

# THE GREATEST THING

By Sarah Winifred Searle

## Classroom consideration

Please note that this book contains depictions that could have specific relevance to some students and are potentially triggering. Teachers are encouraged to monitor reactions and respond appropriately. Carefully consider the steps you can take to ensure that you are providing a safe and inclusive space for everybody in your classroom and school.

**RECOMMENDED FOR:** 14–18 years old, Years 9–12, UPPER SECONDARY

**THEMES:** Friendship, mental health, gender identity, sexuality, romance, learning difficulties, empathy

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**CURRICULUM LEARNING AREAS:**

- **ENGLISH:** Literacy, Literature and Language
- **HEALTH and PHYSICAL EDUCATION:** Personal, social and community health
- **THE ARTS:** Visual Arts
- **General Capabilities:** Personal and Social capability, Ethical Understanding

**NOTES WRITTEN BY:** Rebecca Cornell

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*With breathtaking art and honest storytelling, rising star Sarah Winifred Searle delivers a heartfelt story about love, friendship and self-acceptance.*

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# INTRODUCTION

It's the first day of Grade Ten, and Winifred is going to reinvent herself. Now that her two best (and only) friends have transferred to a private school, Win must navigate high school on her own. Luckily, she isn't alone for long. In art class, she meets Oscar and April. They don't look or act like the typical teenagers in her town: they're creative, a little rebellious and seem comfortable in their own skin in a way that Win can only dream of.

But even though Winifred is breaking out of her shell, there's one secret she can't bear to admit to April and Oscar, or even to herself – and this lie threatens everything. Win needs to face her own truths, but she doesn't need to do it alone. Through the healing power of clandestine sleepovers, op-shopping and zine publishing, Win finds and accepts what it means to be herself.

## PLOT SUMMARY

Win is not looking forward to her first day of Grade Ten. Both of her best friends have gone to another school, and she is left feeling isolated. An old friend kindly reaches out to her, but Win is self-conscious. Fortunately, she has a great opportunity to do an independent project, and she plans to make comics, while helping out in Mrs Fransson's photography class.

Here, she unexpectedly catches the eye of two interesting, creative and rebellious teens. The three become friends, even though Win cannot understand what they see in her. With Oscar and April's encouragement, Win starts to find courage to express herself through clothes and art.

At night, however, Win's anxiety forces her to relive and agonise over her interactions from the previous day. She is tormented about body issues, romantic feelings and self-confidence, though, with support from her new friends, Win gradually starts to believe that she is not alone. She also learns that everyone has complicated challenges in their lives.

Win and Oscar team up (with April's encouragement and help) to create a zine that helps them explore the isolation and yearning for freedom that they all feel.

Through this year, Win navigates complicated friendship and romantic relationship issues, and gains a better understanding of her own complex relationship with her body. Through expressing herself in her artworks and storytelling, Win discovers that hope can be found in honesty and supportive friendships.

## A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

*'The Greatest Thing'* is a fictional story inspired by some experiences I had in high school.

Characters like Oscar and April aren't exact replicas of my friends from that time but rather new creations that encapsulate meaningful impressions left on me by people I loved as a teenager.

But Winifred is just me, as much as my flawed memories allow. Her feelings and successes and mistakes are all things I

went through when I was fifteen myself. This is my story as much as it is hers.

This book is my gift to the young me, to Win, and to anyone like her. I hope that if you feel alone, this story can be there for you, but also that you find glimmers of hope in your own life.

You deserve happiness. It just might take some time and effort to get there sometimes. And you're never as alone as you think you are.'

Sarah Winifred Searle

# CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

## BEFORE READING

Please note that this book contains depictions of eating disorders, biphobia, fatphobia and self-harm. We ask that teachers take care when working with this book in the classroom, and assess whether it is appropriate for their particular context. There is a list of support resources available in the back of the book.

