



Gracehopper

by Mandy Hager

About the author

Mandy Hager is a distinguished author, gaining recent acclaim for her non-fiction titles 'Hindsight: Pivotal Moments in New Zealand's History' and 'Protest! Shaping Aotearoa.' However, her true prominence lies in her compelling writing for young adults, delving into thought-provoking social themes.

In addition to her literary achievements, Mandy has significantly contributed to the education sector, teaching creative writing, and leveraging the expertise gained from her previous work with the Global Education Centre and the DARE Foundation.

Mandy's literary prowess is widely celebrated, marked by an impressive array of awards, residencies, and recognition. Notable among these are the Beatson Fellowship (2012), the Katherine Mansfield Menton Fellowship (2014), and the Waikato University Writer in Residence (2015). Her profound impact on the literary world was recognised with the prestigious Margaret Mahy Medal and Lecture Award in 2019.

Currently residing on the Kāpiti Coast, nestled in the scenic North Island of New Zealand, Mandy Hager remains a prominent figure in literature, captivating readers with her insightful storytelling.



Synopsis of novel

Grace is a diminutive young woman of Taiwanese descent, growing up with her Pākeha mother and grandmother in Wellington. This novel is set during the summer after she finishes school, as she begins to push back against the expectation she will look after and cover for her mother's potentially psychotic PTSD triggered episodes. At the same time, her grandmother's health is failing, putting different pressures on her time and loyalties. As she stands on the verge of adulthood, her unanswered questions about her Taiwanese father become increasingly urgent. In the midst of all this, she reconnects with her childhood friend Charlie, who has achondroplasia (dwarfism), forcing her to face her anger and sense of abandonment from when his family moved to England five years' previously. As all these threads and challenges are resolved in the course of one very intense month, Grace finds out who she really is.



Themes / issues

This is a novel that explores **identity**, **betrayal** and **forgiveness**. As the truth about her past slowly emerges, Grace discovers the true meaning of **family**, **love** and **loss**. With her, we explore what **friendship** is and isn't, and learn about **resilience**. Alongside Grace's own journey, through Charlie, the novel raises questions about **discrimination** and **prejudice**, and how victims of this respond.

Writing style

The writing style is uncomplicated, with a suitable level of sophistication for the intended older young adult audience. The many changes in timeframe, indicated by dates at the start of each chapter, will prove challenging for less competent readers.

Year level suitability and application

Both the challenging nature of the themes, and the use of language appropriate to 18-year-olds experiencing grief and anger, makes this novel suitable for Year 12 or 13 students only. It does contain a failed suicide attempt by the mother, but this is dealt with in a way that is appropriate for older secondary students, focusing on the trauma caused to Grace in finding and rescuing her mother, rather than on the mother's mental state.

Learning opportunities

Before reading:

Prior knowledge discussion / activities:

Find out about the 1999 Taiwan earthquake

Research PTSD and its ongoing effect on victims

Research achondroplasia

Find out more about Jeet Kune Do and the philosophy of Bruce Lee

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 - 3

What do we learn about Grace and Charlie in these early chapters?

Chapters 4 – 7

How does Katherine's response to a small earthquake help us to understand the relationships between the three generations in this family?

List all the indicators that things are not quite right with Claire.

Why do you think Hager provides us with the background about Katherine's response to her father's death in chapters 6 and 7?

Already we have had chapters set in 2017, 2004, 2010 and 2012. What is the effect of all this time travel on you as a reader?

Chapter 8

What is your response to Charlie's justification for his pranks? Do you agree with Charlie or Grace? Why?

Chapters 9 -10

Grace's life changed significantly in February 2011. What were those changes and how did they affect her?

Chapter 11

What are the parallels between finding her mother in Chapter 10 and finding her grandmother in Chapter 11?

Chapters 12 - 13

We see a different side of Katherine in these chapters, both through Charlie's memories and the description of the bullying incident. Why do you think Hager gives us this information right at this point in the narrative?

Chapter 14

Katherine and Claire share a distrust of the medical profession. What do you know about each of them that might help to understand this?

Chapter 15

Grace's entire identity and life is put into question. The novel provides us with some indication of her feelings. Write a diary entry that Grace might have written after receiving the DNA results.

