



OneTree
HOUSE
TEACHERS
NOTES

Not a Babe

by Sarah Johnson

About the author

Sarah Johnson writes stories for young people and adults. Her books have received the Storylines Joy Cowley Award and Storylines Notable Book awards, and been shortlisted for the New Zealand Book Awards for Children and Young Adults.

Sarah lives in Whaingaroa Raglan where she works from a studio in her garden. She is currently studying towards a PhD in Creative Writing through Auckland University of Technology and is on an ongoing journey to learn to surf. *Not A Babe* is her first novel for young adults.

Synopsis of novel

Jerri may be an outstanding surfer, but she hates the limelight. She prefers to support her best friend Frida, who competes in surfing competitions and models surf and beach wear for her sponsor. However, increasingly infuriated by the attitudes of male surfers to the girls, Jerri is pushed to breaking point when they post inappropriate photos. Her desire to bring about change results in a school project that spills into real life and brings her the sort of attention she has always avoided. This is a story of a girl finding her voice and speaking out for others as she challenges sexist attitudes in the surfing community.

Themes / issues

This is a novel that explores **the importance of speaking out, challenging sexist and exploitative attitudes towards women, and accepting yourself as you are.**

Writing style

The writing style is accessible and engaging, incorporating significant amounts of general kiwi slang along with specific surfer jargon. The narrative is chronological, weaving in information about the past as Jerri learns about it from various adults in her life.

Year level suitability and application

Themes of online sexual harassment, as well as bullying, paired with a 15 year old protagonist makes this book suitable for Year 11 or a mature Year 10 reader. These themes are addressed with sensitivity in a way that is appropriate to a general reader of this age group. A teacher would need to be aware of the potentially triggering subject matter around the posting of manipulated photos.

Learning opportunities

Before reading:

Prior knowledge discussion / activities:

- Do some background research on the surfing community and/or surfing in NZ
- Explore student experiences of sportswear that is different for girls and boys, looking at examples such as the recently won fight for more modest attire in women's beach volleyball.
- Research and discuss online harassment and non-consensual posting of photos

During reading: Understanding the content

These tasks and questions are intended to be prompts for classroom discussion during reading. They could also be used as individual written reflections. They are a mixture of comprehension questions (finding information and drawing inferences) and prompts for deeper reflection. The latter are repeated in the final section on themes.

Chapter 1

- What do we learn about Jerri and Frida, and their relationship to each other, in Chapter 1?
- How does Johnson show us the challenges faced by the girls in pursuing their love of surfing?
- How are we told that Jerri's dad is no longer in her life? How does she feel about him? Provide evidence for your answer.
- What indications are we given in Chapter 1 that Jerri likes Atawhai?

Chapter 2

- What do we learn about Jerri when she
 - o tries to rescue the dog
 - o protects Zara from the waves

Chapter 3

- Why is Frida wearing a wetsuit that isn't appropriate for the weather?
Combined with what we know about the swimsuit they asked to wear, what does this tell us about the attitudes of the sponsor?

- We find out here that Jerri's dad has died. Why do you think the earlier references made it sound like he had chosen to leave?

Chapter 4

- Why is the write-up of the competition so offensive?
- "If you're male, they write about how you surf. If you're female, it's how you look. Even the pros get it."
- Frida accepts that this is how things are, focusing on her surfing, while Jerri rails against it. Which one do you agree with and why?
- What do we learn about Paul Stark on pages 54 – 56?
- At the end of Chapter 4 we meet the rest of Jerri's family. How does this scene help us to understand her and her relationship with her mother?

Chapter 5

- Several themes/storylines are developed in this chapter. Select ONE and explain how Johnson communicates information without telling us directly
 - o Debate about the photos
 - o Jerri's reluctance to participate in team activities
 - o Relationship between Jerri and Ata
 - o The way Rick treats girls

Chapter 6

- What do we learn about surfing etiquette here, through the way that various males ignore it when it comes to Jerri?
- What is the symbolism of Pele, in relation to Jerri's personality?
- What do we know so far about Mo and Baz? We are finding out about them as Jerri does. What questions might she have about what she has heard from Mo?

