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Aška, (pronounced Ashka), is an energetic visual storyteller and science communicator. She has illustrated nine published books and is a regular contributor to *The School Magazine* and other children's publications. Aška believes visual literacy is one of the most important skills in today's world and she loves projects that explore new ways of communicating and presenting ideas with images. In her past life, Aška was a physicist, and she still finds time to share her love of science with kids big and small.

THEMES

- Self-acceptance
- Personal identity
- Friendship
- Family relationships
- Diversity
- Representation

AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

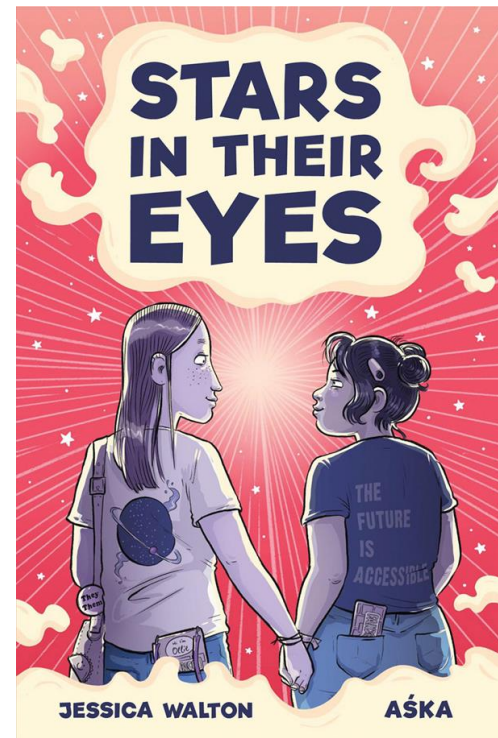
Y6–10 English (Language; Literature; Literacy – including visual literacy)

Y6–10 Health and Physical Education (Personal, Social and Community Health)

Y6–10 Arts (Visual Arts; Media Arts)

USEFUL WEBSITES

- Artist's website: askillustration.com
- Author's website: jessicawalton.com.au



CLASSROOM IDEAS

NB: Words in bold are defined in the glossary.

Discussion questions

1. After reading the novel, what do you think is the meaning of the title? Remember, there can be more than one meaning.
2. Can you think of any other stories with diverse characters? Were these characters main or supporting characters?
3. Who is your favourite character in this story? Explain your choice.
4. What do Maisie and Ollie have in common? How are they different?
5. How would you describe the relationship between Maisie and Jo? Do you think they have a typical mother–daughter relationship? How do they show love to each other?
6. Maisie and Jo have family traditions that are important to them, such as always naming their cars. Does your family have any traditions that are special to you?
7. Why was Maisie upset when a lady called her ‘inspirational’ at the pool? What does Maisie’s reaction suggest about the frequency of these types of interactions?
8. Do you know what the following abbreviations mean? Look them up online if you’re not sure: fanfic, con, merch, ship, rep.
9. Do you know what the following terms mean? Look them up online if you’re not sure.
 - bi/bisexual
 - queer
 - they/them pronouns
 - non-binary
 - LGBTQIA+
 - ally
 - outed, e.g. *you just outed me to a stranger*, (p. 80).
10. What strategies and tools does Maisie use to navigate and cope with a world that is not designed for, or accessible to, disabled young people?
11. Maisie says Luna’s vulnerability makes her a better hero. Do you agree that heroes should have vulnerabilities?
12. Was this story resolved in the way you expected? How would you have liked the story to end?
13. What are three messages you think the creators of this book would like readers to understand?

