



# Mockingbird

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**TEACHERS' NOTES**

## **SYNOPSIS**

For Caitlin, life is better in black and white. Colours are too bright, too harsh for her. After her brother died in a school shooting, on 'The Day Our Life Fell Apart', everything changes for her. She loses the one person who can make sense of the world for her, and life loses all meaning.

As her father crumbles, Caitlin is desperate for answers, and to understand the intense grief she is feeling. To help her, she has Mrs Brook, her school guidance counsellor, who feels that if Caitlin can make friends, the colour will come back into her life. But making friends isn't easy for Caitlin, and recess gives her a horrible feeling in her stomach. That is until she meets first-grader Michael. Michael is kind and understanding, and he too is grieving for his mother who he lost in the shooting.

When a news reporter says how in finding the final shooter, the community will be able to find closure, Caitlin is desperate to know what that means. When her dictionary tells her that it is 'the state of experiencing an emotional conclusion to a difficult life event', Caitlin goes on a quest to find closure after the death of her brother. But closure isn't something anyone seems to be able to provide her with, and Mrs Brook tells her that she must find her own version of it.

Yet it isn't just Caitlin and Michael who are closely connected to the school shooting, a boy in Caitlin's grade is the cousin of one of the shooters, and perhaps his life is the most difficult of all. Josh is incredibly angry and mean, but perhaps he only acts this way because he has become the school scapegoat for the shooting. Whilst the rest of the school judges him, it is only first-grade Michael that sees through his outer shell, and shows Josh a friendship that no-one else will.

As Caitlin continues to navigate the difficulties of school and friendships, she is endlessly looking for closure, until she finds the solution right in her own home - Devon's unfinished Eagle Scout chest. She decides that if she can finish the chest, she will find closure, but her dad isn't ready to complete it. Desperate times call for desperate measures, and when Mrs Brook finds Caitlin covered in cuts from trying to get a piece of 'quarter oak', Caitlin's dad realises that he needs to help her.

With both of them finding some kind of closure at completing Devon's last project, the novel ends at the Middle School auditorium with the presentation to the school of Devon's chest, where Caitlin, Josh and Michael are all sat together. Caitlin has learned that life doesn't have to be lived in black and white, and that sometimes it's ok to let a bit of colour into it.

## KEY THEMES

A major theme of the novel is loss, and how each character deals with loss differently. We see both Caitlin and Michael's dads struggling to deal with the loss of family members, and consequently struggling to know how to behave around the family members that they have left. Whilst Caitlin's father hides his emotions and fails to communicate with her, Michael's detracts from any conversations about loss with soccer (a sport Michael doesn't like). Another key theme is friendship. This is something that Caitlin really struggles with, whilst Michael finds it easy, and represents a pure form of it throughout the novel. We see how friends can be found in unlikely places, and watch as Caitlin learns to value human friendship as much as her friendship with inanimate objects. A final key theme is of growing up. Throughout the novel we see Caitlin grow and develop into a character that is better equipped to cope with the challenges life throws at her. We also see how Josh learns to cope with his emotions, and how minor characters like Emma mature and reach out to help Caitlin. Overall we see the challenges of childhood and how small acts of kindness can make it so much easier.

## DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS ACTIVITIES

### SYMBOLS

- Devon's Boy Scout chest
- Caitlin's dictionary
- Caitlin's manners chart
- Red Dog
- Books
- The film *To Kill A Mockingbird*
- Caitlin's Word Study notebook
- Purple Fleece
- Caitlin's drawings
- The mockingbird
- The monkey bars
- Caitlin's coloured pastels

### LOSS

- Why do you think Caitlin talks about Devon in the present tense?
- In chapter 1, Caitlin compares herself to a bird. What do you think this suggests about how she is feeling?
- In chapter 2, Caitlin says 'I wish I could hide in Devon's room but I'm not allowed in there now.'p13 Why do you think her dad doesn't want her going in there? Why does Caitlin want to seek comfort there?

- How do we know that Caitlin's dad is struggling in chapter 3? Find quotations to support your points.
- In chapter 6, Caitlin decides to research everything about the heart. She ends the chapter saying:  
'What I can't find is how long you can make a Heart work once it is shot and can other body organs take over for it and can a hospital keep you alive without it and are you the same person without it and are you a person at all?'p44

Why is Caitlin so interested in the heart? Why does she need to know the answers to all these questions? Why do you think there is no punctuation within the above sentence?