Chapters 16 – 17

In these chapters we discover more about how Grace continues to carry a sense of responsibility for everyone in her family. Go back through the earlier chapters and outline all the ways in which she takes responsibility for others.

Why is Grace so affected by the videos Charlie shows her?

Chapter 18

Explain the narrative purpose of juxtaposing these incidents from Grace's childhood when she was truly happy.

Chapter 19

Throughout the novel, Grace relies on meditation and advice from Bruce Lee inspired Jeet Kune Do. Yet on her grandmother's death bed, she says to herself: "Bruce said those who followed The Way had to learn the art of dying, letting go of the past and the things that limit our ability to live fully in the moment. Crock of shit. If Grace lets go of everything to this point, who the hell is she?"

Reflect on the contradictions that are creating such turmoil in Grace.

Chapter 20

Can you think of a time when someone you care about has done something that reduces their own mana, but they can't see it? How did you respond to them? If you can't think of an example from your own life, how would you have acted in Grace's place?

Chapters 21 – 22

What is the connection between these two chapters, in terms of what we learn about Grace and her relationships with others?

Chapters 23 - 24

This is the second time Grace has refused to believe someone who tells her she is "in control". Do you think we always know ourselves better than others can know us?

Then in Chapter 24, we learn about how she started to understand emotional control at the age of 14, through her martial arts. How does that help us to understand the contrast between how Grace sees herself and how others see her.

"Love her."

"Who? Mum?" A declaration or an order?

How might this quote from the novel be seen to encapsulate the relationship between the three women?

Chapter 25

This chapter introduces the theme of forgiveness that dominates the last part of the novel. What significant aspects of relationship are explored here?

Chapter 26

Why does Katherine believe that her mother didn't love her or forgive her?

Chapter 27

"Anoop bought her online after Mum forgot my birthday one year."

Explain Anoop's role in Grace's life.

Chapters 28 – 29

Grace has now spoken to three people about her DNA testing and the confusion it has sparked. How do you think this will affect her?

Write a diary entry reflecting on how sharing this information makes Grace feel.

This quote encapsulates all the grief of Grace's life. Reflect on the message it gives to us about how we treat others when we don't know what is behind their behaviour.

“And she cries for the girl who dreamed of finding her father, and the bitches at school who spread the rumour that she was a snob when Katherine gobbled all her time, the near-friends who lost patience, the bullies, the racists ...”

Chapters 30 - 31

Grace finally starts thinking of herself rather than Katherine, in the face of an enormous shock. As a reader, how do you respond to her actions?

Reflect on how you would feel at this moment, in Grace’s position? Would it make any difference if her relationship with Katherine was more straightforward? Would that be better or worse?

Why is she repelled by the statue *Venus of Hohle Fels*? In her current emotional state what does this symbolise?

Chapter 32

Why can Grace not use her usual control of herself at the time she needs it most?

Chapter 33

How does this story change the way you have responded to Katherine throughout the book? Does it justify not telling Grace the truth?

Chapter 34 - 35

What are the reasons that Grace struggles to forgive Katherine? What exactly is she forgiving her for?

Chapter 36 - 37

Why is remembering the good times with Katherine so important?

Chapters 38 – 40

These chapters tie up most of the loose ends. Is this satisfying for you as a reader? Write an alternative ending that leaves the outcomes more open. Discuss as a class the purpose of resolving the issues as Hager does.

Post reading: Taking it further

Themes/Discussion points:

As well as being a literal stress management tool for Grace, Jeet Kune Do serves as an extended metaphor throughout the novel. Unpack the lessons associated with the discipline and the philosophy of Bruce Lee. In what ways are these helpful life lessons? Are there aspects of this that you don’t think are so healthy?

Charlie’s sense of self as a Little Person and the ways he deals with the prejudice and stereotypes serve as a background to Grace’s story, with some clear parallels to the racism she experiences. What is the message about living as a minority person in a prejudiced society? How does that message relate to your life and your relationships?

Despite having had to parent a mother who isn’t technically her mother, and being lied to about her heritage, Grace forgives Katherine. What does this novel teach us about family, love, and forgiveness?

Mental illness is central in this story and yet the book isn’t about mental illness. How does that reflect the way society still often hides and sidelines mental illness?

Prepared by Susy Carryer