## ENGLISH

### LITERATURE



#### Genre: Fictionalised memoir

- What is a memoir? How is it different from a biography or autobiography?
- ‘Memoirs’ are usually classified as non-fiction. What do you think it means that this is described as a ‘fictionalised memoir’?
- What can we learn from reading about other people’s life experiences? Why is this important?
- Show and discuss other memoirs – for example, the ‘Growing up ... in Australia’ series, or extracts from longer books. Ask students to find a meaningful **Sentence**, **Phrase** and **Word** from each extract or short memoir and share why they chose these.

#### Creating Literature

Create literary texts, including hybrid texts, that innovate on aspects of other texts, for example by using parody, allusion and appropriation.

#### Responding to Literature

Present an argument about a literary text based on initial impressions and subsequent analysis of the whole text.

Explore and reflect on personal understanding of the world and significant human experience gained from interpreting various representations of life matters in texts.

#### Responding to literature – Study Guide Questions

- What insights do we get into Win in the first five pages? What adjectives would you use to describe her?
- On page 5, we see the first instance of Win depicted with lines across her. Look for other examples of this. What do you think this symbolises?
- What further clues do we get about Win’s personality from her body language and speech in the first 20 pages?
- How does Win feel after cutting off the sleeves to her jacket? How do you know this?
- Compare the daytime scenes with the ones of Win in bed at night. How has the author represented Win’s struggles? Explain how the images and words work together to create this effect.
- After sharing an awkward experience with her new friends, Win says it felt ‘cathartic’ to have a laugh about it. What does this mean?
- Contrast the night scene on pp76-77 with the earlier night scenes. What has happened to prompt this shift?
- As Win becomes closer to her new friends, it emerges that they also have struggles. How does Win help Oscar (pp40-41, and 82-87)?
- How are the first and second ‘gutterglimmers’ zines symbolic of struggles Oscar is going through?

- What is Win's relationship with her mother like? Compare this to April's relationship with her parents. Find examples of these differences.
- How does Win feel about her new hair colour? What subtle shifts can we see in her attitudes to herself?
- We see Win going through an emotional rollercoaster at the dance, and later that night. Describe Win's emotional journey.
- What message is Win sending Oscar in the third zine? What does it say about her struggles?
- How does Win feel about Oscar leaving their high school? Give examples from the text.
- How does Win accidentally alienate Oscar and April?
- What does Win learn about April (pp298-302)? How does Win feel about this, and how can you tell?
- How does Win show personal growth in her conversations towards the end of the book with
  - Mrs Fransson?
  - Oscar?
  - Tilly?
- How does the book end on a note of hope?

## WORKSHEET 1: The 4 Cs

Complete the 4cs worksheet to consolidate understanding and prepare for assessment.

## LITERACY



### Graphic novels as a medium

- How do graphic novels use a combination of images and language to tell a story?
- Listen to a partner read a section out loud without looking at the images. How does this change your interpretation of the story?
- Why do you think the author chose to use images for this story?
- What can you say about the style of the illustrations in the main part of the book?
- What can you say about the illustrations for the zines?

*Interpreting,  
analysing and  
evaluating*

*Interpret, analyse and evaluate how different perspectives of issue, event, situation, individuals or groups are constructed to serve specific purposes in texts.*

*Identify and analyse implicit or explicit values, beliefs and assumptions in texts and how these are influenced by purposes and likely audiences.*

*Understanding respect*

*Understand how language use can have inclusive and exclusive social effects, and can empower or disempower people.*

*Understand that people's evaluations of texts are influenced by their value systems, the context and the purpose and mode of communication.*

### Literary device – a story within a story

- The 'gutterglimmers' stories are an example of a *literary device* called *a story within a story*. They are *embedded narratives* within *The Greatest Thing*.

According to Wikipedia, 'the inner story often has a symbolic and psychological significance for the characters in the outer story. There is often some **parallel** between the two stories, and the fiction of the inner story is used to **reveal the truth** in the outer story.'

How do the stories involving Wilde and Aubrey, as well as Aubrey and the Lady of the Hounds, reveal the truth in Oscar and Winifred's 'outer' lives?