- Caitlin decides to do her group project 'on the Heart and how it works and how a gunshot wound to the Heart makes it stop working and what they do with the body when it's dead which is cremate it. At least that's what happened to Devon.'p54 How do you think this project is helping her to cope with her loss? Why do you think she needs to do it?
- Caitlin gets her dad to read her project and 'He reads it and his head droops almost to his knees. The bump on his throat goes in and out every time he swallows. He sniffs several times which means at least three times and actually he sniffs five times before I say. What's wrong with it?'p55 Why does he react in this way to Caitlin's project? What can we read from his reaction that Caitlin can't? Why does he then leave the room before crying? Why does he hide his emotions from Caitlin?
- In chapter 8 we find out that Caitlin's mother died when she was three. How do you think that might have affected her growing up? How do you think this has shaped her views on loss?
- In chapter 11, Caitlin tells us more about 'The Day Our Life Fell Apart', she says:  
'After we came home from the hospital that night – with no Devon – Dad was yelling and kicking the furniture and the walls and he started pounding the chest with his fists and shouting, Why? Why? WHY? and he threw the woodworking books and Scout manual into Devon's room and slammed the door and said, No no no no no, until I screamed at him to STOP IT! STOP IT! STOP IT! Then he put the sheet over the chest and now he never even looks in that corner.' P71

How is this reaction different to how Caitlin's dad is shown to deal with his emotions now? Why do you think he threw those particular books into Devon's room? Why do you think her dad didn't get rid of the chest?

- In chapter 11, we see a news report about the school shooting. It ends with the reporter saying 'We'll hear more about this story later but isn't it good that we now have closure?'p74 Do they have closure? Does it matter that the remaining killer has had his hearing? Why do you think Caitlin's dad reacted the way he did to the news?
- In chapter 17, Caitlin explains why she talks about Devon in the present tense. She says 'it doesn't mean I think he's still alive. He was alive when he said those things though.'p111 What do you think she means by this?

- The struggles Caitlin's dad is facing seem to be getting harder and harder for him to hide as the novel continues. How does his use of language and actions show this? Find quotations to support your points.

## USE OF COLOUR

- 'The grey of outside is inside. Inside the living room. Inside the chest. Inside me. It's so grey that turning on a lamp is too sharp and it hurts.' P10 What does grey reflect about Caitlin's world at the start of the novel?
- It should be black inside and that's what I want' p10 Why does Caitlin crave darkness at the start of the novel? What does the colour black represent?
- In chapter 10, Caitlin meets Michael and says 'I see a little red boy in a red baseball cap that reminds me of Devon's red Potomac Nationals baseball cap. And I remember seeing that boy at the memorial service for Devon because I remember that cap.'p64 What does the colour red suggest about Michael? Why does Caitlin notice this about him? How is this a change from the start of the novel?
- In chapter 13, Caitlin says 'I like things in black and white. Black and white is easier to understand. All that colour is too confusing.'p87 What do you think Caitlin means by this? What might colour represent for her?
- In chapter 22, Caitlin meets Mr Walters and draws him, he says 'Feel free to use the coloured pencils or pastels too' and Caitlin says 'I don't use colours. My drawings are black and white with no blurry stuff. It's easier to see that way.'p148 This opinion is similar to the one she expressed in chapter 13. Why can she see more easily in black and white?
- In chapter 33, Emma tells Caitlin that 'Colouring something in is easy.'p200 Why isn't it easy for Caitlin? What does Caitlin think about colours?
- When Mrs Johnson puts Caitlin's drawings with others on the bulletin board, Caitlin notices that 'theirs are all in colour. Now mine don't look as good somehow. I stare at mine and wonder how they would look with colour even though I like things better without colour. I think.'p218 How is Caitlin's perception of colour changing? How could this be a metaphor for her life?
- In the final chapter, Mr Walters gives Caitlin a box of coloured pastels. What does this moment symbolise?
- The novel ends with Caitlin saying, 'I put the sketchbook on my lap and open my new box of colours. Now I'm ready to use them because I figured out how I'm going to draw the whole complete picture.'p237 How has Caitlin developed and grown across the novel? Did you get closure from this ending?

## JOSH

- In chapter 5, we are introduced to Josh. Caitlin says that:  
'I see Josh pushing people off the monkey bars again. He used to be in my class before he got put in the other fifth-grade room because Mrs. Brook says it's better that way. I think so too. Josh used to be just loud but now he's loud and evil. Dad says it's because Josh's cousin was one of the school shooters at Devon's school. The one the police caught right away. And killed. But not before he shot Devon.'p35

How has the aftermath of the shooting changed Caitlin's opinion on Josh? Why do you think the school moved him to a different class? Is it fair to call Josh evil? Do you think those are Caitlin's own words?

