



The Mess of our Lives

by Mary-Anne Scott

About the author

Mary-anne Scott lives in Napier. Many of her previous titles have been shortlisted for the YA section of the Children's Book Awards: Snakes and Ladders (Scholastic); Coming Home to Roost (Penguin) and Sticking with Pigs (One Tree House).

Sticking with Pigs published in 2018 and was Shortlisted for the Children's Book Award Trust Copyright Licensing NZ YA Award in 2018 was Shortlisted for the 2018 NZ Mountain Film and Book Festival and was named a 2019 Storylines Notable Book. Her latest titles, Spearo (a 2021 Storylines Notable Book) and Fantastic Mr Bean were published in 2020.

Synopsis of novel

Jordan is seventeen, struggling to balance finishing school, realising his dreams of being a musician and living with a mentally ill mother. When his younger sister is injured and the reality of their home life is made public, Jordan is faced with choosing between supporting his sister and living his dreams. The core of this novel is his journey, his mistakes and his decisions. Jordan is no hero. He is a heart-breakingly believable young man on the verge of adulthood, making decisions nobody his age should be faced with.

Themes / issues

This is a novel that explores **coming of age, love in all its forms, loyalty, and mental illness**. It takes the reader on Jordan's journey, whilst highlighting both the deep caring that can be found in our communities and the **institutional and societal shortcomings** that allow teenagers to find themselves in such situations.

Writing style

The writing style is uncomplicated, appropriate for a teenage audience. The narrative is primarily chronological, with some brief flashbacks, mostly presented as stories told by one character to another, to provide context.

Year level suitability and application

The ideas and themes could be productively explored at any level of secondary school. The relatively straightforward language and narrative make this more suitable for Year 10 or 11, rather than senior students. However, the depth of ideas would allow for productive study at a higher curriculum level as well.

Learning opportunities

Before reading:

Prior knowledge discussion / activities:

- Research hoarding as a mental illness
- Find out about mentoring services for young people in New Zealand
- Research the laws around guardianship of minors and the foster care system in New Zealand.

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.

Chapters 1 - 2

What do we learn about the Baxter family and their relationships to each other?

Music is introduced as a subject that Jordan is interested in, is good at, and he believes he is disadvantaged by not having his own musical instrument.

Chapter 3

- Who are the other characters introduced in this chapter?
- How are we shown that they will be significant in the story?
- The music class is introduced. Like many school music suites, the classrooms are out of the way and the music students are an eclectic group thrown together despite their different instruments, talents and genres. Musical words to note: cadenza, composition, flute and kōauau, transcribing, treble clef, hook, glissando and one-four-five.

Chapters 4 – 5

There are several descriptive passages about the house in these chapters. Select one and analyse how it shows us something about Jordan's perception of Susan.

Chapters 6 – 7

- Why does it seem to Jordan that it is harder to cope when people show they care about him?
- Jordan needs to record his song but doesn't have

access to a computer so he goes to Huntley's house and uses his sound gear. Musical words to note: improvisation, simple-triple time, compound-duple time, intonation, reverb, six-eight.

- What is an electric piano and how does it differ from an organ?

Chapter 8

Why do you think Jordan is willing to ask a stranger for help, when he won't confide in his teacher or go to the authorities about his sister?

Chapters 9 – 10

How does Jordan's reluctance to accept or ask for help make you feel?

What is your attitude to his plans to leave home after finishing school?

Six performances are held in the music suite. Why do the performances matter?

Musical words to note: discordant, double bass, endpin, bow quiver, jazz-inspired pizzicato piece, pianissimo, performance anxiety, semitone, progressions, jingle, taonga puoro.

Chapters 11- 12

What are your reactions to the cruelty with which Jordan treats his mother?

Are her actions cruel?

Why does Jordan get so cross with Tabitha?

Jordan goes back to Huntley's to record a different song. They talk about song titles and compete to come up with the best. Musical words to note: black-key vibe, uni-directional mic, lyrics, outro.

