

Teachers' Notes
by Nita Jonsberg

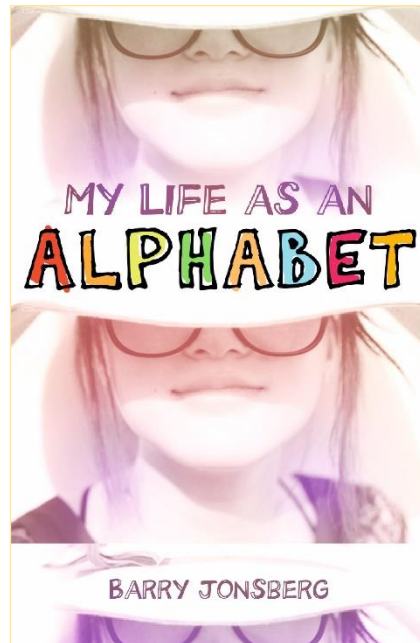
My Life as an Alphabet
by
Barry Jonsberg

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Recommended for ages 10-13 yrs

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INTRODUCTION

The following notes are intended to be used with either the novel *My Life As An Alphabet* or *H is for Happiness* [the film tie-in version of the book].

USE IN THE CURRICULUM

This book is suitable for students of English in Years 6 to 8. It demands a level of understanding and the ability to explore complex relationships. It is valuable for more abstract and complex exploration at older levels, too, because of the nature of the complex themes explored. It lends itself to the:

- Study of structure
- Study of characterisation
- Study of the writer's craft
- Intertextual study with the film of the book

Links

My Life as an Alphabet could be studied in comparison with other texts such as *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (novel), *Little Miss Sunshine* (film) and other texts with idiosyncratic narrators and characters.

FILM VERSION AND FILM TEACHERS NOTES

There are teachers' notes exclusively written for the film *H is for Happiness*, starring Richard Roxburgh, Emma Booth, Joel Jackson, Miriam Margolyes, Deborah Mailman, Daisy Axon and Wesley Patten. These notes cover:

- Meet the actors
- Loss and grief
- Family ties and challenges
- Difference
- Friendship
- Introduction to filmic codes
- Creative and analytical tasks for the classroom

Please note that there are some areas of overlap between the teachers notes for the film and these teachers notes for the book. Some of the film notes also deal with the intertextuality between the novel and the film.

The film notes can be downloaded here: <https://www.docdroid.net/wpo9GYx/h-is-for-happiness-study-guide.pdf>

PLOT SYNOPSIS

Candice Phee is herself. The reader quickly becomes aware that she is an idiosyncratic narrator who has a poignant story to tell. She worries about her family, including Earth Pig Fish, who, she suspects, may come to view her as a God. She is concerned about her mother who has retreated from the family after the death of Candice's sister, 'Sky'. Candice has few friends, until she meets 'Douglas Benson From Another Dimension', who gives her a new perspective and enables her to see that all things are possible – even re-uniting Rich Uncle Brian with her father. Ultimately, Candice sets out on a daring mission to mend her fractured family – whatever it takes.