## THINK PAIR SHARE – effective images

- THINK: Each student flips through the book and finds an image or page they think is effective.
- PAIR: Each student explains to a partner why they chose that image.
- SHARE: Teacher chooses students to share their ideas with the class. Come up with a class answer to the question: how do images tell a story?

**Understanding respect**

Compare and evaluate a range of representations of individuals and groups in different historical, social and cultural contexts.

Analyse and evaluate how people, cultures, places, events, objects and concepts are represented in texts, including media texts, through language, structural and/or visual choices.

**Creating texts**

Create imaginative, informative and persuasive texts that present a point of view and advance or illustrate arguments, including texts that integrate visual, print and/or audio features.

## Comparing

- Find another graphic novel for a similar audience (a few suggestions are provided in ‘corresponding literature’ at the end of these notes, but there are many more). Find similarities and differences, and analyse how the words and images work together to form meaning.

## Creating Texts

- Choose a section from the book. Write it in narrative form, using sensory imagery to describe what can be seen on the page.
- Students form pairs. One student tells an anecdote. The other draws this anecdote in the form of a storyboard or comic strip, then they swap roles and do the exercise again.

## WORKSHEET 2: Circle of viewpoints

- At different points in the book, create a ‘Circle of Viewpoints’ to analyse each character’s reactions and thoughts. Choose an event in the book, and three characters that experience that event. Here are some suggestions:
  - Win, Tilly and Mrs Fransson on the first day of school
  - Win, April and Oscar after the sleepover
  - April, Oscar and Tilly after the dance
  - Oscar, Tilly, Mrs Fransson after reading ‘Lady of the Hounds’

## LANGUAGE

### What's in a word?

Win doesn’t say a lot out loud, but we can say a surprising amount with very few words.

Go to the 6-word memoir website for teens: <https://www.sixwordmemoirs.com/teens/>

- Find an evocative and interesting 6-word memoir on the website. Share this with the class and explain why it struck you.
- Write a 6-word memoir for one of the characters in *The Greatest Thing*.
- Write your own 6-word memoir, based on a significant memory from your life. Consider the best words to use, and how you can use punctuation (e.g. colons, commas, full stops and semicolons) to make meaning. Submit it to the website.
- Create a visual representation of your 6-word memoir.

**Expressing and developing ideas**

Identify how vocabulary choices contribute to specificity, abstraction and stylistic effectiveness.

Refine vocabulary choices to discriminate between shades of meaning, with deliberate attention to the effect on audiences.

## ASSESSMENT

- **Reading about other people's experiences helps us better understand our own challenges.** Consider this statement and discuss in essay format with reference to *The Greatest Thing*.
- Plan, rehearse and deliver a persuasive presentation about the importance of empathy, using examples from the text.
- Research the history and purpose of zines. Students then create their own zine to raise awareness of an issue they are passionate about.
- Students compose their own allegorical story, inspired by the 'gutterglimmers' stories. Writers and artists pair up to tell the story through a combination of words and images.
- Students write a memoir about a significant memory that has influenced their identity.
- Students represent a significant memory in a visual format (comic strip, storyboard, video, photo essay), and present a speech reflecting on why this memory is important to their identity.

# HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

## PERSONAL, SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY HEALTH



### Understanding emotions

Evaluate situations and propose appropriate emotional responses and then reflect on possible outcomes of different responses.

### Being healthy, safe and active

Evaluate factors that shape identities and critically analyse how individuals impact the identities of others.

Examine the impact of changes and transitions on relationships.

Plan, rehearse and evaluate options (including CPR and first aid) for managing situations where their own or others' health, safety and wellbeing may be at short or long term risk.

### Being healthy, safe and active

- The text provides insight into the complexities of gender and sexual identity. Choose a character and explain the difficulties they are going through. How do friends support them through these difficulties?
- What changes or transitions do the characters go through?
- Are any characters at risk? What clues do you see in the text for this? What can we do if we notice someone who is at risk?

