

“Why I hate school” by Michael Fatarsky

Author: Kris Stanhope

Synopsis

Michael Fatarsky hates school. In fact he hates it so much that he decides to write a book a *why* he hates school. So far the book is divided into 16 sections and contains 243 reasons. Michael really does loathe school. He feels like he is always being picked on by the teachers and other students. He has no interest in doing any work or making any sort of effort, unless you count soccer. He especially hates Sharon Cramshaw, a girl who he used to be friends with. Her life seems so wonderful and her work is always perfect. It makes Michael even more aware of his own life and the fact that his family is falling apart. Michael doesn't like to think about his problems or even remember the cause of them. It is too painful – especially since he believes that it is his fault.

Michael's older brother Tom died in a car accident two years earlier and the family are having trouble coming to terms with his death. Michael's mother drinks heavily to dull the pain and his father avoids coming home as much as he can. Both of Michael's parents are too caught up in their own grief to help Michael deal with his. This lack of communication means that they are unaware that Michael feels responsible for his brother's death and this burden is ruining his life.

Michael's life is turned upside down when his teacher pairs him up with Sharon Cramshaw to complete a project on families. At first this seems like a nightmare because Michael feels so ashamed about the state that his family is in. But as he gets to know Sharon better it becomes clear that her own family is not so perfect. Her mother left two years ago and her father drinks heavily and is unable to hold down a job. Sharon does her own thing and looks after herself. As Michael spends more time with Sharon it becomes clear that the two have a great deal in common. Sharon begins to have a positive effect on Michael and he realises that there are some things about school that he likes. He begins to reconnect with his parents and the future look a little brighter. That is until Michael visits his brother's grave and remembers the reason why he hates Sharon in the first place. It turns out that the lives of the two friends are inextricably linked.

Text Type

“*Why I hate school*” by Michael Fatarsky is New Zealand writer Kris Stanhope's first novel and is winner of The Tom Fitzgibbon Award. The story is fast-paced and has broad appeal for young readers, particularly boys. Written in easy to read colloquial language the novel deals with issues such

as family, death, dealing with emotions and the destructive influence of alcohol.

Michael is a credible main character and even though the story is told from third person point of view, the reader is privy to Michael's thoughts and feelings about what is going on. Michael doesn't enjoy school and is seen by his peers as a trouble maker. However, the reader is soon made aware that Michael has his reasons for being so unhappy. His brother died in a car accident two years earlier and because he was going to the video shop to get Michael a movie Michael feels responsible. The burden of guilt weighs heavily on his shoulders and his parents, dealing with their own pain, fail to recognise that Michael is in trouble.

The reader sees Michael gradually change as his relationship with Sharon develops. In many ways Sharon is a kindred spirit to Michael and he begins to realise that there are things about home and school that he likes. Just as Michael is beginning to come to terms with his brother's death and his own guilt he remembers something that threatens to send him back to the depths of despair. Sharon's dad is responsible for Tom's death – he was driving the car that killed him. Michael is forced to make a decision – by being friends with Sharon is Michael betraying his brother? Is it fair to punish Sharon and her father for an accident?

Sharing the Novel

The novel has been divided up as follows: Chapters 1 and 2 (pp. 7-16), Chapters 3-18 (pp. 17-93) and Chapters 19-23 (pp. 94-147).

During the shared sessions encourage students to ask questions to clarify their understanding of words and ideas presented in the novel. Have them make predictions about what is going to happen and wherever possible encourage them to try and relate their experiences and lives to Michael's. Students should be able to explain how Michael's character develops and changes as the story progresses and be able to identify the main ideas and themes in the novel.

Introducing the Novel

Have students study the front cover of the novel and read the blurb.

- Who is the main character in the story? How many reasons does he have for hating school? Can you relate to any of his gripes? Discuss in groups.
- Why do you think that the cover of the book has been illustrated the way that it has? Who are the publishers trying to appeal to?
- Who do you think the person is who helps show Michael what is good about school?
- Make a prediction about why Michael began hating school in the first place.

Teacher reads Chapters 1 and 2 (pp. 7-16) aloud to the class. Students follow along in their books.

Comprehension Chapters 1 and 2 (pp. 7-16)

- How many reasons does Michael have for hating school? How many sections is his book divided into? What is Section G? What inspires Michael to start writing his book?
- Who is Sharon Cramshaw? Why does Michael hate her so much?
- Why is Michael so surprised when he reaches the end of the page? What evidence is there in the story to suggest that Michael is not a very good student?
- How do the other students in Michael's class treat him? How does this make him feel?
- Describe Sharon Cramshaw. How is she different to Michael? Why is it surprising that Michael and Sharon used to be friends? What do you think happened to cause the end of their friendship?

Discussion

- What does the fact that Michael is writing a book called *Why I hate school* suggest about his character? What suggestions could you make that might help him enjoy school more?
- In what ways can the other students affect how you feel about school? Have you ever been the victim of rumours or bullying? How did this make you feel? What is the best way to deal with bullies?
- Why do you think Michael tries so hard to forget things? What might have happened to make him hate school and Sharon?

Students read Chapters 3-18 (pp. 17-93) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 3-18 (pp. 17-93)

- Why does Michael go straight to his room when he arrives home from school? What do you think Michael means by if he is in his room then his mother “doesn't have to be bothered pretending”?
- Why does Miss Russell keep Michael after school? Why isn't he more concerned about her threats?
- Why do you think tears roll down Michael's mother's face when she says that they have somewhere to go? What does Michael mean when he says it's “that time again”?
- Where is Michael's dad? Why won't he be accompanying them in the weekend?
- What does Michael's mother keep in the cupboard over the bench?
- Why do you think Michael believes that he is responsible for his parents' unhappiness?

- How does Michael feel when he begins playing soccer? What happens to ruin his good mood? Why doesn't he get back into the game?
- Describe Sharon's home life. Where is her mother? Why doesn't she ever invite people over? What does Sharon have in common with Michael? Why does Sharon like school so much?
- Why is Michael so worried when Miss Russell explains the assignment that he is expected to complete? Who is Michael's partner? How does he feel about this?
- What happens at the library that reminds Michael why he used to like Sharon? How does Sharon get Michael to answer questions about himself? Why is Michael so surprised when he tells Sharon about his brother Tom? How does Sharon react to this information?
- Why is Michael "surprised and amazed" about the information that Sharon gives him about herself and her family? Why do you think Sharon trusts Michael so much? How does Michael's attitude towards Sharon begin to change?
- Why does Sharon regret asking Michael about Tom?
- Why is Michael excited about going to school after his meeting with Sharon? Why does he begin to edit his book?
- Why do you think that Michael doesn't want to try out for the soccer team?
- What does Sharon give Michael? How does Michael react to the gift?
- Why does the game of *multiplication mayhem* boast Michael's confidence? Why do you think this game is different to the others that he has played? Why is Miss Russell so proud of Michael?
- How does Michael stick up for Sharon in front of Jeremy, Freddy, Pita and Jesse? Why is he so surprised by his actions?
- Describe Michael's dream. How does he feel when he wakes up? What do you think he writes down on the piece of paper?
- Why does Michael feel so uncomfortable when his father comes into the room in the morning? Is it fair that Michael's father expects him to do something that he won't do himself? Why/why not? Why does Michael believe that his father thinks he is a screw up?
- How does Michael respond to Sharon when she asks him if he is going to visit Tom's grave? Why does he react like this?
- What is revealed to us about the part that Tom played in his brother's death? Do you believe that he is responsible? Explain your answer.
- What story does Michael's mother tell him about Tom when they were little? What effect does reading Michael's letter have on her?

Discussion

- Describe Michael's relationship with his parents. Why do you think they are so distant from each other? What does Michael need from his mother and father that they aren't giving him? How would you feel if you were in Michael's position?
- Why do so many people turn to alcohol when they are unhappy? What short and long term effects can alcohol have on a person? How can a parent's drinking affect the rest of the family?

- Why do you think Michael is so worried about letting people down? How does his fear affect his life? What coping mechanism has he adopted?
- What assumptions does Michael make about Sharon that turn out to be incorrect? Why is it dangerous to make assumptions?
- What evidence is there in the story that suggests Michael's attitude towards school is improving? Why is it important to always try hard at your schoolwork?
- Predict what will happen next in the story.

Students read Chapters 19-23 (pp. 94-147) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 19-23 (pp. 94-147)

- What information do we find out from the second letter that Michael writes for Tom? What do Michael's parents tell him when he says he feels responsible for Tom's death? What promises do Michael's parents make to him?
- Why do you think Michael changes his mind about trying out for the soccer team?
- How does Michael feel when his dad turns up to accompany him and his mother to the cemetery? Why do Michael and his parents feel almost happy when they visit Tom's grave?
- What does Michael start thinking about as he lies next to Tom's grave? What does this suggest to the reader?
- What shocking memory does Michael have when he sees Sharon and her father at Tom's grave?
- How do Michael's parents react when they see Sharon and her father at the cemetery? Do you find this surprising? Why/why not?
- Why does Michael feel so conflicted after his visit to the cemetery? What realisation does he come to about Sharon and her father?
- How does Michael let Sharon know that he still wants to be friends with her?
- What does Michael cross out from his *Why I like school* book?
- Is there anything in Michael's book *Why I hate school* that you can relate to? Explain why. What things can you do to make the best out of your schooling?

Discussion

- How does this story teach us the importance of communication and sharing your feelings?
- Discuss how Michael's character develops and changes as the story progresses. How do you think his life will change after he comes to terms with his brother's death?
- Identify the main theme of the novel. How is this theme developed by the author?

- Describe Sharon's character. How has Tom's death affected her life? What qualities and characteristics does she exhibit?

Activities

Character – Draw a picture of Michael on a large sheet of paper. Around his picture include thought bubbles that show what he thinks and speech bubbles that show important things that he says. Also include adjectives that describe his character around his picture.

Research- Complete your own research assignment on a classmate's family. Present your research as a poster and include photos.

Diary Entry – Imagine that you are Michael. Write a diary entry for the night after you visit the cemetery. Include information about what has happened that day and your thoughts and feelings about it.

Plot – Complete a flow diagram that shows 10 important events that occur in the story in the order that they occur.

Writing – Write your own book called *Why I like school*. Include a cover and illustrations.

Review – Present an oral book report to the class about *Why I hate school*. Include information about the storyline, the characters and the themes. Remember to give your personal opinion about the story. Read an excerpt from the story as part of your presentation.

Poetic Writing – Write a poem based on events that occur in this story. Try and create imagery by incorporating figurative language features into your writing.

Static Image – Design an alternative book cover for the novel and write a new blurb. Combine verbal and visual features to communicate your ideas.

Writing – You are Tom. Write a third letter to your brother Tom explaining how your life has changed after the second anniversary of his death.

Notes written by Vicki Williams