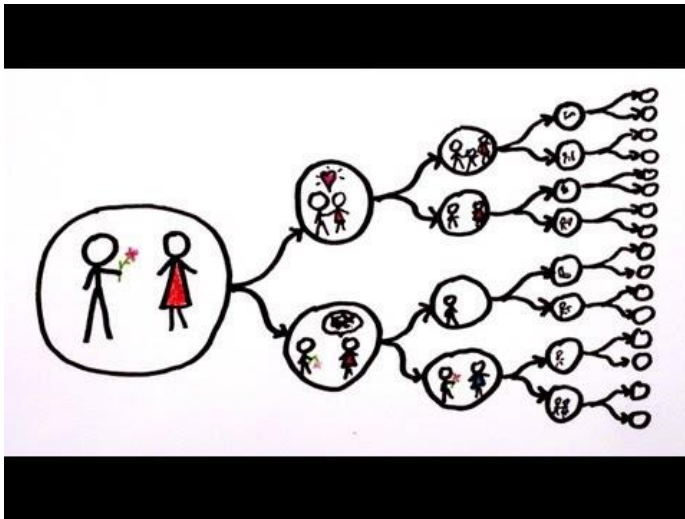


BEFORE READING

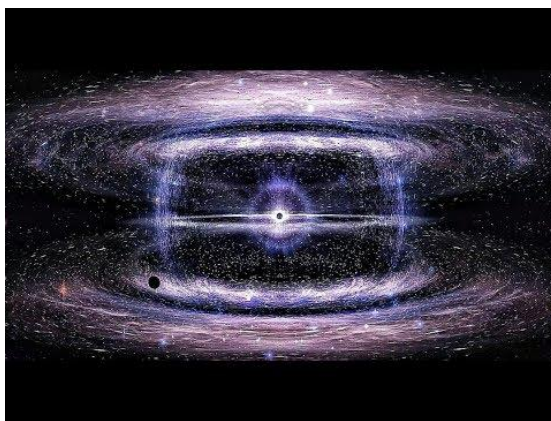
NB: please check *all* websites and pages for suitability on the day of proposed use.

The underlying theme of the book is Candice's determination to make her family happy again after the death of her sister. This may raise issues for some students: it may help to mention/explore death in the family during orientation activities.

- Douglas Benson is convinced his real parents exist on another planet. His earthly parents have much less fascinating jobs. Find out about theories regarding other dimensions and parallel universes. (You may wish to consult a science teacher for collaboration across subjects depending on the level of your class.)
1. The YouTube video below is an excellent introduction to the idea of parallel universes. It ties in nicely with Candice's explanation [as she understands it] on page 199. It also uses much of Douglas Benson From Another Dimension's discussion of string theory.



And here's a slightly more complicated view of the parallel universe theory:



- Have students consider what their 'alternative' family would be like: what jobs would they do? How might students' lives be different from the ones they have?
- Discuss the positive and negative things about having money.

OVERVIEW

CHARACTERISATION

Authors create a sense of character using these main techniques:

- Direct description
- The character's speech
- The character's actions and reactions
- How others interact with the character
- What others say about the character
- The settings with which characters are associated

Rich Uncle Brian has a strange mannerism that helps define his wealthy status – the jingling of coins reminds readers of the rift between him and his brother. The focus on his yacht also shows his sense of position

Candice is defined mostly through her speech and in the different ways she is treated by her father, mother and uncle. Her relationship with Douglas shows readers her accepting nature and willingness to understand another's point of view. The things Candice does emphasise a sense of hope and absolute belief in her ability to mend her family.

Candice's mother is defined initially by her withdrawal from family life because of her depression, as is Candice's father, and readers are able to empathise with Candice's apparent isolation until she meets Douglas Benson.

STRUCTURE

The novel is structured according to the letters of the alphabet. This allows the narrator to go back and forth in her story while appearing to adhere to a linear technique. Candice often chooses somewhat strange titles and then conveys facets of her life and experiences in a non-sequential way. Her letters to Denille add detailed insight and comments about the events of the novel. In this way, the structure helps to communicate Candice's unusual thought-patterns and perspectives.

Elements of structure can be viewed [here](#) (a 'teachit' worksheet on types of narrative structure – you need to register)

Or [here](#) (includes a useful link to Freytag's triangle)

A comprehensive glossary of narrative structure techniques and terms can be found [here](#).

NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

My Life as an Alphabet is told by a first-person narrator. The narrator seems a little odd at first, but readers quickly realise that she believes in 'precision' (p. 1), which reassures us that her tale will be told with exact detail. This makes Candice a 'reliable' narrator, though readers must always be aware that first-person narratives are necessarily subject to a single person's understanding and interpretation of events.

LANGUAGE AND STYLE

Candice's favourite book is a dictionary and this is reflected in her sophisticated vocabulary. It contrasts sharply with the register used by some of her schoolmates; notably Jen Marshall, who tells Candice to 'shut up' and labels her an 'Essen', or special needs child. This title is ironic – Candice may have some special needs, but her needs are related to her especially analytical mind, not a lack of intellect or ability.

However, Candice's age and naivety are not obscured by her language; her speech features some childish expressions. When Candice visits a solicitor, she thinks the way the receptionist talks about her is 'not fair' (p. 145).

Dramatic irony is created by the juxtaposition of Candice's interpretations of situations and the reader's own. For instance, she describes how she has her 'own seat that the librarians reserve' for her and that 'they don't even mind if [she] occasionally eat[s] a sandwich, despite the rules saying it's forbidden' (p. 5).

