

# Don't call me Ishmael!

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## Synopsis

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Ishmael Lesuer is 14 years. He believes that he suffers from Ishmael Lesuer's syndrome – a chronic condition for which there is no cure. Symptoms of Ishmael Lesuer's syndrome include the inability to stick up for yourself and the uncanny ability to humiliate and embarrass yourself in front of your peers – even when you are trying really hard to remain calm, cool and collected.

Ishmael spent Year 8 at St. Daniel's Boys College trying to be invisible. It was the only way that he could stop Barry Bagsley and the other school bullies from picking on him. He plans to spend Year 9 the same way, but things don't work out that way. Firstly, Miss Tarango, a new teacher, begins at the school. She's enthusiastic, fun and best of all she identifies Barry Bagsley as the class bully right from day one. Miss Tarango begins a subtle campaign to bring Barry down a peg or two. Secondly, a new student called James Scobie starts in Ishmael's class. James is slightly odd and quirky – an obvious target for bullies and Ishmael is initially worried about allying himself with him. However it soon becomes apparent that James is more than a match for Barry Bagsley. He is intelligent, quick-witted and absolutely fearless. As his friend, Ishmael feels protected.

James encourages Ishmael to join the debating team as a researcher. Ishmael makes new friends on the team. Gradually as his confidence increases he is able to face his fears and speak in front of an audience. Then the unthinkable happens. James suddenly has to travel overseas, leaving Ishmael and the other members of the debating team in the lurch. The team has to decide whether to compete in the debating finals or forfeit because they have lost their leader. Can the team pull it together without James, or will everything fall apart? More importantly, will Ishmael finally find the courage to stand up to his arch-nemesis Barry Bagsley or will he remain invisible forever?

## Text Type

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*Don't call me Ishmael* is an hilarious and realistic novel about growing up and fitting in. Although the novel deals with serious issues it is written in a relaxed, colloquial style that is highly readable. It is suitable for readers 10+ and although aimed primarily at boys it has broad appeal.

The story is told in first person point of view with Ishmael, the main character, narrating the story. Ishmael is 14 years-old and the victim of the school bully.

Ishmael is a hapless victim who inadvertently finds himself involved in some hilarious adventures. He is a hugely likable character because he is such a misfit. Ishmael employs various strategies to avoid Barry Bagsley's unwanted attention, including remaining silent, avoiding all confrontational situations and generally being invisible. When James Scobie starts at school his courage and fearlessness inspire Ishmael. As his confidence increases Ishmael becomes less and less comfortable with allowing Barry a free reign of terror over the school. When Barry turns his attentions to his new friend Bill Kingsley, Ishmael feels compelled to take action. The story sees Ishmael's character develop and change as his confidence increases until he eventually becomes a person that he is no longer ashamed of.

Issues raised in the novel include bullying – what motivates bullies and the best way to deal with them, family relationships, friendship, growing up and finding the courage to stand up for yourself and others.

## Sharing the Novel

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***The novel has been divided up as follows: Chapters 1-5 (pp. 3-19), Chapters 6-19 (pp. 20-110), Chapters 20-36 (pp.111-201) and Chapters 37-50 (pp. 202-277).***

During the shared sessions encourage students to share their ideas and discuss the issues raised in the novel. Have them make inferences and wherever possible relate what Ishmael is going through to their own experience and broader knowledge. Students should understand the setting of the novel and how it affects the action. Have them analyse the writing style of the author and examine how humour has been employed in the novel. Encourage students to study the main characters in the novel. They should look at their emotions, behaviour, motivations and how they develop and change as the story progresses. Discuss the main issues raised in the novel and how these are developed by the author.

## Introducing the Novel

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Study the front cover of the novel and read the blurb.

- ∞ Ishmael is the name of a character in a very famous American novel. Can you name the novel? Are there any clues on the front cover of the novel and in the blurb that might help you figure it out? Why do you think the novel is called *Don't call me Ishmael*?
- ∞ Study the illustrations on the book cover. Where do you think the story is set? What do you think it is going to be about?
- ∞ What kind of team do the cards on the back of the book belong to?
- ∞ Who is the narrator of the story? What disease does he think he has? What might some of the symptoms of this disease be?
- ∞ How can a year be both “embarrassingly awful” and “the best year of their lives”?

**Teacher reads Chapters 1-5 (pp. 3-19) aloud. Students follow along in their books.**

## **Comprehension Chapters 1-5 (pp. 3-19)**

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- ∞ Who is the narrator? What syndrome does he believe he suffers from? Why don't other members of his family suffer from this syndrome? What are the symptoms? Why does Ishmael believe that the carrier of the syndrome can "trigger disturbing behaviour in others"?
- ∞ What do we know about Ishmael's family?
- ∞ Describe how Ishmael got his name. Which famous novel does the name come from? Who wrote the novel? What is the first line in the novel?
- ∞ When did Ishmael begin to exhibit symptoms of Ishmael Lesuer's syndrome?
- ∞ Why did Ishmael's life change so dramatically when he began at St. Daniel's Boys College?
- ∞ Who is Barry Bagsley? What does he mutilate Ishmael's name into? How do Barry's comments make Ishmael feel?