Chapter 7

- What is the irony in the statement that a wetsuit is "not designed for sportswomen"? (87)
- What is the significance of Jerri and her brothers all being named after famous women surfers?

- Lisa Andersen was the first to design board shorts for women. What other sporting clothes or gear have women had to fight to have adapted to suit them?

Chapter 8

- Why is Frida OK with photos of her, but embarrassed by the photo of Jerri? Yet, Jerri is most angry about how they have presented Frida. What are the implications of the way both girls are presented, in terms of the way the boys see girls?
- Frida thinks that many girls are put off surfing because they don't fit the "type". Do you think this applies to other sports? Is it only girls who might be affected by this sort of thinking?

Chapter 9

- Why does Jerri accept the fact that her brothers do practically no work around the house? What does this tell us about her character?
- Is Jerri right to feel that Ata has some responsibility for the photos? Why or why not?
- What are Jerri's feelings about Zara being able to compete? Back up your answer with evidence from the text.

Chapter 10

- Why does Jerri not want to tell Frida about her growing attraction to Ata?
- Why do you think designing and selling clothes by body shape rather than size is not already a thing?
- "What Parker and his mates had done was wrong, really wrong, and someone should do something about it." (137).
 - o Why do people allow others to get away with totally unacceptable behaviour?
 - o How is Frida's attitude allowing misogyny to be normalised?

Chapter 11

- In Chapter 4, Jerri's mother insisted the boys do some work and let Jerri go surfing.
 - o Why is her attitude different now?
 - o What do we learn about the family dynamics and Jerri's part in them from this interaction?
- Why does Jerri decide not to go to the competition?

Chapter 12

- What do we learn about Baz and the reasons for his attitude to Jerri?
- What is implied by his certainty that Mo won't fix Jerri's board, (not aware that Mo made the offer?)
- Why is Jerri surprised by Mo's living arrangements?

Chapter 13

- Why is Jerri uncomfortable about finding out about her mother from Mo?
- What are your feelings about the way Mo holds onto the boards of dead surfers?
- "...hugging the side no longer seemed to be the right place to be." (186) How does this description of how she is riding a bike indicate a turning point for Jerri in the story?
- Why did Jerri decide not to post the photo of Parker?

Chapter 14

- What does Mo mean when she says that "fear has always been used to stop [women]" (195) Is she just talking about surfing?
- What do you think Jerri is most nervous about?
- Given how much she loves surfing, why do you think Jerri wouldn't believe she was good until she saw herself filmed?

Chapter 15

- Do you think it is fair of Jerri to blame Ata for the behaviour of his friends?
- How is Leon acting the same as the boys, even though he thinks he is sticking up for Jerri?

Chapter 16

- Throughout the wetsuit project, Jerri ends up doing what Frida wants her to, despite her reservations. What does this tell us about their relationship?
- Jerri claims that their project is about "taking back the power" in terms of surfing because they like it, rather than being constrained by what people think of them. What are other areas of life where women are objectified and need to "take back the power"?

Chapter 17

- Rick continues to claim he can surf better than Frida, despite her just having won a national title. Why do you think he needs to make this assertion?
- What is so powerful in the presentation for girls like Mina and Winnie?
- Why do you think Ata finally speaks up in defence of the girls?
- How often do we fail to make a difference because we don't want to draw attention to ourselves? Is this something that everybody encounters, or is Jerri different from the majority?

Chapter 18

- What is it the boys are really concerned about in the argument at the coffee shop?
- Why did Jerri agree to go to the gorge?

Chapter 19

- "For once it was you, not me, deciding to do something spontaneous, stupid and dangerous." (260) What do we learn about the girls' friendship from this statement?
- What was the boundary Jerri crossed when she and Frida got in the water at Te Toto Gorge?
- Why do you think Ata came to the gorge?

Chapter 20

- Why does it change Jerri's attitude to Ata that he is there to look out for his cousin?
- Does the fact that Ata apologised to Winnie later make it better that he didn't speak up at the time?

Chapter 21

- Why did Rick not take his inhaler with him?
 - Why do teenagers take such risks?
- Was it really Jerri's fault that they were all here?
- Was Jerri right to let Frida's board get destroyed in order to look for Parker sooner?