One of Candice's defining characteristics is her overwhelming need to be clearly understood. This is evident in her explanations to readers (often in parentheses) and in her letters to her pen-pal Denille. In one letter, she says that her mother describes the colour of Candice's eyes as 'like corn flowers [not to be confused with cornflour which is white and used in baking]' (pp. 7-8). When Candice talks about her dead sister and her mother's illness, she is matter-of-fact and her narrative does not obviously reflect an emotional response. As the story progresses, Candice's narrative style becomes very familiar to readers, who are therefore positioned to wonder about the things she *doesn't* explain in extreme detail.

THEMES

Thematic studies include:

- Relationships with family and friends
- Loyalty
- Accepting differences
- Labelling
- Loss and grief
- Depression
- Family
- Truth and Fiction

After reading: In small groups, choose a main theme to focus on. Identify where and how each of the themes is explored in the text. Present your findings to the class, using PowerPoint or Prezi.

ACTIVITIES DURING READING

(Choose preferred activities based on the level of your class.)

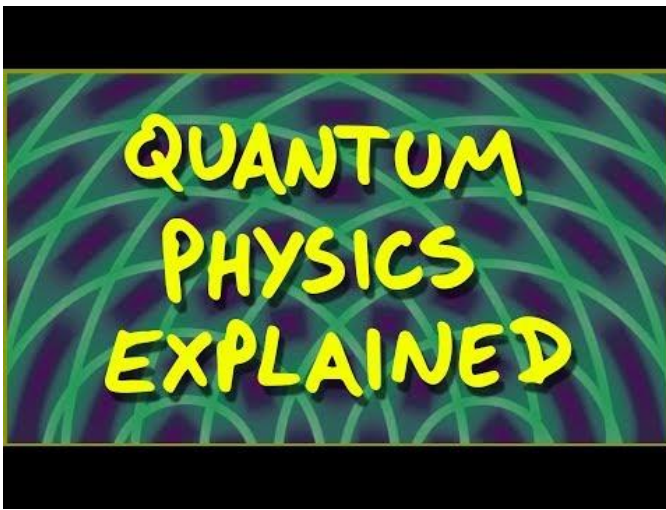
CHAPTERS A –B

- In your own words, describe Miss Bamford.
- Write a letter from Miss Bamford to a friend in which she describes Candice.
- Discuss the initial impression of 'Rich Uncle Brian' in chapters A and B.
- Look at Rich Uncle Brian's use of extended metaphor (p. 14). Is it effective? He is a keen fan of boats and sailing. Try to describe Candice's birth using an extended metaphor from the point of view of a car enthusiast e.g.: 'you roared into our lives like a Ferrari Berlinetta...'(extend).

CHAPTERS C-D

- Candice lines up all her pencils the same way in her pencil case and keeps them separate from her pens. Discuss in pairs, or think about individually, some habits that you have that others may consider odd. (The writer of these notes *must* have her special pen and propelling pencil on the desk before she can mark students' work. She gets very worried indeed if she can't find them.)

- As a class, discuss the word 'truth'. Candice says that 'one person's truth doesn't necessarily coincide with another person's truth' (p. 27). Why might that be?
- Discuss which truth the reader is tempted to believe at this point and why (does everyone agree?).
- Douglas Benson reveals that he is from another dimension (p. 36). How does the reader react to this?
- Candice indulges in some word-association as Douglas explains the theory behind his presence in this world. As a class, try word association – the teacher can begin and each student can come up with a new word that links in some way (no repeated words). Go all around the class.
- Candice writes down any complicated thoughts for Douglas to read. Why do you think she does this?
- Find out what quantum physicists think about here:



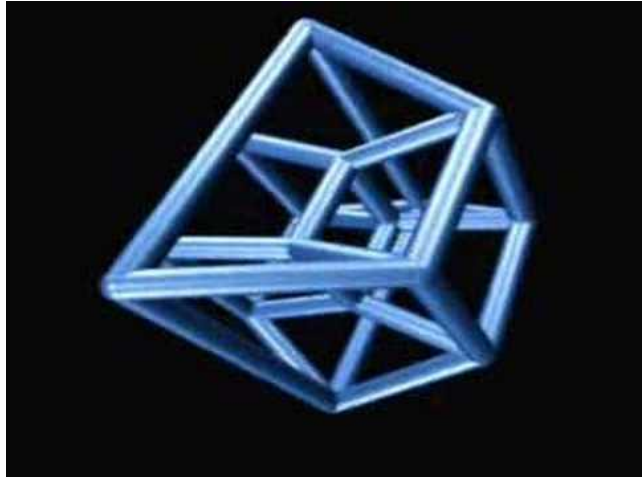
- Find out what 'experimental musicians' do [here](#) (a simple explanation for the teacher – lots of examples on YouTube).