Chapter 13

Do you know people like Hunter, who feel deprived when others are offered opportunities?

If you were Hunter's friend, what advice would you give him?

Chapter 14

How does knowing that Tabitha is being bullied change your perception of Jordan's actions and decisions?

Chapters 15- 16

Why do you think Jordan confides in Te Hana?

What characteristics does Te Hana have that makes her a trustworthy person?

Chapter 17

How do the different reactions to Tabitha being missing confirm or challenge your previous assessments of Jordan and Susan?

Chapters 18 – 19

While both Susan and Jordan are concerned about Tabitha, they both have other concerns as well. What are those concerns and why are they highlighted in these chapters?

Chapters 20 – 21

Why do you think Jordan became fixated on clearing away the junk, rather than going straight to the hospital?

Chapters 22 – 23

- Why does Tabitha want to go home?
- Ms Frost visits Jordan at Tabitha's bedside and gives him a poster which shows the Circle of Fifths. What is this and how does it work?
- She challenges him to write something in every key. Research the meanings of key signatures — sharps and flats. What is a stave and what is pitch?

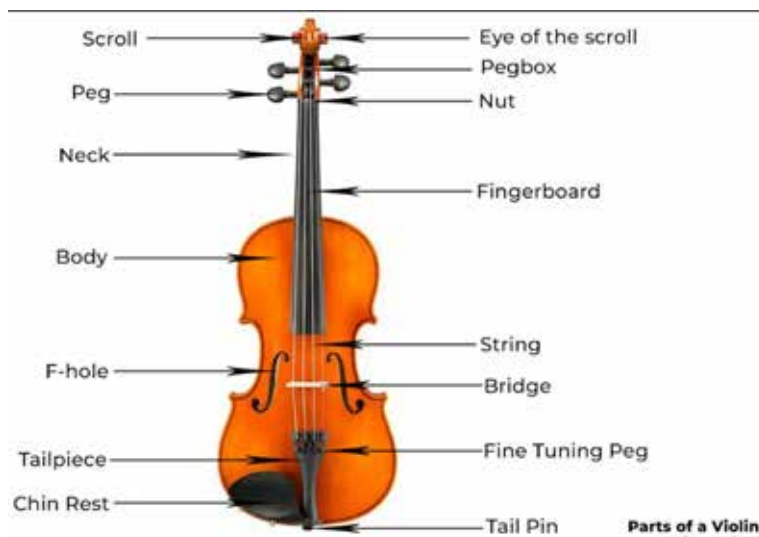
Chapter 24

We see a number of perspectives on helping others in this chapter. What are they and how do they raise issues about the way we support each other (or fail to do so) in New Zealand?

Chapters 25- 26

- Is Tracey's implied criticism of Jordan fair? Why or why not?
- Why is Jordan so set against living with Andrej and Alena?

Jordan finds a viola in the trash and he examines it with Andrej. What are f holes? Fine tuners? What wood was often used to make stringed instruments?



- Words you could research for stringed instruments; the bow, the horsehair, the frog, the belly, ebony.
- What knowledge might you need to deal in old instruments?

Chapter 27

What is Rangī referring to when he says: "The more time that passes while you're thinking, the more time for this boy to think the song is his. ... It's a lesson we Māori learned the hard way."

Chapters 28 – 29

- Jordan first confronts Huntley about getting his first song printed out. He also asks Huntley about the composition he sold for \$10K. Was it a jingle or a song? What is the difference?
- Reflect on why Scott organised the events in these two chapters as she did. How does alternating between Tabitha's joy (and then come-down) and the story of the stolen music give us deeper insight into characters?
- How do these two storylines communicate ideas about why people bully others?

Chapter 30

- How does Susan's behaviour help you to understand the depth of her struggle?
- How does this chapter further clarify Jordan's internal conflicts in relation to both Susan and Tabitha?