Chapter 22

- How did Jerri make use of everything she had learned in order to get to Parker?
- Why do you think she didn't hesitate to try and rescue him?

Chapter 23

- How do Jerri's actions contrast with those of Baz and Dave?
- Could there be any justification for not helping someone injured in the water, regardless of how stupid they were to be there?
- What is implied in the comment that "[Mo] couldn't take it again"?
- Why did Baz change his mind about helping?

Chapter 24

- Does Jerri's role in them being out in dangerous conditions reduce the value of her rescue efforts?
 - Why do people often find it difficult to accept that they have done something extraordinary?
- Was there any justification in the way Baz condemned Paul Stark for breaking up with Mo?
- "I can choose my own." (329) Jerri realises she doesn't have to let her life be shaped by the way others see her. How is this a natural development of her earlier actions and choices?

Chapter 25

- How do the events of the previous day help Jerri to make some significant changes in her behaviour?
 - List all the courageous things she does in this chapter
- Why did Morag give up surfing and pull away from the surfing crowd?
- Why is unsettling to Jerri to learn a different story about her parents?
 - To what extent is this a metaphor for becoming an adult?

Chapter 26

- Is it fair of Baz to expect Jerri to like him now?
- How does this chapter pull together the loose threads in the story?

Post reading: Taking it further

Themes/Discussion points:

There are a number of important themes and ideas in this novel. A study could focus on just one or two, explore all of them, or allow students to select the one they feel most strongly about and develop their own inquiry around it.

- Choosing your own story – not letting others define who you are and how you see yourself
 - o How often do we fail to make a difference because we don't want to draw attention to ourselves? Is this something that everybody encounters, or is Jerri different from the majority?
 - o Why do people often find it difficult to accept that they have done something extraordinary?
 - o "I can choose my own." (329) Jerri realises she doesn't have to let her life be shaped by the way others see her. How is this a natural development of her earlier actions and choices?
- Female clothing and how it can prevent girls from experiencing life in all its fullness
 - o "If you're male, they write about how you surf. If you're female, it's how you look. Even the pros get it." Frida accepts that this is how things are, focusing on her surfing, while Jerri rails against it. Which one do you agree with and why?
 - o What is the irony in the statement that a wetsuit is "not designed for sportswomen"? (87)
 - o Lisa Andersen was the first to design board shorts for women. What other sporting clothes or gear have women had to fight to have adapted to suit them?
 - o Why do you think designing and selling clothes by body shape rather than size is not already a thing?
- Gender expectations and the many ways they play out in everyday life
 - o Frida thinks that many girls are put off surfing because they don't fit the "type". Do you think this applies to other sports? Is it only girls who might be affected by this sort of thinking?
 - o What does Mo mean when she says that "fear has always been used to stop [women]" (195) Is she just talking about surfing?
 - o Jerri claims that their project is about "taking back the power" in terms of surfing because they like it, rather than being constrained by what people think of them. What are other areas of life where women are objectified and need to "take back the power"?
 - o Rick continues to claim he can surf better than Frida, despite her just having won a national title. Why do you think he needs to make this assertion?
- Online harassment through social media and posting/manipulation photos without consent
 - o Why is Frida OK with photos of her, but embarrassed by the photo of Jerri? Yet, Jerri is most angry about how they have presented Frida. What are the implications of the way both girls are presented, in terms of the way the boys see girls?
 - o "What Parker and his mates had done was wrong, really wrong, and someone should do something about it." (137).
- Why do people allow others to get away with totally unacceptable behaviour?
- How is Frida's attitude allowing misogyny to be normalised?
- How we let one action, incident or interaction define our future path and relationships
 - o "...hugging the side no longer seemed to be the right place to be." (186) How does this description of how she is riding a bike indicate a turning point for Jerri in the story?
 - o Could there be any justification for not helping someone injured in the water, regardless of how stupid they were to be there?
 - o "I can choose my own." (329) Jerri realises she doesn't have to let her life be shaped by the way others see her. How is this a natural development of her earlier actions and choices?
 - o How do the events of the previous day (Chapter 25) help Jerri to make some significant changes in her behaviour?