Teaching notes for Graceland

Themes discussed in the book:

1. Looking past someone’s disability to see the person behind it
2. Friendship and relationship
3. Calling ‘coercion’ what it is

Discussion questions and classroom activities based around the themes:

In HaSS class, Grace is confronted by her teacher about Hitler’s attitude towards people with disabilities in World War II.

1. Research: what were the key criteria required to belong to Hitler’s Aryan master race? How many people in your class would have ‘belonged’ to the Aryan race?
2. Do you think it is a fair comparison of Mrs Higgins’ to compare Hitler’s regime (killing people with disability) with a contemporary issue (pre-screening for Down syndrome)?
3. Grace reacts strongly to Mrs Higgins’ questioning, especially when she mentions children born with Down syndrome were killed under Hitler’s regime. Why do you think Grace responds the way she does?
4. How have Grace’s experiences with her brother, Jesse, and what happened to him, impacted on how she might really feel about Hitler’s treatment of people with disability?
5. Grace has a different attitude toward Jack at the end of the novel, to what she did at the beginning. What were the main factors that resulted in the change in Grace? How did Grace’s change in attitude toward Jack impact on him throughout the novel?
6. As Grace begins to spend more time with Jack, she struggles to be patient with his strange behaviour and quirky ways. This changes toward the end of the novel, and in the final chapter we see Grace show a deeper understanding of why Jack acts the way he does:

*His eyes start flittering from the ceiling to the floor and back to the ceiling again.*

*‘It’s okay, Jack. I know you’re nervous, but Mum is going to be so excited you’re here. You don’t need to be worried, okay?’*

What is it about the change in Grace that makes it so some of Jack’s autistic traits are no longer an issue in their friendship?

In science classes, Jack and Grace have a few discussions about the role DNA plays in our behaviour.

1. When discussing the DNA of voles Jack says, *‘They have longer strings in their DNA that make them spend more time with their mate and with their offspring. Because they have more receptors, they have a greater release of vasopressin, dopamine and oxytocin into their brain when they’re with their mate.’*

Research:

* 1. Vasopressin
  2. Dopamine
  3. Oxytocin
  4. Give a definition of what these naturally occurring ‘drugs’ do in our brain.

1. Jack goes on to say, *‘There’s something in their (voles’) DNA that causes them to get good feelings from being with their family. And so, they want to stay.’*

Do you believe DNA can really influence a person in the kind of way Jack suggests?

1. DNA is often described as a blueprint that controls the characteristics of organisms, including people. What other things can influence people’s characteristics?
2. As Grace’s group explain in their project in class, there is evidence to suggest Autism may be caused by a DNA variety, and could be hereditary. Certainly, Jack has some difficulties to overcome at school, but do you see Jack’s “DNA variety” as a good thing, or a bad thing?
3. How does Jack’s autism make him a good friend for Grace, once she got to know him better? How / why not?
4. Of all of Grace’s friends, some were more generous than others in encouraging her to pursue her dreams. How important is it, that friends support each other to achieve what they want in life?

In Graceland, Grace’s friends play a big part in her life, but they’re not always the best influence on her.

1. Grace’s friendships develop throughout the novel, and some new characters we get to know at the same time Grace does. Rank the characters Ellen, Hayley, Nikki, Brad, Cooper and Jack, in order of the best kind of friend for Grace, to the least. What are the defining characteristics that make some friends better than others?
2. Would you rank Grace’s friends differently at the beginning of the novel, compared to at the end? What factors impact on any changes you would make?
3. Throughout the novel, Grace begins to doubt whether some of her friends are as trustworthy as she first thought.
   1. Which of Grace’s friends clearly betray her?
   2. Which of her friends are we still not sure about by the end of the novel?
   3. Do you think this reflects reality, that some people are easier to get to know and trust than others?
4. The word ‘Grace’ has a few different meanings; one is when you receive forgiveness you don’t deserve. Which of Grace’s friends deserve her grace / forgiveness?
5. There is an inspi quote that says, *Forgiveness doesn’t excuse their behaviour. Forgiveness prevents their behaviour from destroying your heart*.
   1. What do you think this quote means?
   2. What might Grace ‘forgiving’ Cooper look like?
   3. Do you think she had forgiven Cooper by the end of the novel? Give an example from the final chapters to explain why.

In a blog post [here](https://www.bustle.com/articles/67926-is-it-rape-if-you-say-yes-5-types-of-sexual-coercion-explained), the author discusses five warning signs that a sexual encounter may have be coerced, and therefore sexual assault.

1. Is this a trust worthy article? What makes it trust worthy / not trustworthy?
2. List the five warning signs of coercion. Were there any that surprised you?
3. Of the five warning signs listed in the post, which ones suggest that if Grace had slept with Cooper at his party, it would have been considered coercion?