CHAPTERS E-F

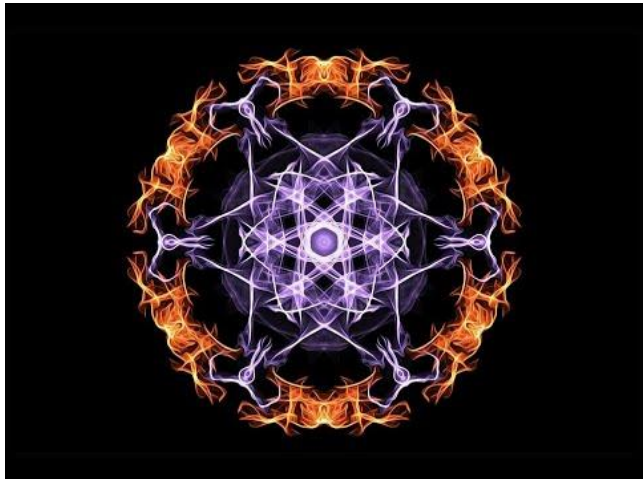
- Readers discover that Candice's mother is not well. What specific words and phrases convey this?
- Candice talks of her memories – describe the earliest thing you can remember.
- Why does Candice call her sister Sky?
- Review at the end: why is this chapter important in terms of the novel as a whole?

CHAPTER G

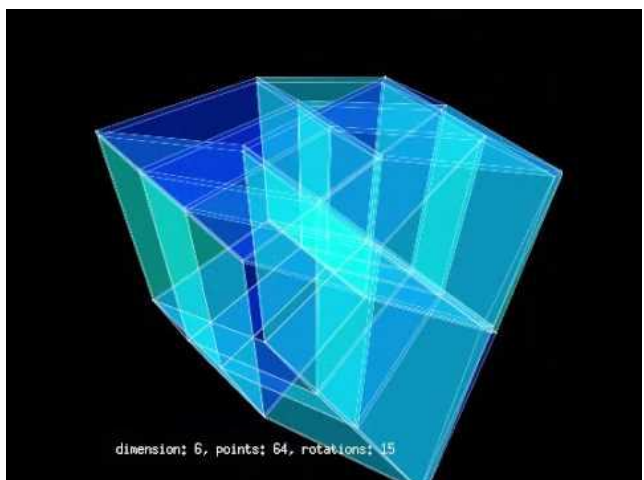
- Douglas Benson tries to explain tesseracts to Candice – see one rotating [here](#):



- Explore other dimensions [here](#) (only parts suited to the intended age-group for the novel – some parts very sophisticated):



- and [here](#) (hyper cube that demonstrates a sixth dimension; mind-bending! Good for students to see, even if they join the majority of us in not quite understanding it fully.):