Health and Physical Education (Personal, Social and Community Health)

1. Search online to discover what these terms and phrases mean:
 - ableism
 - inspiration porn
 - accessibility is not a perk
2. List some actions Maisie takes to protect her physical and mental health.
3. Maisie takes time to calm down by watching cat videos and reading in the quiet room when she experiences anxiety. What steps do you take to get into a better headspace when you feel overwhelmed or anxious?
4. On pages 26-27, Maisie talks about her experiences with childhood cancer, including the fact that the hospital she stayed at had meerkats! Australian hospitals now use a range of design elements that keep children entertained, reduce their distress, and make hospital visits a more positive experience, including animal enclosures, aquariums and interactive screens. Can you come up with any ideas that would improve your health and wellbeing and make hospital a more positive experience if you ended up needing to go there?
5. Maisie and Jo have a very strong bond, but their relationship is changing as Maisie gets older and wants more independence. Write a few sentences about this transition as a diary entry from Maisie’s point of view, then a few sentences from Jo’s point of view.
6. In what ways did the conference event and venue meet Maisie’s health needs? In what ways did the event and venue not meet her needs?
7. The social model of disability is a way of thinking about disability that came out of the disability rights movement in the UK in the 1980s. The old medical model sees disability as a personal or individual problem of the body or mind, whereas the social model instead focuses on rights and access, and how to remove barriers disabled people face in society. Research the social model, then list some of

the barriers to access that Maisie faces in this story. Remember that Maisie has multiple disabilities, including chronic pain and anxiety.

1. Maisie and Ollie attend a panel called 'Fantasy Queers' at the fan convention. They have a conversation on pages 150-151 about finding others like them and feeling less alone. Why do you think it's important for marginalised young people to find peers who share their experiences, and to feel connected to their communities?

English (Language; Literature; Literacy – including visual literacy)

1. What do you think will happen next? Extend the story with your own ideas.
2. Maisie and Ollie are going to try a long-distance relationship. Write an email or text message exchange between the pair. You could do it in a comic book format and include emojis (like on p. 135).
3. If Maisie and Ollie had been born much earlier in history, they might have agreed to communicate via mailed letters after the fan convention, instead of email or text message. What benefits do new forms of communication technology provide, and how has this technology changed the way that people communicate with each other over long distances?
4. Maisie and her mum communicate using text messages while they are apart at the fan convention. Explore the differences in the way they write these messages. Look at the way you and your classmates write text messages and compare them with a few similar text messages from an adult (with their permission). Are there any differences in tone, punctuation, vocabulary etc?
5. Maisie and Ollie enjoy creating fan fiction (fanfic). This involves writing or drawing your own story using characters or settings from another story. Choose your favourite characters from a book, movie, TV show or video game to write or illustrate a fanfic story about.
6. Write a story (with pictures if you wish) from a time you didn't feel that you fitted in. This could be set in school or some other social situation.
7. On p. 39, Maisie talks with her mum about the way that non-disabled people interact with her. They discuss the work of disability rights activist Stella Young. Watch [Stella Young's TED Talk 'I'm not your inspiration, thank you very much'](#), then create the cards that Maisie could take with her to the pool to hand to people who call her inspiring.
8. Maisie wears a t-shirt with the phrase 'The Future Is Accessible' printed on it. This shirt exists in real life and was designed by disability activist and content creator Annie Elaine. Could the future really be accessible and, if so, what would need to change to make it so? Research accessibility and write a persuasive letter to your school, newspaper or local MP about an accessibility issue relevant to your school or neighbourhood.
9. *Stars in Their Eyes* is an #OwnVoices novel, because the author is bisexual and disabled, just like Maisie. Disabled writer Corinne Duyvis created the #OwnVoices hashtag in 2015 to highlight and celebrate books where the author from a marginalised or under-represented group shares an aspect of their identity with the protagonist/s of their book. Duyvis says, 'Society tends to favour privileged voices even regarding a situation they have zero experience with, and thus those are the authors that get published. All #OwnVoices does is centre the voices that matter most.' (www.corinneduyvis.net/ownvoices). List any other texts where you know the writer and protagonist/s share a marginalised or underrepresented identity.
10. Author Jessica Walton refers to herself as disabled in her biography at the back of the book. Read this [article by disabled activist and writer Jax Jacki Brown](http://www.dailylife.com.au/news-and-views/dl-opinion/saytheword-why-im-reclaiming-the-word-disabled-20160120-gma4uj.html) (<http://www.dailylife.com.au/news-and-views/dl-opinion/saytheword-why-im-reclaiming-the-word-disabled-20160120-gma4uj.html>) and write a one-minute speech explaining the difference between person-first and identity-first language.
11. The first page (or two) after each title page is what's called an 'establishing shot'. Choose one establishing shot in the book and describe in words everything you see. Include the scene description, sounds, mood, any characters, their expressions, and any movement.
12. How is humour used in the book? Look at both: text and images. How does it change the way you perceive Maisie as a character and her daily struggles?
13. Look at pp. 34–35. Describe Maisie's feelings, as depicted on those pages. How are these contrasted by the events on page 36? (Look at the art and the visual elements, such as: **panel** shapes, sound effects and facial expressions.)
14. The artist, Aśka, created habitual gestures for Maisie and Ollie, to make their personalities more lifelike. See if you can spot these and explain what they tell us about each character. (Hint: follow the hands.)