### **Discussion**

- ∞ Are there any students at your school who have unusual names? What are they? Do they get teased about them? What sorts of things should parents consider when naming their children?
- ∞ Do you agree with Ishmael when he says "if it hadn't been my terrible fate to end up as Ishmael Lesuer then none of the other disasters of my life would have happened"? Why/why not? Can a name really ruin your life? Why do you think Slobo Bugsley was so popular?
- ∞ How did you feel when you began Intermediate or High School? Did you leave any friends behind? Was there anyone in your class that you knew or did you need to make new friends? What aspects of starting a new school did you find the most difficult? Did you encounter any bullies?
- ∞ Predict what is going to happen in the story next.

**Students read Chapters 6-19 (pp. 20-110) independently before the next shared session.**

## **Comprehension Chapters 6-19 (pp. 20-110)**

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- ∞ What tactics does Ishmael adopt to ensure that he is "as small a target as possible" for Barry and his mates? How do you think it makes Ishmael feel to become invisible? What opportunities doesn't he take advantage of?
- ∞ Describe Miss Tarango. Why is she so popular with the students? How does she put Barry in his place?
- ∞ What information does Miss Tarango give the class about Ishmael's name that he fears will provide them with more ammunition to tease him with?

- ∞ How does Miss Tarango propose to get Barry off the chair? What are the rules of the challenge? How does Miss Tarango try and scare Barry before the challenge begins? What is the outcome of the challenge? In what way does the challenge affect Barry's status in the class? Why do you think Miss Tarango chooses to embarrass Barry in this way?
- ∞ In what ways does Barry take his frustration with Miss Tarango out on Ishmael? Why doesn't Ishmael stand up to Barry?
- ∞ What does Ishmael witness on the track by the fields? What is his initial reaction to the situation? What stops him from following his instincts?
- ∞ How does Ishmael stick up for Marty? What is the outcome of his intervention? How does Ishmael try and cheer Marty up after his friends have gone? What do you think it means to Marty that an older boy stopped to try and help him?
- ∞ What is the name of the new boy who arrives at Ishmael's school? Describe him. Why does Ishmael believe that he will be a target for bullies? How does Ishmael feel when Miss Tarango appoints him as the new boy's buddy?
- ∞ Describe what happens when Mr Barker leaves the room. How does Ishmael choose to deal with the situation? What does James Scobie do? Why is the rest of the class surprised by his reaction?
- ∞ How does James make Barry feel embarrassed in front of the class? What explanation does he provide for his inability to feel fear? What do you think would have happened if Mr Barker didn't return when he did?
- ∞ How does Ishmael know that Barry is plotting something? What three things strike him as strange? Why doesn't he try and warn James?
- ∞ Describe what happens when James opens his desk. How does the class react to the chaos? What is James' reaction? Why don't you think James blames Barry for the incident when he is questioned by Mr Barker? How does Mr Barker discover the culprits? What is their punishment? Why do James' fortunes soar after "Buggate"?
- ∞ Why does James address the assembly? Who did he write the poem for? How does the assembly react after he finishes reading it? In what ways does James' poem foster school spirit? Why is James' ploy of appealing to the rugby team and its fans such a clever one?
- ∞ How does St. Daniel's perform in the first half of the game against Churchill? What does James do at half time? How does his performance affect the crowd? How does the rugby team perform in the second half of the game? Who replaces Juan Corianna on the field? What does James yell from the sidelines to try and motivate him? What is the outcome of the game?

### Discussion

- ∞ What does Miss Tarango mean when she talks about the importance of language and how it can empower people? Do you believe that language can empower Ishmael to defeat Barry Bagsley? Explain your answer. How does James illustrate the idea that language is power? Think of some examples from history where famous people have delivered powerful messages using language.
- ∞ Complete a list of 5 amazing things about yourself.

- ∞ How does Barry make Ishmael's life a misery? What do you think is the motivation behind Barry's behaviour? Have you ever been bullied? If so, describe what the bully did to you and how it made you feel. What do you think is the best way to deal with a bully?
- ∞ Describe James Scobie. What strange quirks and habits does he have? Why do you think he is so confident? How does he undermine Barry's position in the class? How does he stick up for himself? Why do you think James is able to confront Barry but Ishmael can't? What characteristics does James have that will make him a successful debater?
- ∞ Predict what is going to happen in the story next.