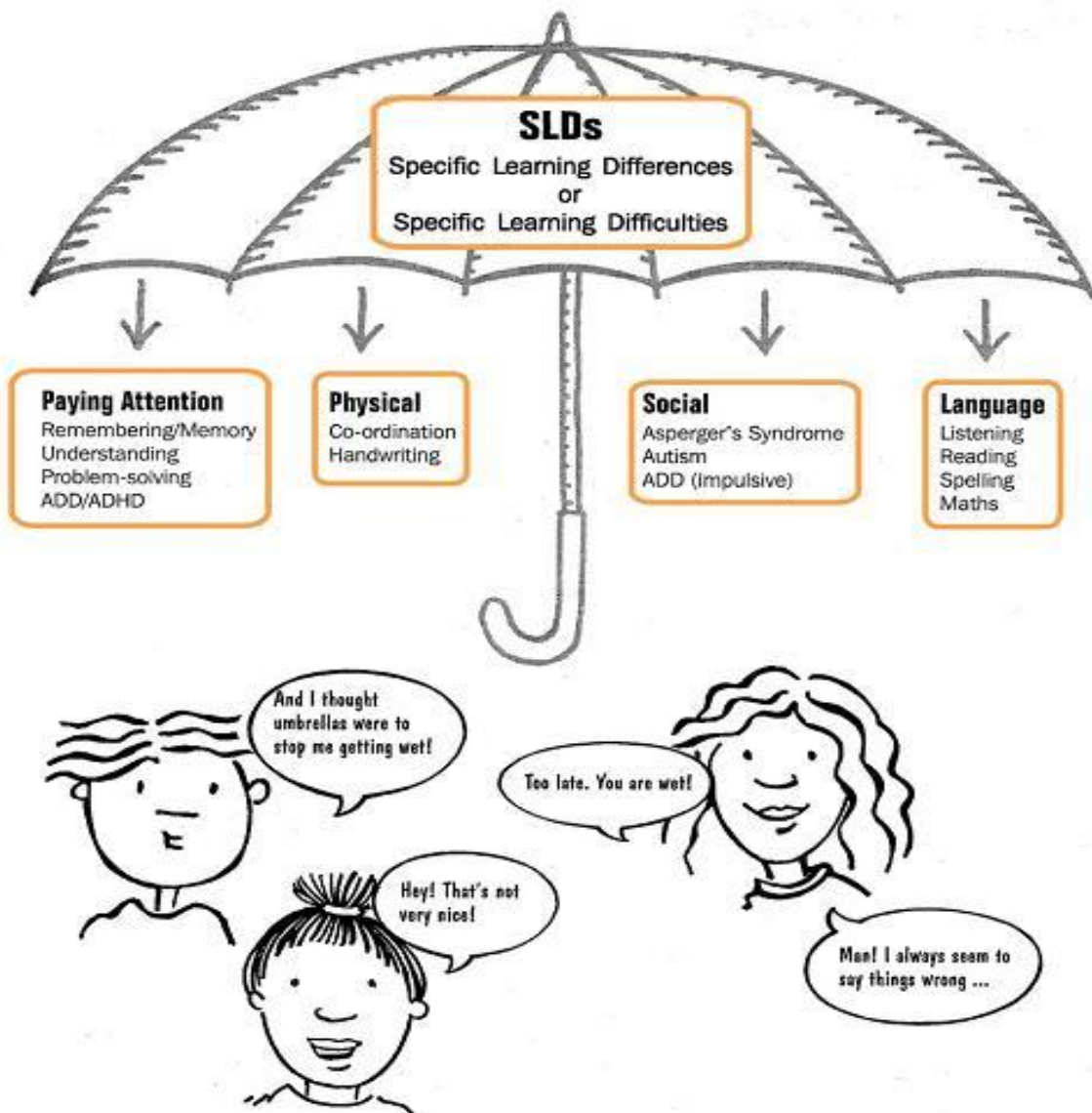


- Douglas's 'facsimile' mother assumes that Candice is autistic or suffers from 'Autism Spectrum Disorder' (p. 64). What is autism? Do all people with autism have the same behaviour? (See sites below.)

Some very famous people have been described as being on the Autism spectrum:

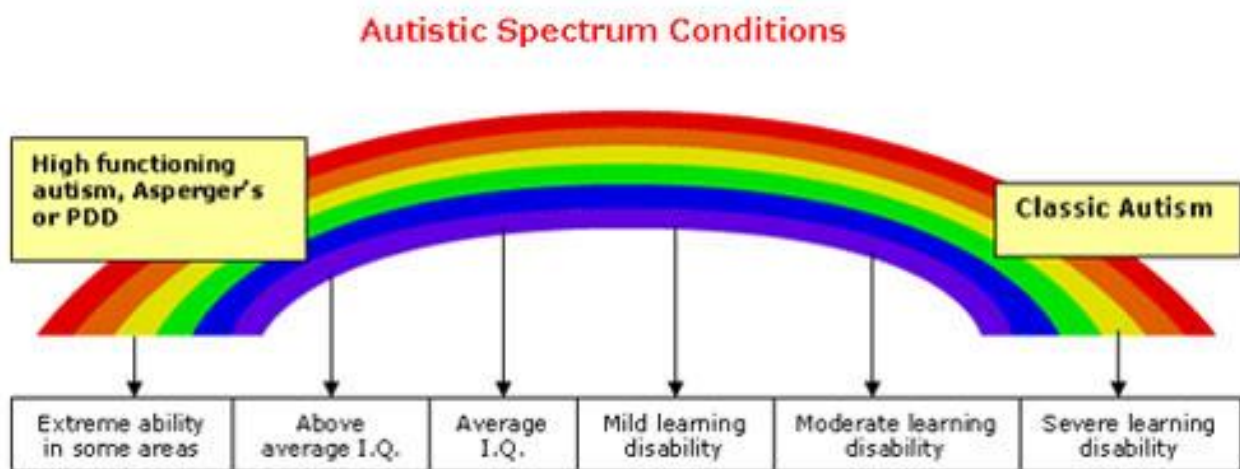


- Here is one visual interpretation of where the 'disorder' sits from some perspectives (should be looked at in context with comments from this [site](#).)