### Communicating and interacting for health and wellbeing

- What are some poor decisions Win makes? What are some good decisions she makes? For each, evaluate the outcome.
- Sometimes, Win is not honest. Can you explain why she does this?
- Find some places in the text where Win might have acted or spoken differently. Roleplay these interactions, and decide whether a different decision might have created more positive and respectful relationships.
- Find resources and information about how to recognise eating disorders and what to do if you think you or someone you know might be at risk of an eating disorder.

### Discussion topics

- Consider this quote from Mark Twain: *The worst loneliness is not to be comfortable with yourself*. To what extent do you think that Winifred, April and Oscar would agree with this statement by the end of the novel? How does each move from self-loathing to clarity of self, acceptance and eventual happiness?

- If good parenting is helping your child discover who they really are and teaching them to take control of their own life, who do you think is the better mother: April's or Winifred's? What scenes featuring either helped you to decide?
- Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen testified in 2021 that Facebook's own internal research showed that Instagram was responsible for making body issues worse for one in three teenage girls in the United States and United Kingdom. What are body issues and to what extent are they a problem for teenagers today? How does social media, such as Instagram, make people feel worse about their bodies? Are there other parts of our society that perpetuate the idea of the 'ideal' body? What can we all do to address this problem?
- Do you think *The Greatest Thing* is a story for everyone, or just people who are depressed or anxious? To what extent do you think mental health is stigmatised in our society today? What are some tangible ways to help people struggling with mental health issues?

**Communicating and interacting for health and wellbeing**

Investigate how empathy and ethical decision making contribute to respectful relationships.

Evaluate situations and propose appropriate emotional responses and then reflect on possible outcomes of different responses.

Critically analyse and apply health information from a range of sources to health decisions and situations

## ASSESSMENT

- Create an information report on a health issue that arises from the text to inform the community about the consequences of this issue. Provide justified recommendations for support.
- Write an extended response about the consequences of decision-making, using a scenario from the text as a stimulus. A scaffold may be given to help students structure their paragraphs.
- Create a zine to communicate about an important issue. Consider options to publish and distribute the zine to the community.

## VISUAL ARTS

A graphic novel is a long-form comic that can be fiction or nonfiction. A basic understanding of how we read comics reveals a lot about the techniques that graphic novelists such as Sarah Winifred Searle use to tell their stories. These can include visual elements such as colour, lines, panels, perspective and framing.

**Visual Arts**

Conceptualise and develop representations of themes, concepts or subject matter to experiment with their developing personal style, reflecting on the styles of artists, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists.

*Colour is one of the most important aspects of graphic novels. It sets the tone for a page or panel, illuminates essential details and communicates ideas.*

- Look closely at *The Greatest Thing* to find examples where colour – or sometimes the lack of it – communicates changes in time (pages 61–67), nested stories (see more on this later in these notes), heightened emotions (page 32) and intense intimacy (pages 82–87).

*Lines around a character's head often help us to understand their inner thoughts and feelings, even though the character themselves might not understand.*

- Look at the slanting lines across Winifred's face in the image of her entering school on page 5. What do these lines tell us about how she is feeling? What is it about these particular lines (their placement and angle, for instance) that communicates this idea so effectively? Similarly, what do the web-like lines on page 21 tell us

about how she is feeling, and what is it about these particular lines that communicates complex emotions and turmoil?

- Can you find other examples of this in *The Greatest Thing* that express negative mental states?
- Conversely, lines can also represent positive emotions. Can you find examples of where they communicate Winifred's surprise and delight?

*Sounds can be shown using words and visual techniques in graphic novels.*

- One example of this is on page 19 where the letters 'RNGG' and 'KLK' highlight Winifred's experience of phoning her friends and getting the answering machine message. Do you think that the presence of these letters highlighted Winifred's disappointment for you? Is it possible that these and other 'sounds' appeal to our senses in a more direct way than prose novels? What other visual ways are sounds presented in *The Greatest Thing*?