***Students read Chapters 20-36 (pp. 111-201) independently before the next shared session.***

## **Comprehension Chapters 20-36 (pp. 111-201)**

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- ∞ How does Ishmael react when James tells him that he put his name down for debating? Why does he react like this? How does James convince Ishmael to join the team? What does James believe that Ishmael can contribute to the team?
- ∞ Why does Ishmael believe that he needs "either a famine or a flood of volunteers"? Who volunteers for the team? Describe each of the boys. Who will coach the boys? Who plans to attend the all-day debating workshop at Moorfield High?
- ∞ Why does Orazio tease Ishmael at the workshop? What are the four steps of effective rebuttal? Why can't Ishmael remember them?
- ∞ What thoughts does Ishmael have about Kelly Faulkner that night in bed? What was the first thing that he noticed about her? What details about her appearance did he memorise? Describe Ishmael's dream.
- ∞ What is the debating team's first topic? Why does Ishmael believe that the group has trouble with teamwork? How does the team manage to win the debate? What is so good about Scobie's performance? How does the team's initial success change the mood in their meetings?
- ∞ In what ways do Scobie's friendship and being part of the debating team change Ishmael's life? What changes do his parents notice in him? What compliment does Prue pay him?
- ∞ What are the Peg People? How would it feel to have a sibling who is a genius?
- ∞ What problem does Scobie report to Ishmael on the eve of the debate against Lourdes Girls' College? Why can't the team forfeit? Why does Ishmael agree to speak at the debate despite his fears?
- ∞ What does Scobie reveal to Ishmael about his fearlessness? Why isn't Scobie afraid of spiders and insects?
- ∞ Why doesn't Ishmael want his dad to stay and watch the debate?
- ∞ Who is on the Lourdes debating team? Why does Ishmael become even more nervous when he sees her? What physical symptoms does his nervousness cause? Why doesn't Ishmael hear the points that the first speaker makes in her speech?

- ∞ Why is Ishmael's speech such a disaster? What happened to Bill Kingsley's palm cards? What falls out of the bottom of Ishmael's trouser leg? What is Ishmael's response to the situation?
- ∞ How does Scobie try and make Ishmael feel better about the debate? What further humiliation is revealed to Ishmael during the debriefing? Why does Razza take so much delight in teasing Ishmael about what he did? How does Ishmael feel about what he did?
- ∞ What does Scobie mean when he tells Ishmael that he "entered the lion's den"?
- ∞ What disturbing news does Ishmael give the debating team after the September holidays?
- ∞ How will the semi-finals be different to the heats? Who is the teams' opposition? Why does Orazio want to forfeit? Why does Ishmael believe that the team should participate?
- ∞ What is the secret topic of the debate? What side are the team debating? Which member of the team has vast knowledge about the topic? How does Ishmael help the team organise their argument? Which team member speaks in which position? Why do the group choose to organise the team in this way? What does the fact that Ishmael is willing to stand up and speak again suggest about his character?
- ∞ Who in the audience is supporting St. Daniel's? Why does listening to Preston's first speaker help increase Ishmael's confidence?

### Discussion

- ∞ Public speaking rates as a top fear for many people. Why do you think this is? How do you feel about public speaking? What emotions/feelings do you experience before you get up to speak in front of a crowd? What things can you do to make public speaking easier?
- ∞ How does the author create suspense in the story? Find examples from the story where the author foreshadows events that are going to occur later in the story.
- ∞ Scobie's debating team is a good example of "success breeding success". What does this phrase mean? Why do you think it is often true?
- ∞ Scobie has had a life-threatening experience. How has this experience affected how he lives his life? Why is he no longer afraid of everyday things?
- ∞ Ishmael has a humiliating experience at the debate. What is your most embarrassing moment? What emotions did you feel? How did you deal with the situation?
- ∞ In what ways has Ishmael's life changed since he became friends with Scobie? Find evidence in the story that suggests Ishmael's confidence is increasing. What do you think Ishmael has learnt from Scobie?