- When Caitlin confronts Josh for being unkind to William, he asks her 'Is this about your brother? [...] I don't have to apologize for that! That wasn't me! Okay? That was my cousin! I didn't do anything!' p39 Why does he automatically link back to Caitlin's brother? Why is he bringing up his cousin? How has the shooting affected his behaviour?
- Why are the other children so quick to defend Caitlin in chapter 5? How do they ostracise Josh? Why do you think they are reacting to the situation like this?
- Why do you think Mrs Brook pairs Josh with Michael for reading? Is Caitlin's reaction justifiable?
- Do you think Josh is unkind or just misunderstood? Find quotations to support your points.
- In chapter 35, it is clear that Josh has become a scapegoat for all the other children. Why is Michael able to see past who Josh is related to? What could other characters learn from him?
- Josh tells Caitlin that 'I'm mean to people because they're mean to me!' p215 Is this shown to be true across the novel? What does Caitlin realise about Josh at the end of chapter 35? Why does she help him?

## FRIENDSHIP

- In chapter 7, Caitlin is talking to Mrs. Brook about group tasks. Mrs Brook tells her that group tasks are valuable for making friends. Caitlin tells her she already has friends 'My Dictionary. TV. Computer.' p49 How does this make you feel as a reader? Why do you think Caitlin chooses these objects for her friends rather than people?
- In chapter 10, Caitlin meets Michael. This is the first connection with someone new that we see her make in the novel. What's different about Michael? Why does Caitlin feel able to make friends with him? Use quotations to support your points.
- Mrs Brook tells Caitlin that 'Friends give comfort to each other. Friends help solve problems. You can share so much with friends.' P90 Who used to fulfil this role for Caitlin? Find quotations to support your points.
- In chapter 15, Michael introduces Caitlin as his friend and she says ' I feel so proud to hear him

say that.' P103 Why is this a real turning point for Caitlin?

- Why does Caitlin think that she can't be friends with Michael if Josh is? How do we know that Michael still wants to be her friend? Find quotations to support your points.
- In chapter 30, Caitlin tries really hard to make friends with the girls in her class, but is unsuccessful. Mrs Brook says 'And obviously we need to work on the friendship skills in the fifth grade as a whole.'p186 What does she mean by this? How do the other characters need to change their behaviour?
- At the end of chapter 33, Caitlin says about Michael, 'He's the only friend I have and maybe the only friend I'll ever have.'p203 Is this true? Why does Caitlin find it easier to be friends with Michael?
- What is Caitlin learning through her friendship with Michael? Find quotations to support your points.
- Was Emma being a friend to Caitlin in chapter 31? Has she been a friend to her at any other points in the novel?
- In chapter 37, Caitlin tells Mrs Brook that 'I have one really good friend which is Michael and one sort of maybe future friend which is Emma.'p221 How has friendship changed her as a character? How has it made her life better?

## **CLOSURE**

- When Caitlin goes to see Mrs Brook about closure, Mrs Brook says 'This is very stressful for our entire community. We're all looking for Closure.' P78 What does she want Caitlin to understand by this? How has the shooting affected the whole community? How is it different to how it has affected Caitlin?
- Mrs Brook tells Caitlin that closure is 'something you have to find for yourself because everyone is different. We all have to find our own special way.'p79 Is this good advice for Caitlin? How do you think it will help her?
- When Michael asks his dad about closure, he replies with 'Let's play football.'p99 How is this a reflection of his grief? Why might this be confusing for Michael?
- Mr Walters says to Caitlin that 'I think we all need to find Closure. It hurt the whole community. We're all sad.'p150 How is what he is saying, similar to what Mrs Brook said earlier in the novel? How can the community move on from the shooting?
- In chapter 24, Caitlin finds the explanation of closure that she is looking for 'They finally brought the project to Closure.'p156 How do you think finishing Devon's Eagle Scout project will help Caitlin? Do you think it will bring her closure?
- In chapter 26, Caitlin tries to get the materials to finish Devon's chest to get closure, but her

dad says 'I'm not ready to work on the chest.'p160 Why do you think this is? What could finishing the chest symbolise for him?