*The term 'panel' is used in graphic novels to describe each sequential image and accompanying words. Panels are often similar in size but can be bigger or smaller, vertical or horizontal, as a special way to tell the story.*

- Turn to pages 31–32 to analyse the impact that the panels have here on the 'drama' of Winifred's transformation. Why do you think Sarah Winifred Searle chose to use two vertical panels, a horizontal and full paged panel here?

*Just as in movies, graphic novels use framing devices to emphasise moments in a story. Long shots create a very different effect.*

- Look closely at the panel featuring Winifred's eye on page 155. Why do you think an extreme close-up was included at this point in the story? Consider the image of Winifred approaching her school at the bottom of pages 2–3. What does the frame here tell us about Winifred and how she feels about starting her new school year? Find three other examples of close-ups or long-distance frames and describe what impact each has on the story.
- Draw or create an artwork mimicking Searle's style, representing an important aspect of your own identity.
- Break into groups of three to create your own zine. Agree on who will be the writer and the artist, and who will create the physical zine (see pages 98–100).

## ASSESSMENT

Develop a portfolio exploring your own graphic novel style, influenced by Searle's style, as well as other artists you have considered. You should aim to communicate a narrative through the images, using graphic novel frames, and communicating meaning with sparse or no words.

# GENERAL CAPABILITIES

## PERSONAL AND SOCIAL CAPABILITY



This book allows many opportunities to explore and discuss personal and social capability.

### Self Management

- Discuss Win's challenges with expressing emotions and her journey to becoming more confident and resilient.

#### Personal and Social capability

Students work cooperatively with others in teams when undertaking project-based activities.

Students develop interpersonal skills (such as communication, teamwork and leadership) and learn to appreciate the different strengths and abilities of themselves and their peers.

Students are given opportunities to explore their own personal identity and develop an understanding of the influences that form their sense of identity.

### Self Awareness

- Discuss places in the novel where emotions are intensified. Also discuss the value of an independent project, such as the one Win is doing with Mrs Fransson.

### Social Awareness

- Discuss how diverse perspectives are represented in the novel. Also look at the dynamics of relationships – family, friendship and romantic relationships.

### Project-Based Learning

- Students research, plan, draft and compose a memoir or video memoir. This could be a combined project across the curriculum with English, Health and Physical Education and Visual Arts components.

### My24

- Students watch a variety of [My24 videos on YouTube](#) and create their own using the [My24 App](#). [More about My24](#).

## ETHICAL UNDERSTANDING



This book provides further opportunities to explore ethical understanding in context.

### Understanding ethical concepts and issues

- Discuss the ethics of responsibility when friends are struggling with mental or physical health issues.
- Reasoning in decision-making and actions: Discuss decisions made by the characters, and the consequences of these decisions. Students may roleplay the potential consequences of alternative decisions.

#### Ethical Understanding

As students engage with the elements of Ethical Understanding in an integrated way, they learn to recognise the complexity of many ethical issues. They develop a capacity to make reasoned ethical judgements through the investigation of a range of questions drawn from varied contexts in the curriculum.

### Class debate

- Facilitate a class debate on provocative statements. Topics could include:
  - It is our responsibility to protect our friends from harm, including self-harm.
  - It is never okay to lie to your friends.
  - Parents know what is best for their children.

## ABOUT THE CREATOR

Cartoonist Sarah Winifred Searle originally hails from spooky New England and currently lives in sunny Perth, Australia with their beloved spouse and cat. They're an art school dropout with an associate's degree in Communications and New Media from Southern Maine Community College and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Humanities from Harvard University Extension School. They write and draw comics and are best known for vulnerable memoir and compassionate fiction.

You might recognise Sarah from their short comics featured in Image's *Twisted Romance* and IDW's *Jem and the Holograms: Dimensions* series, covers for series like *Adventure Time* and *Faith*, and contributions to dozens of indie anthologies. Their memoir comic 'The Price of Acceptance', originally published by *The Nib*, was short-listed for Slate's 2018 Cartoonist Studio Prize. And their comic 'Healing is a process', published in the double feature *Unhealthy* in 2019, won a silver Ledger Award.