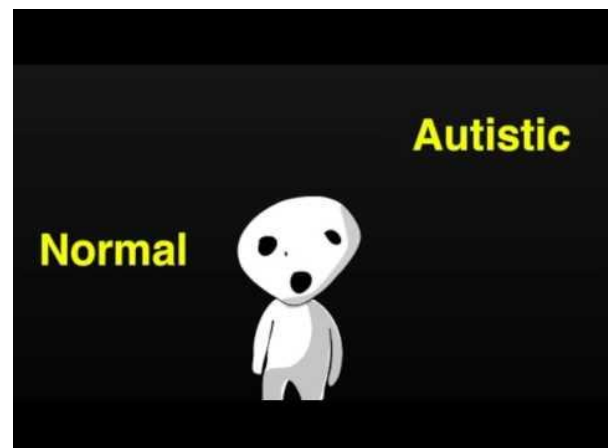
(www.theoryofmind - link now defunct.)

Another useful site can be found [here](#).



- Are labels helpful in any circumstances? Discuss.

[Here](#) is a very interesting perspective from someone with high-functioning autism:



CHAPTERS H-J

- Rich Uncle Brian buys Candice a tricycle. Is this a good idea given his strained relationship with her father?
- How does the author make seasickness seem funny? Discuss in pairs and collate answers as a class.
- In your own words, describe Candice's home life.
- How does the author's use of dialogue in the scene where Candice speaks to Miss Bamford about her 'ocular problem' help to build Candice's character? (p. 91)
- Chapter J contains elements of fairy tale to give readers hope. Discuss how this is achieved. Re-write the scene to have the opposite effect.

CHAPTERS L-M

- In this chapter, Candice forces her mother to face the truth of 'Sky's' death. Is it always better to face reality or are some things better left alone? Discuss in pairs and then review your opinions at the end of the novel.

The organisation dealing with Sudden Infant Death Syndrome used to be called 'sids and kids'. It's now called Red Nose and teachers [and kids] can find useful information on their official [website](#).

- Write a description of what happens in chapter 'M' from Candice's father's point of view. Make clear what he is thinking about the two other members of his family.

CHAPTERS N-P

- What do you think of Douglas Benson's 'unusual' birthday gift?
- Stop reading on page 135 and predict what Candice may be planning. Then read on and see if you are close!
- List the things that could have gone wrong with Candice's plan. How else could she have achieved the same effect?
- Candice attempts to divorce her parents – but finds herself speaking to a property conveyancer. What does a property conveyancer do? Do you think it sounds like a boring job? Explore other people's jobs and find three that you think would not be fun.

CHAPTERS Q-S

- Candice writes to Denille and asks: 'Why are lawyers in New York very young, intelligent, exceptionally well-dressed and bursting with enthusiasm?' (p. 150)
- Jonsberg shows that Candice's ideas almost certainly come from the media and television series in particular. What other jobs are presented as being extremely glamorous but are probably very hard work? Brainstorm in groups and draw two columns representing your impressions of five careers. Then research what they actually involve.
- Read the rest of Candice's letter and think about Douglas Benson's language compared with Candice's matter-of-fact replies. What is the reader's response to this scene? Is it sad, funny or both?
- Look at the metaphor of a remote-control plane for a family (p. 167). Explain the effect it has on Candice's father. How does what next happens to the 'plane' emphasise Candice's point? Look at the metaphor Candice decides *not* to share (p. 170). What do the two images have in common?
- The reader's understanding that Candice's mother is depressed is articulated on page 173. Find out what depression is [here](#) (useful and easily-understood downloadable fact sheet which also explains some things that can help, as well as some causes)
- A resource designed for teachers when dealing with mental health can be found [here](#).
- Students can access support from the website [here](#):

If you choose the activities above, dealing with depression, you may wish to have the school counsellor on hand to support you in answering any questions or revelations from students.

NB: Emphasise the number of ways students can get help if they recognise any of the symptoms in themselves or others.

CHAPTERS T-V

- Candice is paired with Jen Marshall for an assignment. Describe what you think might happen before reading on.
- Chapter 'T' ends with a pun (a play on words). After the teacher has demonstrated some, see if the class can come up with a few new ones.