- In chapter 28, Caitlin tells her dad that 'You have to Work At It, Dad. You have to try even if it's hard and you think you can never do it and you just want to scream and hide and shake your hands over and over and over.'p170 What is she realising about closure? Do you think Caitlin can help her dad to find closure too?
- After Caitlin's advice, her dad agrees to finish the chest and says 'Maybe we can make something good and strong and beautiful come out of this.'p171 What does he mean by this? What could the chest become a symbol of?
- In chapter 29, Caitlin talks about 'The Day Our Life Fell Apart' and says 'I think about those words and how I haven't said them lately.'p175 What does this suggest? What is Caitlin realising?
- Why is it significant that Caitlin leaves Devon's door open in chapter 29? What could it symbolise?
- At the end of chapter 29, Caitlin says 'I thought everything would be okay now that we're working on the chest. But it's still not.'p177 What is she realising about closure?
- Towards the end of the novel, Caitlin's dad seems to be finding some kind of closure. How do we know this? Find quotations to support your points.
- Why do you think the school board decided to change the name of Virginia Dare Middle School? How might this help to bring closure?

## **MICHAEL**

- In chapter 12, Michael says 'I don't feel lucky. I feel bad because I'm not happy all the time like he is. Like I'm supposed to be. He always wants to do something like throw a football or play Frisbee or go bowling and sometimes I just don't want to do that stuff because I'm sad.'p81 How does Michael's dad react differently to grief and loss than Caitlin's? How does this impact on Michael?
- In chapter 17, we find out that Michael's mother was the teacher killed in the school shooting. Do you think this is important? How might it affect his relationship with Caitlin?
- Why is Michael an important character in the novel? What do you think he represents?
- What do you think we can all learn from Michael?

## **PUNCTUATION**

- Why do you think Caitlin uses capital letters in the middle of words and at the start of words that don't need them? How could this link to her feelings and emotions?
- When Caitlin recounts conversations, the speech is in italics rather than speech marks. Why

do you think this is? What do you think this shows you about her relationships with other characters?

## **TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD**

- Why do you think Erskine uses this novel in *Mockingbird*?
- Why do you think Devon calls Caitlin, Scout? Are there any similarities between the two characters?
- Caitlin talks about the moment in *To Kill A Mockingbird*, where Atticus Finch shoots a dog and 'Devon said it was a sick dog who would attack them and make them all die. I guess sometimes it's good to shoot things. But not Devon. Devon was not going to attack anyone or make them die.'p87 How is Caitlin able to rationalise the shooting of the dog? Is it ever ok to shoot anything? How might opinions about guns be different in the UK to the US?
- What does comparing Devon to Jem suggest about him?
- Devon tells Caitlin the meaning of the title '*To Kill A Mockingbird*' is that 'It's wrong to shoot someone who is innocent and was never going to hurt you in the first place.'p88 How does this link to the school shooting? How could this be problematic for Caitlin who is looking for closure?
- In chapter 15, Caitlin notices that 'Michael is wearing overalls. Just like the ones Scout wears in *To Kill A Mockingbird*.' P100 Why is this significant?
- Why do you think Devon's favourite part in '*To Kill A Mockingbird*' is 'where Scout talks to the crowd of angry men and makes them go away.'p105 What could this suggest about the potential impact of Caitlin's actions?
- In chapter 34, Caitlin's dad says 'I wish I were more like Atticus'p210 What do you think he means by this?
- Why does Caitlin draw a mockingbird to be carved into Devon's chest?

## **CREATIVE WRITING ACTIVITIES**

### **DIARY ENTRIES**

- Write Josh's diary entry for when he goes home after the incident in chapter 5.
- Write Caitlin's diary entry after the incident at the hardware shop in chapter 25.

### **A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE**

- Re-read chapter 10. Imagine you are Michael, describe your first meeting with Caitlin. What do you think of her? Do you think she is your friend now?

- Re-read chapter 28. Imagine you are Caitlin's dad and rewrite the chapter from your perspective.

## **A GUIDE TO FRIENDSHIP**

- Write Caitlin's guide to friends and friendship
- Create an assembly on friendship to be given to the fifth grade at Caitlin's school. Make sure you talk about:
  - Difference
  - Understanding
  - Kindness

## **FILM**

- You have been asked by a Hollywood producer to turn *Mockingbird* into a film. Storyboard ten key moments of the novel and explain why you think they are important.
- Create a poster that promotes the film version of *Mockingbird*. Include a tagline that summarises the novel.

## **USING A STIMULUS**

- Pick one of the chapter titles and write a short story using that as your starting point.
- Use the title 'Mockingbird' as the basis for either a poem, short story or play.