Currently Sarah is focusing on original graphic novels. *Sincerely, Harriet* (Graphic Universe, 2019) is a quiet middle grade graphic novel about the power of storytelling that was nominated for the Outstanding Story Ignatz award and won a silver Ledger; *Who Was the Girl Warrior of France?: Joan of Arc* (Penguin Workshop WhoHQ, 2022) is a biography of the historic figure for young readers, written by Sarah and illustrated by Maria Frantz; and *The Greatest Thing* is a fictionalised young adult memoir.

Find Sarah around the web: @swinsea / swinsea.com

## ABOUT THE WRITER OF THESE NOTES

Rebecca Cornell is a secondary school English teacher in Sydney. Her approach to teaching is focused on how we can learn empathy through texts and apply this to make the world a better place. She loves developing connections through text and finding deep and hidden meanings in authors' words.

Before teaching, Rebecca worked in website marketing, then publishing and editing, as well as education support. She is an avid reader and a lifelong learner with three university degrees, considering a fourth.

## CORRESPONDING LITERATURE

Other Graphic Novel/illustrated memoirs for a similar audience:

*Spinning* by Tillie Walden

*Almost American Girl: An illustrated Memoir* by Robin Ha

*Honor Girl* by Maggie Thrash

Short Memoirs: Growing Up ... In Australia Series

*Growing up Asian in Australia* edited by Alice Pung

*Growing up Indigenous in Australia* edited by Anita Heiss

*Growing up Queer in Australia* edited by Benjamin Law

*Growing up Disabled in Australia* edited by Carly Finlay

*Growing up African in Australia* edited by Maxine Beneba Clarke

# OTHER RESOURCES

## Support where needed:

Headspace.org.au is a reliable source of information for topics raised in this book:

- Eating disorders: <https://headspace.org.au/explore-topics/for-young-people/eating-disorders/>
- Family and friendship issues: <https://headspace.org.au/explore-topics/for-young-people/navigating-life/family-and-friendships/>
- Gender identity: <https://headspace.org.au/explore-topics/for-young-people/gender-identity/>
- Sexuality and sexual identity: <https://headspace.org.au/explore-topics/for-young-people/sexuality-and-sexual-identity/>
- Helping a friend going through a rough time: <https://headspace.org.au/explore-topics/for-young-people/help-a-friend/>

## On the history and purpose of zines:

- A Brief History of Zines (University of North Carolina): <https://blogs.lib.unc.edu/rbc/2017/10/25/a-brief-history-of-zines/#:~:text=Zines%20were%20first%20created%20in,collaborate%20on%20writing%20and%20artwork>
- How to Make a Zine: <https://thecreativeindependent.com/guides/how-to-make-a-zine/>

## All about zines on YouTube:

- What is a Zine? <https://youtu.be/cCjtHVZ--JQ>
- How to: Zines: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6cUie23VII>
- How to Make a Zine Using Collage Techniques: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00Hxh4pKwvM>
- How to Fold a 14-page Zine <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iwspEWt9Hlo>

## Short memoirs

- My24: Short video Memoirs by Young People: [Watch a season on YouTube](#)
- 6 Word Memoir Project: <https://www.sixwordmemoirs.com/>

## Free websites for creating your own comic strip:

- <https://www.storyboardthat.com/storyboard-creator>
- <https://www.pixton.com/>
- <https://makebeliefscomix.com/Comix/>
- <https://www.canva.com/create/comic-strips/>

## WORKSHEET 1: The 4cs

### CONNECTIONS

What connections can you make between Win and her friends?

What connections can you make with your own experiences?

### CHALLENGES

What are the different challenges facing Win, April, Oscar and Tilly?

Are there any characters you want to challenge? Why?

### CONCEPTS

What are the key concepts/themes of this book?

What message/s is the author trying to share?

### CHANGES

What changes in attitude or behaviour does Win go through?

What changes do you hope she will still go through after the story is over?

## WORKSHEET 2: Circle of Viewpoints

EVENT:

Perspective 1:

Perspective 2:

Perspective 3: