

# Payback

Author: Michelle Kelly

## Synopsis

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Riley Mitchell is nearly 14 years old. He is a popular guy, funny and confident. The only problem is that he is really, really short. In fact Riley is pygmy-sized. Usually this doesn't bother him. After all, it didn't stop him from going out with one of the most popular girls in school and being best friends with Karl and Alex, two sporty types who also happen to make excellent bodyguards. But things seem to be going pear-shaped lately. Kelly isn't talking to him and he has no idea why. Vince McGerck, the school bully, won't stop hassling him about his diminutive stature, and now Riley has had enough. In a moment of extreme insanity Riley hits Vince over the head with his plaster cast (result of a skateboarding accident), knocking him clean off his feet. While Riley's actions turn him into a temporary hero he knows that it is only a matter of time before Vince gets him back.

Things get even worse when Riley joins his school's softball team. He plays backstop and Vince McGerck is chosen as pitcher. While Riley loves softball and representing the school he can't fully enjoy himself. When and how will Vince get him back? To make matters even worse the doctor has referred Riley to a growth clinic. Riley always assumed that he would grow, sooner or later. What if this isn't true and he is destined to be a "midget" for his whole life?

## Text Type

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*Payback* is a fast-paced and highly readable novel that will appeal particularly to boys. Set in New Zealand, the story is told using colloquial language. The author has used short chapters and sentences, a style guaranteed to grab the attention of even the most reluctant reader. *Payback* is an often humorous look at a typical New Zealand teenager's life.

The narrator of the story is Riley Mitchell, a credible character who is hugely likeable. He is cocky and confident (most of the time) and doesn't let his small stature stop him from doing everything that he wants to do. Riley's parents have just broken up and Riley is learning to deal with this situation. The divorce issue adds depth to the story. Riley deals with many problems that teenagers will be able to relate to, including bullying and relationship difficulties. At the end of the novel Riley learns how important it is to have belief in yourself.

## Sharing the Novel

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*The novel has been divided up as follows: Chapters 1 and 2 (pp. 5-16), Chapters 3-11 (pp. 16-63) and Chapters 12-21 (pp. 64-136).*

*During the shared sessions encourage students to ask questions to clarify their understanding of words and ideas presented in the novel. Have them make inferences and wherever possible relate Riley's experiences to their own lives. Students should identify and discuss issues raised in the story such as bullying, relationship problems and divorce. Have students make predictions about what will happen next in the story. Students should analyse the character of Riley and discuss how he changes during the course of the novel.*

## Introducing the Novel

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

- Why do you think the novel is called *Payback*?
- Have you ever had revenge exacted on you for something that you did? Explain.
- Who is the main character in the novel? What problems does he have?
- What do you think that Vince will do to get Riley back?

*Teacher reads Chapters 1 and 2 (pp. 5-16) aloud to class. Students follow along in their books.*

## Comprehension Chapters 1 and 2 (pp. 5-16)

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- Why does Riley get so annoyed when people comment on his height?
- Why is Riley so confused about Kelly's behaviour towards him?
- How did Riley break his arm? What does the doctor discover when he does the x-rays? Where does he suggest Riley should go?
- What is Riley's favourite subject at school?
- What do Riley's mates call him? How does he feel about the nickname? How does being friends with Karl and Alex benefit Riley?
- Why does Riley believe that "last year, everything was brilliant"?
- Why does Vince challenge the other boys to punch him? How does Vince rile Riley up? What does Riley do to Vince? What reason does Riley give for his actions? What does Riley do after the incident? Why does he believe that he must have a death wish?

**Discussion**

- What have we learnt about Riley so far? How does being teased about his height make him feel? Why doesn't he mind when his friends make fun of him? What do you believe is the best way to deal with a bully like Vince?
- What do you think that Vince will do to pay Riley back?

*Students read Chapters 3-11 (pp. 16-63) independently before the next shared session.*

## **Comprehension Chapters 3-11 (pp. 16-63)**

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- How does Riley know that he has support from other kids at school? What do you think he means when he says "where were they before?"
- Why did Riley's mother write a poem for him? How does she feel about her son? Why does Riley decide to read the poem again?
- How does Riley feel about his mum's attempts to be "cool"?
- What does Riley have in common with his brother Sam?
- What is Riley's mum's new boyfriend like? How is he different from Riley's dad?
- Why is Riley so concerned that Connor passed his restricted licence? What convinces Riley to get into the car with him?
- Why does Vince decide not to get Riley back straight away?
- Why is Riley so worried about people from school seeing his mother's poem? Where does he decide to hide it?
- Why does Riley like Kelly so much? What does he miss about her?
- What happens at the growth clinic that embarrasses Riley? What does the doctor want him to ask his father? What kind of tests does the doctor want to run on Riley?
- What sports team does Riley decide to trial for? Who does he convince to try out with him? Who is Riley appalled to see at the trials?
- What does Vince hate to admit about Vince?
- What position does Mr Thompson get Riley to play? Why does he try and get out of it? Why does Mr Thompson believe that Riley has "no brains, but balls"?
- Why does Riley think that Mr Thompson chose him to be catcher?
- How does Riley's father react when Riley tells him that the doctor wants to carry out tests on him? Why do you think he reacts like this?