The Michigan University website defines Consent [here.](https://sapac.umich.edu/article/49)

1. What does ‘consent’ mean in a relationship?
2. Within the definition, the site says, ‘It is the responsibility of the person initiating the sexual activity to get this permission.’ How is this complicated in incidents of coercion in sexual assault?
3. Do you think Cooper believed he had Grace’s permission to sleep with her?

When Mikaela tells Grace that her sleeping with Cooper had been coercion, Mikaela is still hesitant to call it rape.

1. Why do you think Mikaela was so confused about whether it was really sexual assault?
2. List the ways Mikaela’s experience of sexual assault may have been impacting on her in the novel.
3. Why do you think Grace and her friends become so determined to let ‘the world’ know what Cooper was really like?
4. Do you think the girls’ action against Cooper was warranted? Why / why not?

Curriculum Themes that the story fulfils:

**Year 10 science curriculum:**

Transmission of heritable characteristics from one generation to the next involves DNA and genes [(ACSSU184](http://www.scootle.edu.au/ec/search?accContentId=ACSSU184))

* describing the role of DNA as the blueprint for controlling the characteristics of organisms
* representing patterns of inheritance of a simple dominant/recessive characteristic through generations of a family

**Year 10 history curriculum:**

Students investigate wartime experiences through a study of World War II in depth. This includes a study of the causes, events, outcome and broader impact of the conflict as an episode in world history, and the nature of Australia’s involvement. The causes and course of World War II [(ACDSEH024](http://www.scootle.edu.au/ec/search?accContentId=ACDSEH024))

* Examination of significant events of World War II, including the Holocaust

Examination of significant events of World War II, including the Holocaust and use of the atomic bomb [(ACDSEH107](http://www.scootle.edu.au/ec/search?accContentId=ACDSEH107))

* Investigating the scale and significance of the Holocaust, using primary sources

Process and synthesise information from a range of sources for use as evidence in an historical argument [(ACHHS188](http://www.scootle.edu.au/ec/search?accContentId=ACHHS188))

Identify and analyse the perspectives of people from the past [(ACHHS190](http://www.scootle.edu.au/ec/search?accContentId=ACHHS190)

**General capabilities throughout the Australian curriculum:**

In the Australian Curriculum, students develop personal and social capability as they learn to understand themselves and others, and manage their relationships, lives, work and learning more effectively. Personal and social capability involves students in a range of practices including recognising and regulating emotions, developing empathy for others and understanding relationships, establishing and building positive relationships, making responsible decisions, working effectively in teams, handling challenging situations constructively and developing leadership skills. (https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/general-capabilities/personal-and-social-capability/)

* *Self awareness:* This element involves students developing an awareness of their own emotional states, needs and perspectives. Students identify and describe the factors that influence their emotional responses. They develop a realistic sense of their personal abilities, qualities and strengths through knowing what they are feeling in the moment, and having a realistic assessment of their own abilities and a well-grounded sense of self-knowledge and self-confidence. Students reflect on and evaluate their learning, identify personal characteristics that contribute to or limit their effectiveness and learn from successes or failures. In developing and acting with personal and social capability, students.
  + recognise emotions
  + recognise personal qualities and achievements
  + understand themselves as learners
  + develop reflective practice.
* *Social awareness:* Students learn to show respect for and understand others’ perspectives, emotional states and needs. They learn to participate in positive, safe and respectful relationships, defining and accepting individual and group roles and responsibilities. Students gain an understanding of the role of advocacy in contemporary society and build their capacity to critique societal constructs and forms of discrimination, such as racism and sexism. In developing and acting with personal and social capability, students:
  + appreciate diverse perspectives
  + contribute to civil society
  + understand relationships.

A biography of me:

Catriona works in a Christian school on the Fraser Coast, Queensland. Although she has a history and English background as a teacher, her current work and studies are in Inclusive Education. She works with teenagers from Year 6 through to Year 12, many of whom have Autism. She is passionate about inclusion not only in schools, but in society as a whole. She has drawn on her experiences in working with teenagers with Autism in writing the character of Jack, who struggles with many different aspects of life at school, but excels in some areas such as science.

A few years ago, Catriona recalls needing to spend some time in a Year 10 science class. Not having been very interested in science class at the age of 15, she found sitting in a science class second time round fascinating. “I would walk around the students in the class, asking them how they are not being blown away by the things there were learning. But instead, the students were half falling asleep.” She couples this experience, together with the current teaching trend (encouraged throughout the Australian Curriculum) for students to learn to work together in groups, to bring together Jack and main character, Grace.

In writing Young Adult books, Catriona also draws on her experiences of not always choosing wisely when it came to friends, or boyfriends, when she was a teenager. “I want to inspire today’s teenage girls to think more deeply about their relationships and who they are choosing to be in their ‘tribe’. Having friends with similar values and interests is so important. Likewise, I want to encourage teens to be strong in who they are and want they want, and to know the other person’s true character, before diving into a serious relationship with them.”