

My Life as a Hashtag

By Gabrielle Williams

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Recommended for readers 13 years and older

Summary

Imagine you could have Justin Bieber venting online on your behalf. Or Josh Hutcherson, Jennifer Lawrence, Kylie Jenner? When Marie-Claude, known as MC, discovers she can use these celebs (and more) to vent against one of her best friends (who has blocked her and isn't speaking to her after MC kissed the guy she liked at a party), she thinks she's discovered the perfect anonymous way to get things off her chest. But when the vents go viral, it's only a matter of time before the world turns its attention to MC. And when it does, things go from bad, to worse, to worstest (which isn't even a word, but should be).

No one writes funny like Gabrielle Williams but the beauty of *My Life as a Hashtag* is that what's under this fabulously entertaining and deeply relatable story is a cautionary tale about the subjectivity of truth and the very real outcomes of a small reckless act. It's hilarious and familiar, and Gabrielle Williams brings this modern comedy to a close in a believable yet warm and humorous way.

Use in the classroom

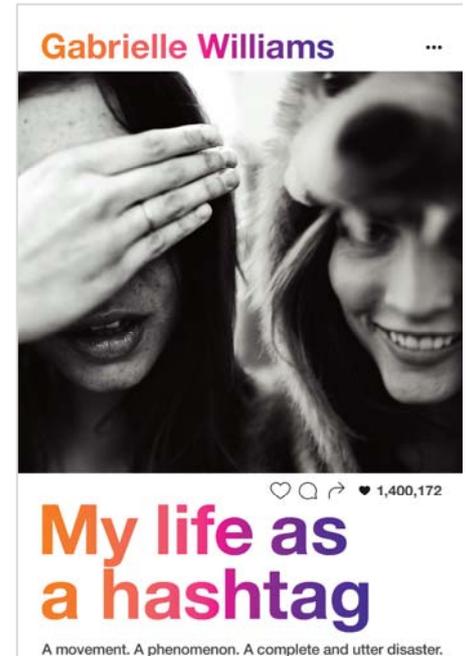
This is a highly engaging novel, praised by teenage readers for not 'talking down', 'sounding just like us' and being 'so relatable'. In the classroom, it lends itself to discussion of issues surrounding social media and young people and also to digital and on-line/intranet creative responses.

Themes

- Social media
- Bullying/Cyber bullying
- The politics of the teenage world
- Effect on children of divorce and re-partnering
- Self-control vs 'venting'
- Consequences

In the author's own words

'I wanted to explore the idea of social media as a place where you can get support, but you can also get slammed in a huge way. I wanted to tell a story from the point of view of a girl who becomes the target when the world turns against an individual on the internet.'



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'I read Jon Ronson's book, *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, and was shocked at how vicious the on-line world can be. How unforgiving.

'The pressure on kids today is enormous, and I'm impressed that most of them manage to navigate it so successfully. However, having said that, we know the incidence of depression amongst teenagers is now hovering at the 25% mark, which is in part due to the prevalence of social media in their lives – how many 'likes' they get; how many comments; how many friends; etc.

'The irony of me writing a book about social media, is that I don't engage with it terribly much. I'm not on Facebook, rarely use Instagram, and Tweet very occasionally. However, this absence of an on-line presence ended up being an advantage for me. I interviewed a large number of teenagers about how they use the medium; the subtleties and politics of it. The surprise for me was, the way they use it is very different from the way adults use it. Even twenty-somethings utilise social media in a way that is foreign to teens.'

Discussion questions

1. An early title for this book was 'Mad as Hell'. Before reading the book take five minutes to watch the 'I'm Mad as Hell' scene from the film *Network* here, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AS4aiA17YsM>
 2. After reading the whole novel replay the scene and discuss how it adds a broader meaning to the events that unfold for MC and her friends.
(Hint: could it be saying that we all need to vent at times and that *Network* was a film exploring the power of a popular medium – television - to broadcast that vent? Forty-five years later and the advent of social media – the most powerful medium ever – means that our ability to vent can have even greater audiences and, therefore, consequences.)
 3. 'I felt like things were fake comfortable with Dad these days. Everything was normal – you see what I did there? Exactly the same, but shifted around slightly.' (p. 16). MC narrates her story as if she is speaking directly to the reader. How does this approach influence our reading and how we respond to MC as a character?
 4. 'The wind from earlier in the day had slunk off, ashamed of its bad behaviour, leaving the night warm and slightly static.' (pp. 50-51).
What literary technique is Gabrielle Williams using here? How does this technique influence our reading of the text and our understanding of the narrator?
 5. Find examples of the 'teenage voice'. Is it credible i.e. does the writing accurately capture modern teenage speech and behaviour? How important is this feature in this novel?
 6. 'A diary hidden in my desk drawer could have been found and read by anyone, but my blog on Tumblr, while in a way being the world's most public diary, was hidden in the wood of millions of gig of data. No one I knew could ever find it. Ever.'
- (a) In a whole class discussion discuss whether social media is ever safe if you are writing something you don't want your friends or family to see. What are some ways teenagers can make sure that they can remain safe while using social media.
- (b) Which events in the story support the notion that social media has a positive influence on our lives?

In the classroom...



7. Retell the story from Anouk's point-of-view. Think carefully about how she might describe her reaction to:
 - what happened at Jed's party
 - seeing Jed kiss a girl at her own party
 - realising she was THE Anouk and that MC had posted the videos
 - hearing from Jed after she is named THE Anouk
8. 'Looks like he doesn't want either of us, she'd written. Wish you were here.' (p. 152).
 - (a) Find a definition of the word *subjective* and describe how it applies to Anouk's text to MC. In your own words describe what Anouk was saying here and MC's very different interpretation of what she was saying.
 - (b) did the use of social media exacerbate the miscommunication between the two friends?
9. Has MC matured over the course of the novel? Choose any other character in the novel and compare and contrast her feelings about that character before and after her traumatic experiences. Why do you think her experiences change her?

The author

Gabrielle Williams lives in Melbourne and has three kids, one husband and a dog. In the name of research, she has spent time underground with a clandestine group called the Cave Clan, conducted a series of in-depth interviews with a group of notorious art thieves, and spent some time animating strawberries and trawling Tinder. She is the author of the critically acclaimed YA novels *Beatle Meets Destiny*, *The Reluctant Hallelujah* and *The Guy, the Girl, the Artist and His Ex*, all of which have been shortlisted for a number of prestigious awards.

