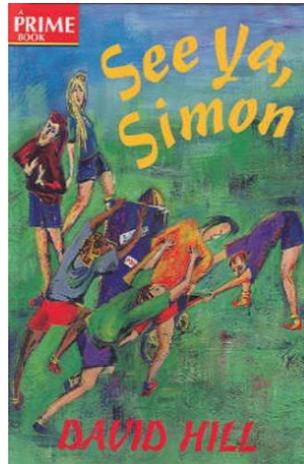


PUKAPUKA TĀWHIRI

See Ya Simon by David Hill

Published 1992



Pukapuka Tāwhiri refers to books that keep calling us back – books that we’ve connected with in the past and continue to emotionally resonate with us. What is it about these books that stick in our heads? Whether the fires of interest are stoked through connections with characters, through particularly vivid imagery, or through exciting themes of magic or mysticism, once burning they can energise us for a future of reading for pleasure. A lifetime of reading is a lifetime of placing ourselves in others’ shoes and a lifetime of learning about people whose lives are different to us. These emotional connections developed through reading occur at a neurological level, but the effects span to a societal one as they teach us how to develop empathy and understand others.

When reading, think about how this book ignites your interest, or doesn’t. Why does it continue to sit on Aotearoa’s bookshelf decades after it was first published? This is an emotionally heavy book, with themes of **grief and loss**, as well as a story of **friendship and love**. Based on the story of a schoolmate of the author’s daughter it engages with heavy concepts of **death**, as well as **disability**, in a heartfelt, humorous, and approachable way.

Before Reading:

This book confronts loss and death in an explicit way which may be upsetting for anyone who has lost someone or suffers/knows someone who suffers with Muscular Dystrophy. The discussion should be facilitated with care. The experience of disability is a central focus of the book and will be a part of class discussions – this discussion needs to be managed in a sensitive way that is safe for all children.

Discuss the context of the story:

Simon has Muscular Dystrophy, an inherited disease that presents as progressive muscular weakness. There are more than 30 types of MD, with varying ages of disease onset and ways in which the disease is experienced.

Many people in New Zealand cope with a massive range and variety of disabilities that impact their lives in different ways. Often the structure of society, especially the built environment, is not constructed with these people in mind and they struggle with accessibility as well as their illness. Ableism, discrimination against disabled people, remains prevalent in both conscious and unconscious ways and blocks disabled peoples' access to engage with society as they have a right to.

Discuss the ways ableism presents in society

This could include social, cultural and physical barriers. Use your school as a case study and ask students if they think a wheelchair user would be able to easily navigate around the whole school. If not, how could this be achieved?

Disability presents in different ways and may not be obvious when looking at someone. These people require equal recognition, and their experiences should not be dismissed. In discussions maintain the right of disabled people to self-definition and validate their experiences.

More info here:

<https://www.mda.org.nz/>

<https://www.healthline.com/health/muscular-dystrophy>

<https://gazette.education.govt.nz/articles/challenging-ableism/>

During or after reading:

Themes in *See Ya Simon*:

Disability

- Simon knows he doesn't have long to live and engages with life, school, and friendships with unrestrained vigour. He is quick-witted and often uses humour to divert attention from his disease.
- In the book Simon grows frustrated with how others treat him differently because of his disability. He refuses to downplay his illness, being very upfront about his life expectancy. This tends to make others uncomfortable.
- Simon's wheelchair allows him to participate in the things he enjoys, including soccer and the school disco.

Possible questions/discussion points:

1. "Simon is a typical teenager," is a sentence used in the blurb of the book. How is, and isn't, Simon a "typical teenager." What is a typical teenager? Is there such thing as a typical teenager?
2. What are some occasions in the book where other characters treat Simon differently due to his disability? Why do you think Simon is frustrated by this?
3. Simon's wheelchair breaks down in the story, but it also helps him score goals in soccer. How do you think Simon feels towards his wheelchair?

Loss/Grief

- After a decline in health that results in many hospital visits, Simon dies. The teachers and students at the school, even the unexpected ones, pay their sympathies to Nathan.
- Nathan struggles with the reality of his friend's death. Simon was realistic about his life expectancy but Nathan's knowledge of this doesn't make his experience of the reality of his death any easier.
- Much of Simon's class attend his funeral and remember him as the funny, witty and cool person he was.

Possible questions/discussion points:

1. How do you think the loss of Simon may affect Nathan's worldview in the future? Is he changed by his friendship and loss of Simon?
2. Brady refuses to go see Simon's body after he dies, which makes Nathan angry. Why do you think this is?
3. Nathan describes how his face felt "thick and heavy." Do you think people feel grief in different ways?
4. Do you think this book tells Nathan's or Simon's story?

Friendship

- At the heart of the story is the friendship between Simon and Nathan. They have fun together, going to the school disco and playing sports.
- The story is told from Nathan's perspective, as he experiences both the joy of his friendship with Simon, as well as witnessing the effects of his Muscular Dystrophy as his health declines.
- Nathan struggles to come to terms with the imminent loss of his friend throughout the book.

Possible questions/discussion points:

1. In what ways are Simon and Nathan different to each other?
2. Are there any occasions where Nathan helps Simon when he has a moment of need? How does Simon react to this?
3. Are there any moments in the story where Nathan and Simon disagree, or have conflict?
4. How does Nathan view Simon's Muscular Dystrophy? Does he see it as something defining who Simon is, or as just one part of Simon's life?

After Reading: Beyond the Book:

Create a broader discussion surrounding this book and readership.

Possible questions/discussion points:

1. This book was published almost three decades ago, yet it remains a well-known and classic New Zealand book. Why do you think this book has persisted, whereas others have not? Is this book unique?
2. Can you think of any more recent books that remind you of See Ya Simon? How do they differ?
3. How did you find the writing style of the book? Discuss a phrase or sentence that stuck out to you, and why it did so.
4. How did See Ya Simon make you feel? It's normal to have complex, even conflicting feelings.
5. Did you like the book? Were there any parts which you found odd or confusing? Why do you think this is?
6. What kind of books do you normally like? What is it about these books that call to you? For example, vivid imagery, or characters that you find relatable.
7. Do you think we should read this book over more modern ones? What is the continuing value of traditional books?

Further reading:

- **Wonder** by R.J. Palacio
- **The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time** by Mark Haddon
- **The 10pm Question** by Kate De Goldi
- **Stargirl** by Jerry Spinelli