Some funny examples [here](#):

- How does an understanding develop between Jen Marshall and Candice? What do they find out about each other?
- Candice's father asks Douglas Benson what he can offer in return for Candice's hand in marriage (p. 197). Some cultures exchange money and goods during a marriage.

Find out more [here](#):

- Candice's father is working on a new computer program, which Candice explains to Denille. It is similar to the novels that let the reader choose from a series of possible endings. Think about times in your life when a different decision could have altered everything (moving to a new house is one example).
- What do you think of the new computer program? Can you imagine talking to another you? Would you like yourself? What things about you might you find irritating?

CHAPTERS W-X

- When Miss Bamford returns to school dressed as a pirate, she says "Would anyone care to take this black spot to Blind Pugh?" (sic). This is an allusion to *Treasure Island* which helps to convey the humour of the scene. (There is an allusion to Jonsberg's first book *The Whole Business with Kiffo and the Pitbull* on the same page and an allusion to 'Macbeth' on page 235.) Can you find any others?
- In her description of her mother's birthday dinner, Candice repeats: 'Albright is that kind of place.' Describe Albright in your own words, using clues from the novel so far.
- Candice gives her mother tickets to go to New Orleans. Re-write what happens next from her mother's point of view.

CHAPTERS Y-Z

- Look at chapter Y. How is the tension built and released here?
- The reader discovers something about Douglas Benson on pages 246-7. Does it change our view of him? Is it made clear whether or not he is from another dimension?
- How does the tone of the last section of the novel change?

FURTHER ASSIGNMENTS

CREATIVE

- Choose a scene from the book and recreate it in a short film or photo-story.
- Interview a character from the book about some significant things that happen.
- Write an extra chapter to be inserted at the beginning, end or a specified place in the novel.
- Present a monologue in character as 'Rich Uncle Brian'.
- Make a fake Facebook Page for Candice (this can be done in Word if you like). Think carefully about what would feature on her page. Annotate with reasons for your choices.
- Write two letters: one to yourself and a reply from your 'facsimile' self.

ANALYTICAL

- Present an oral presentation exploring the character of Candice Phee.
- How important is humour in the story?
- Explore autism and write a report on what it is and how others can help those affected.
- Write a detailed review of the novel.
- Explain the importance of chapter F in terms of the novel as a whole.
- Choose one main theme of the novel. Identify where and how the theme is explored in the text. Present your findings to the class, using PowerPoint or Prezi.

LINKS

Narrative structure matching activity. (teachit english - resources you can trust. An independent charitable educational source.)

<https://www.teachitenglish.co.uk/resources/ks5/original-writing-trail/teachit-english/narrative-structure-matching-activity/5023>

My Class Notes: Narrative structure (John Watson john-w.com)

<http://johnwatsonsite.com/MyClassNotes/Topics/Narrative/NarrStruct.html>

List of narrative techniques. (Wikipedia)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_narrative_techniques

THE UNIVERSE, EXPLAINED S2 • E1. The True Science of Parallel Universe. (MinutePhysics - educational YouTube channel created by Henry Reich.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ywn2Lz5zmYg>

The True Science of Parallel Universes (Unveiled YouTube channel)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-xbJmVrz1jI>

BOOK TO FILM

Some comments from the author

'Many books are optioned for films, but very few actually make it onto the big screen. So when I heard that *My Life as an Alphabet* had been optioned by a screenwriter, I didn't get overly excited. Even when I found out that the screenplay placed fourth out of a thousand entries in an international screenwriting competition, I tried to be realistic. Competitions are one thing, finding funding of millions of dollars is something else entirely. Then Julie Ryan of

Cyan films got involved. Julie is a legend in Australian film-making and produced the iconic movie *Red Dog*. This was significant [and yes, slightly exciting] but I still carried on writing the next book. "I'll allow myself to dream when the funding is found," I said to myself. Then I got a call from Lisa Hoppe, the screenwriter, to tell me that Screen Australia was putting up money and that the film would definitely happen. [Later, other funding bodies joined the party]. Interestingly, I received that call in the southern part of WA where I was doing school visits, only forty or fifty kilometres from where the film would eventually be shot. Now I got excited! I made two phone calls – one to my wife, Nita, who was shocked but thrilled and the second to Angela Namoi who had brokered the deal for me and Allen & Unwin. To be honest, I think Angela was a bit shocked as well [and equally thrilled].