**Students read Chapters 37-50 (pp. 202-277) independently before the next shared session.**

## Comprehension Chapters 37-50 (pp. 202-277)

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- ∞ What information is contained in the letter Ishmael receives from Scobie? Why do Ishmael's problems seem so minor compared to what Scobie is dealing with?
- ∞ How does Barry Bagsley's behaviour change after Miss Tarango announces that James won't be returning? Why does it change? Why does Barry call Ishmael a "gutless wonder"?
- ∞ Why do you think Barry and his friends begin to torment Bill Kingsley? What do they do to make his life miserable? How does their treatment of Bill make Ishmael feel? Why do you think Ishmael finally decides to make Barry pay for all the things that he has done?
- ∞ How does Ishmael feel when Barry asks him the question "are you going to make me"? Why does Barry have a smug and arrogant expression on his face when he asks Ishmael this? Why does Barry begin to torment Bill more after this conversation with Ishmael?
- ∞ What advice does Razza give Ishmael when he tells him his problems with Barry? How does it make Ishmael feel to know that he has Razza's unconditional support?
- ∞ Why does Razza want to attend the debating final? Why does Ishmael agree to accompany him?
- ∞ Who does Ishmael bump into after the debating final? How does she respond when Ishmael tries to explain the Peg Person? What does Ishmael suddenly remember as he talks to her? Why does his apology embarrass her so much?
- ∞ Why does Kelly thank Ishmael? What does she think about his name? What does Ishmael vow to do after his conversation with Kelly?
- ∞ Why is Razza convinced that Ishmael is "in" with Kelly? Why does Ishmael decide not to pursue Kelly? Is he making the right decision? Why/why not?
- ∞ Why does Ishmael believe that he and his namesake are as different as "chalk and cheeseburger"? Who is the person aboard the *Pequod* that Ishmael can relate to? What do Ishmael and this character have in common?
- ∞ How does Barry help stoke the fire for revenge that rages in Ishmael's belly?
- ∞ What task does Mr Barker assign the members of the Year 9 debating team? How does Ishmael feel about the assignment?
- ∞ How does Barry sabotage Bill's talk? Why doesn't Ishmael tell Mr Barker what Barry has done?
- ∞ How does Razza deal with Barry's putdowns? Why is this tactic so effective?
- ∞ What goes over and over in Ishmael's mind after he wakes up from his nightmare? How do you think Ishmael will get revenge on Barry?
- ∞ Why can't Ishmael's parents attend prize giving? What does Ishmael hand to Barry before prize giving begins? How does Barry react to what he is given? Why doesn't Ishmael care that Barry is angry with him? What makes Ishmael believe that Barry is beginning to panic?

- ∞ Why is Ishmael so surprised when he sees Barry's parents in the crowd? What three words does Barry mouth to Ishmael when he steps up to the microphone? What does Ishmael see when he looks into Barry's eyes?
- ∞ Why doesn't Ishmael go through with his plan to humiliate Barry? What does this suggest about his character? Do you believe that he made the right decision? Why/why not?
- ∞ How does Razza cheer Bill up after prize giving?
- ∞ How does the power shift between Ishmael and Barry after the prize giving? Why does Ishmael no longer feel the need to hide?
- ∞ What news does Mr Barker give Ishmael after prize giving?
- ∞ What does Ignatius hand Ishmael?
- ∞ What does Kelly invite Ishmael to in February?

### Discussion

- ∞ Describe Orazio Zorzotto. How does his character contrast with Ishmael's? How does Razza provide comic relief in the novel? Razza spends a lot of time teasing Ishmael. Is this the same or different from what Barry does to Ishmael? Explain your answer.
- ∞ Do you think Barry will continue to bully Ishmael next year? Why/why not? Why does Ishmael no longer fear Barry? If Ishmael hadn't met James Scobie do you think he would have found the confidence to stand up to Barry? Explain your answer.
- ∞ What challenges does Ishmael face in the story and how does he overcome them? What lessons do you think Ishmael has learnt from his experiences?

### Activities

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**Research** – Conduct a research assignment on bullying. Look at why people bully others and the effects that bullying can have on the victims. Present your findings as an essay, on a poster or as an oral presentation.

**Poster** – Design an anti-bullying poster to display at your school.

**Letter** – Imagine that you are Ishmael. Write a letter to Scobie after prize giving night explaining what happened with Barry and describing your thoughts and feelings about it.

**Writing** – Rewrite a Chapter in the novel from another character's point of view.

**Writing** – Write an epilogue for the novel dated one year after the original story takes place. Explain what happens when Scobie arrives back at school, what Ishmael experiences in Year 10 and what becomes of Barry Bagsley.

**Plot** – Choose 15 important events from the story and create a flow diagram that shows the order in which they occur.

**Theme** – Identify an important theme in the novel. Write several paragraphs explaining how the theme is developed by the author. Back up your ideas with evidence and quotes from the text.

**Character** – Describe James Scobie. What qualities and attributes does he possess? What is his role in the novel? What does James teach the main character in the novel?

**Soundtrack** – Imagine that *Don't call me Ishmael* is being made into a movie. Your job is to choose 5 songs for the soundtrack. List the songs that you choose along with where they will be played in the film and why they are appropriate.

**Letter** – Write a letter to a friend about *Don't call me Ishmael*. Include a brief plot summary, some information about the characters and an explanation about what the novel teaches us. Include reasons why you think your friend should read the novel.