15. Look at the shapes/sizes of the **speech bubbles** and the size/thickness/font of the text. Find four different examples and discuss what they communicate. Find the only **narration box** used in the book and explain why it's necessary.
16. Aśka uses many different sized and shaped **panels** to tell the story, and sometimes no panels at all. Find two examples where these choices help us to understand the story and the passage of time better.
17. How is the speed of passage of time shown in the book? Find an example of time moving quickly in a scene and one of an event that takes a longer time, and explain how they work. (Hint: look at the sizes and number of **panels** on each page). Think about how long it takes you to absorb the information of each moment from the way it's drawn.
18. **Onomatopoeia**, **motion lines** and **emanata** are an important part of visual storytelling. Find five different examples of these in the book and explain their function. Then draw three emotions or situations using your own **emanata**.

Media Arts

1. Why do you think it is so important for teenagers like Maisie and Ollie to see themselves represented in the books, TV shows and movies they enjoy?
2. Why do you think it is important to Maisie that disabled characters are portrayed by disabled actors?
3. This story includes lots of pop-culture references. What do you think are the pros and cons of including references to other media in a story?
4. Make a list of the pop-culture references in this story that you understood, and any you didn't understand.
5. Create a poster or brochure for a fan convention that you would like to attend. Which characters/actors would attend? What topics would be discussed at the panels?

Visual Arts

1. How has Aśka used the following graphic-novel elements to help tell the story: symbols, point of view, body language, facial expression, dialogue (speech), flashbacks and fantasy scenes.
2. This novel combines images from flashbacks and fantasy with the main story. List some of the ways Aśka lets the reader know which scenes show flashbacks/fantasy.
3. It is important for Maisie and Ollie to see themselves in characters. Create a character that represents you. The character does not have to look like you, or even be a person, but should represent you in some way. Give them a catchy name that captures the aspect of you that they represent.
4. Design a badge like the ones Jo, Maisie and Ollie wear at the convention. If you want, your badge can include information about yourself.
5. Research the basic principles of composition, angles, point of view in photography. Tell a story using photos you take on your phone, either by digitally ordering the images or printing them out.
6. Fold an A4 piece of paper, to make an 8 page booklet. (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=21qi9ZcQVto>) Using the eight pages, make an illustrated journal of your day, from waking up to going to sleep. How can you keep it interesting? Is there an event you can retell in a humorous way? Are there any surprises? (If so, make sure you put them on an EVEN page, after the page-turn). Try to use one **splash-page** for something unexpected or funny.
7. Look at all of the chapter title pages together. What devices does the Aśka use to introduce each chapter? Why do you think there are no people featured in any of them?

GLOSSARY

Emanata – symbols drawn around a character to indicate their feelings, movements or sounds, such as sweat droplets, radial lines, grumpy clouds, jagged lines, trembling lines, etc.

Motion lines – lines showing movement in a stationary picture.

Narration box – text that is not spoken by any of the characters, but by a narrator.

Onomatopoeia – words that represent sounds by imitating them phonetically.

Panel – a box or bubble in which a single moment of time is drawn in a comic. Sequences of panels drawn on each page make up a story.

Speech bubble – a shape that contains speech or thoughts of characters. Often it has a tail pointing to the speaker.

Splash Page – one big panel or illustration across two pages of a comic, reserved for important moments.

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