'I read the screenplay and was delighted at the way Lisa had adapted my book for the screen. Lisa confessed she was worried I wouldn't like her treatment, that some authors can get very protective of their words and characters, but I assured her I understood that different media require different treatments. And her screenplay was absolutely true to the heart and spirit of the book. I was invited down to Albany, WA, where the film was scheduled to be shot and shown the 'mood board' that director John Sheedy had compiled, outlining his vision for the movie. It was a mood board saturated and vibrant with colour. I also learned that I had been given a cameo role in the film – Mr Coolidge, the school principal who introduces Douglas Benson From Another Dimension into Candice's class. Although John Sheedy gave me no specific direction (to be fair, I'm in the film for two seconds in a long shot and have no dialogue) I did a Robert de Niro and immersed myself in the character for a couple of months. I decided he would be an old, overweight idiot and I think the finished product shows how well I delivered that brief.

'News of the cast began to leak – Richard Roxburgh as Dad, Joel Jackson as Rich Uncle Brian, Emma Booth as Mum and Miriam Margolyes as Miss Bamford (the amazing Deb Mailman was a later addition). I must admit I was a little overwhelmed by the quality of the stars assembled. Later I found out that director John Sheedy sent 'love letters' to the cast telling them why they were crucial to his vision for the film. Finally, after an exhaustive nationwide search, the two leading roles were cast: Daisy Axon as Candice and Wesley Patten as Douglas Benson From Another Dimension. Obviously, I knew nothing about these children but Lisa Hoppe sent me some pictures. Daisy looked gorgeously dorky and I knew she was the right choice for the quirky Candice Phee. Wesley, an Indigenous boy, had previously made a short film with John Sheedy – *Mrs McCutcheon*, which won a swathe of awards both here and internationally. I watched that short film and was blown away by his acting and by Sheedy's direction. John later told me he had never worked with such a charismatic child actor before. Everything was set. Now the film had to be made.

'My wife Nita and I travelled to Albany in November 2018. It was surreal to meet my characters and even more surreal to act in a scene with Miriam Margolyes, who has always been a screen favourite. My two seconds of screen time took four hours to film (nothing compared to the twelve hours it took for the hall scene later on).

'We watched the filming for a week and were mightily impressed by John Sheedy's direction and the acting ability of Daisy and Wesley. Everyone treated us with great kindness and made us feel incredibly welcome. This was not something they had to do. I'd written the book six years before and my job was done. They'd bought the rights and didn't have to speak to me if they didn't want to. But we were all made to feel part of the team and I will always be grateful for that. I felt the film was going to be special and certainly cast and crew felt the same way. The backdrop of Albany was spectacular. As John said, the town is a character in *His for Happiness* in its own right.

'We returned to Darwin and I tried to forget the film (yeah, right!). I knew it was going to have its world premiere at the Melbourne International Film Festival in August 2019 and that post-production had started. That all takes place behind closed doors, so there was no news at all. Then the first stills were released and then the 'teaser' trailer. This was followed by interviews with cast and crew. LevelK, the international distributors, took a teaser of the film

to the Cannes Film Festival [it later announced it is taking the film to the Toronto Film Festival]. MIFF was making the film its centrepiece Gala family production, complete with red carpet and a miniature horse in attendance. The premiere was sold out. 1200 people watched as John Sheedy led the cast onto the stage, including me, and introduced us all. Then we watched the film.

'At the end of the film the whole audience cheered and applauded.'

ABOUT THE WRITERS



BARRY JONSBERG

Barry Jonsberg's young adult novels, *The Whole Business with Kiffo and the Pitbull* and *It's Not All About YOU, Calma!* were short-listed for the Children's Book Council Book of the Year, Older Readers, award. *It's Not All About YOU, Calma!* also won the Adelaide Festival Award for Children's Literature and *Dreamrider* was short-listed in the NSW Premier's Awards. *Being Here* won the QLD Premier's YA Book Award and was shortlisted for the Prime Minister's Award. *My Life as an Alphabet* won the Gold Inky, the Children's Peace Literature Award, the Territory Read, Children's Literature/YA Award and the Victorian Premier's Literary Award and was shortlisted in the Prime Minister's Literary Awards, the CBCA awards, the WA Premier's Book Awards and the Adelaide Festival Awards. *A Song Only I Can Hear* won the Indies Award in 2019

Barry lives in Darwin. His books have been published in the USA, the UK, France, Poland, Germany, Holland, Slovenia, Italy, Hungary, Brazil, Turkey, China and Korea.

Visit www.barryjonsberg.com

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Anita Jonsberg lives in Darwin and teaches English at Years 10, 11 and 12.