- Why are Riley and Sam so close, particularly at the moment?
- Why does Riley think that Kelly is trying to make him jealous? What impressive feat does Riley achieve to try and impress Kelly? Why does it fall flat?
- Who does Riley's dad introduce his sons to at the mall? Why do you think he springs the meeting on them with no warning? Is this fair? Why/why not?
- Who else does Riley see at the mall? Why does this upset him?

### Discussion

- How do your parents act around you and your friends? Do they ever do anything embarrassing? How does their perception of "cool" differ from yours?
- Riley's mother's poem comforts Riley when he is feeling down about his height. What do your parents do to make you feel better if you are feeling down?
- Why do you think that Kelly broke up with Riley? Is it fair of her to break up with him and not tell him why? Why/why not? What would you do if you were in Riley's position?
- How does Vince ensure that Riley is in a state of constant nervousness? Why is the anticipation of an event often worse than the event itself?
- How does Riley's smart mouth help him cope with his size? Why does it get him into trouble sometimes?
- Predict what will happen in the story next.

*Students read Chapters 12-21 (pp. 64-136) independently before the next shared session.*

### Comprehension Chapters 12-21 (pp. 64-136)

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- Why does Mr Brown give Riley a detention?
- How does Riley's mother embarrass him in front of Alex?
- What is Sam's idea for a trick to play on Tom?
- Why does Riley go and talk to Becky at the bowling alley? How does Becky react to Riley's request?
- What does Karl tell Riley about Kelly as the two of them are trying to go to sleep? Why do you think Karl didn't tell Riley this earlier?
- Who is Simon? Why do Riley and the others let him pitch?

- What happens when Riley hits the ball into centre field? Why doesn't Riley run? Why doesn't Riley want to tell Sam what really happened to his lip?
- Why is Kelly hanging around with Vince? Why does Riley ask Simon to help him train?
- What does Riley discover when he arrives at school on the Monday the 18<sup>th</sup> November? How does Riley's competitive nature help him during the competition? What is his prize for coming runner-up? Why does being in the competition give Riley status with the other boys?
- What does Simon mean when he says "It's not over until the fat lady sings"?
- What does Riley admire about Kelly? In what ways do they seem compatible as a couple?
- Why does Riley regret telling Karl and Alex that Kelly and Vince are training together?
- Why does Riley get in trouble with his mother?
- Why is Riley in such a bad mood when he arrives at the hospital? What kind of test does the doctor perform?
- What does Riley do in the game against Gladstone that helps his team win the game?
- Why does Riley feel sick with worry?
- Why does Riley offer to help Simon look after the twins? Who else is at Simon's when Riley arrives? How does Kelly react when she sees Riley at her house?
- How does Connor injure himself? Who takes him to the hospital?
- Why do Riley and Kelly have so much trouble looking after the twins?
- What does Riley find out from Kelly about why she is mad at him? What additional information does Karl give him?
- Do you agree with Riley when he says that Kelly is being "a drama queen"? Explain your answer.
- What do Riley's mum and Tom do to get Riley and Sam back for the licence plate incident?
- Who crawls under Riley's bed and read the poem? What news does she give him about his results? How does Riley react to this news?
- Why do you think Riley removes the poem from under his bed?
- Why is Riley so surprised when his father asks for his opinion about the steroids? Why does Riley believe that his parents think he is growing up and maturing?
- Why is Riley so pleased that both his mother and father come to watch his game? Why is he relieved that Tom and Helen aren't there?
- How does Riley help his team win the final? What does Vince do to contribute to the team's success?

- How does Vince finally pay Riley back for decking him? Who else is in on the payback? How does Riley feel when he hears Vince's words? What does it show about his character that he doesn't crumble?

### Discussion

- Is Kelly's behaviour towards Riley justified? Why/why not?
- What is Riley's relationship like with his mother? Is she a good parent? Why/why not?
- Describe Vince's character. Why does he like to hassle Riley so much? Do you think he learns anything during the story? If so, what?
- Do you agree with Riley when he says "his words were more harmful than a good bash"? Explain your answer.
- Describe Riley's character. What qualities and attributes does he have? Does Riley's character develop during the story? In what ways?
- What is the main theme of the story? How is it developed by the author?

### Activities

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**Writing** - Rewrite the ending of the story.

**Plot** - Design a storyboard that illustrates 10 important events from the story in the order that they occur. Under each illustration write a brief explanation about what is happening.

**Conflict** - Riley is constantly in conflict with Vince during the story. Write a paragraph explaining why this conflict occurs and why it is important to the story.

**Character** - Draw a picture of Riley on a large sheet of paper. Divide the picture in half. On one side list all of Riley's positive characteristics, on the other, all of his negative characteristics. Use examples and quotes from the story to illustrate your ideas.

**Book Review** - Write a book review for *Payback*. Include a brief plot summary and describe the setting. Describe the characters and explain how they develop and change as the story progresses. Identify major themes and ideas in the story. Remember to give your personal opinion about the book.

**Character** - Imagine that you are Riley and he is asked to give a speech about himself to his class on the first day of school. Write the speech and present it to the class in role. Include information about his family, where he lives, things he enjoys doing and what kind of person he considers himself to be.

**Character** - Devise 5 questions, with answers, for Kelly.

**Theme** - Identify an important theme in the story and design a static image that depicts it. Include quotes and images from the story to back up your ideas.

**Static Image** - Design a poster advertising the Mr Puniverse competition at Riley's school.

**Writing** - Write a news article about the softball final for Riley's school magazine.

*Notes written by Vicki Williams*