Chapter 31

- What does it say about Jordan that frightening Mrs Summers makes him feel good?
- Who do you sympathise with in this extract?
- What ideas does reflecting on that question bring to mind?
- Smasher says Jordan is talking about a breach of copyright which is a civil matter. Research the 2011 Act relating to copyright piracy and the latest arguments that have arisen with the increase in the free access to creatives such as music and writing.
- When the constable hands over the information Jordan needs, it's clear that the proof 'fixes' the song recording to the exact date he needed. What does the term refer to?

Chapter 32

Does Jordan have "a duty" to care for Tabitha?

Chapters 33 - 34

- We can sympathise with Jordan's anger. Does that excuse his treatment of Susan (and of Mrs Summers)?
- How does having Jordan behave this way help us to think about the way society treats young criminals, whose behaviour is frequently a response to similar anger for similar reasons?
- When Jordan searches for his song online. Research what a song or jingle might normally earn online?
- How do you copyright your music?

Chapter 35

Based on Huntley's behaviour, why do you think he stole Jordan's song?

Chapter 36

Did Susan's father really lose his life because of music?

Chapters 37 – 39

- What is the connection between the old lady getting on the bus and Jordan deciding to return home?
- Why does Andrej push Jordan into agreeing to sleep inside before he offers to find him a caravan?

Epilogue

- What is the significance of the song "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"?
- What is a reggae beat? What is a gospel sound?
- Why is Tabitha singing such a hopeful ending?
- Clarinet to be cleaned, oiled and new pads. Instruments that have reeds on mouthpiece need regular cleaning and replacing of some parts.

Post reading: Taking it further

There is a wealth of ideas and themes in this novel. These discussion points provide some suggestions for how students might be guided to engage with some of them. They certainly do not cover all the possibilities raised by the novel.

Themes

- Nature of love
- Independence
- Duty and responsibility to others
- Mental illness
- Bullying
- Prejudice
- Anger management and the justice system
- Juvenile delinquency
- The responsibility of teachers/concerned neighbours to take action on behalf of students vs a right to privacy.
- Coming of age

Discussion points:

Susan's actions appear cruel and abhorrent, yet she claims to love her children. Is it a given that a mother always loves her children, as claimed by Alena and the counsellor?

Is love measured in what is intended or what is perceived?

The guitar and the rabbit family are important symbols in the novel. How do they help us to understand key ideas?

The interaction between independence and community is a core theme. Why is it so difficult for us to find the correct balance? Are there cultural dimensions to this?

Tabitha displays symptoms of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, which makes Jordan worried that she might become a hoarder as well.

- How are these illnesses related?
- How do rituals help Tabitha to cope with the chaos of her life? Can such a reaction really be considered a mental illness?

Another key issue raised is Jordan's confusion and anger. He makes the "right" decisions in the end but makes some bad ones along the way. Most of the adults don't really seem to get it, however sympathetic and supportive they are. Jordan could have easily ended up in the justice system himself. How does this change the way you consider the treatment of young criminals in New Zealand?

How significant is Miriama giving Jordan permission to "get it wrong" in the decisions he makes after that? Why is it so important for teenagers to be allowed enough independence to make mistakes?

Right at the end, Andrej tells Jordan to "play the cards you've been dealt." Jordan's anger comes from his inability to accept that his life is what it is. What does the novel suggest about the balance between accepting the things we can't change and exposing injustice and cruelty in life.

Jordan finally takes on adult responsibility by sacrificing his independence and remaining reliant on other adults. This appears to be a contradiction. How is it a metaphor for growing up?

The end of the novel reminds us that a search for home and a search for freedom are not mutually exclusive. Why do you think we so often seek freedom by leaving home?

Jordan is the protagonist of this novel. Despite it being told in the 3rd person, the narrative is shaped by his perspective. How might it have been told differently, if Tabitha were the protagonist? What about Susan?