

Title: Iris's Ukulele

Author: Kathy Taylor

Synopsis

Iris and Sidney are best friends; joined at the hip, Iris's Gran reckons. Iris and Sidney do everything together and aspire to become the best musicians in the universe. In fact, they call themselves The Masters of the Musical Universe. At the moment Iris and Sidney are working on a rap musical together about werewolves and vampires. Iris is determined to win the talent show at the mall so that she can buy herself the amazing purple ukulele that she has been eyeing up in the window of the Guitarium.

Things seem to be going well until Sidney informs Iris that vampires are passé and he would rather write a Rock Opera to perform in the talent show. Iris is hurt and upset by this and she and Sidney have an argument and stop talking to each other. To Iris's disgust, Sidney becomes friends with Morgan, the pretty, rich and perfectly groomed girl in their class who Iris has always disliked. He also falls victim to the bullying of a new student called Che, who singles Sidney out because he is obviously different from all the other boys at school. Feeling unsure of herself without Sidney's friendship Iris decides to make herself over. With new clothes and a new attitude Iris returns to school but this doesn't improve the situation at all. Iris has forgotten her friends and when she doesn't stick up for Sidney when Che is bullying him, Elijah, the coolest boy in school (who Iris also happens to have a huge crush on) accuses her of having "changed" and definitely not for the better.

Ashamed and embarrassed Iris decides that it is time to apologise to Sidney and make up with him. Will Sidney and Iris make up or is it too late to salvage their friendship?

Text Type

Iris's Ukulele by Kathy Taylor is the winner of the 2011 Tom Fitzgibbon Award for a previously unpublished author. Set in New Zealand and dealing with a range of topical issues, the novel will appeal to girls particularly. The story is written in easy to understand colloquial language and is lively and fast-paced.

Iris is a credible and likeable protagonist who faces a range of challenges in the story. She has to deal with her argument and subsequent falling out with her best friend Sidney. When Sidney befriends Morgan, Iris is forced to examine her own feelings towards the girl and questions whether her behaviour is fair. Iris really likes Elijah but is shy and unsure about how to express these feelings. When Iris changes her appearance she learns the very valuable lesson that it is what is on the inside that really counts.

Che's bullying of Sidney and Elijah's anger at her inaction teaches Iris that it is always important to have your friend's back. The character of Sidney is interesting because although the issue of his sexuality is never discussed directly in the book, his flamboyant personality and penchant for fashion suggest that he is gay. This difference is the reason why he is bullied by Che. The prejudice displayed

by Che is contrasted by Elijah's easy acceptance. Elijah is very tolerant of Sidney because he has a brother who is very like Sidney.

During the course of the story Iris learns that it is important to know people before you judge them. Morgan seems to have it all but in actual fact she is lonely because her family is never at home. Che is a bully but when Iris sees how his own father treats him she wonders if his behaviour is a bit more understandable. Iris also has to deal with a change in her own family. After years of having her mother to herself Iris's mother starts dating again. Iris learns through her challenges that there is often more to people than meets the eye and that she has many important people in her life who are there to help and support her.

Themes include bullying, understanding and accepting diversity, peer pressure, relationships, friendship and the fact that winning isn't everything.

Sharing the Novel

The novel has been divided up as follows: Chapter 1 (pp. 7–16), Chapters 2–8 (pp. 17–98) and Chapters 9–17 (pp. 99–186).

During the shared sessions encourage students to ask questions to clarify their understanding of words and ideas presented in the novel. Have them make predictions and inferences. Wherever possible have students relate Iris's problems and challenges to their own lives and experiences. Have them analyse the characters and their motivations. Students should pay particular attention to the main character Iris and explore how she develops and changes as the story progresses. Encourage students to identify main themes in the story and examine how these are developed by the author.

Introducing the Novel

Have students study the front cover of the novel and read the blurb.

- What important award did this novel win?
- Examine the front cover of the novel. What kind of novel do you think this is? What do you expect from novels like this? Who do you think the target audience of the novel is?
- What clues does the cover illustration give you about what this book might be about?
- Who is the main character in the story? What is her dream?
- In what ways do you think the main characters life might get complicated?

Teacher reads Chapter 1 (pp. 7–16) aloud. Students follow along in their books.

Comprehension Chapter 1 (pp. 7–16)

- Why does Iris's mum get frustrated with her before school?

- What is Iris is preoccupied with?
- Who is Iris's best friend?
- Who is Elijah Solomona?
- Why does Iris think that her mother doesn't have time for a new job?
- Who gave Iris her note book? What does she write in it?
- What discovery upsets Iris's mum while she is waiting for the bus? Who does Iris blame for getting her into trouble?

Discussion

- What is the effect of the story being told in first person point of view?
- What do we learn about Iris's life in the first Chapter?
- What information do we learn about Iris's best friend Sidney? What is he interested in that might be considered a little unusual for a boy?
- What do you think will happen when Iris confronts Sidney about the makeup?

Students read Chapters 2–8 (pp. 17–98) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 2–8 (pp. 17–98)

- What does Sidney's entrance into the classroom suggest about his character?
- How does Sidney react when Iris tells him that she is in trouble with her mother? Why does his reaction annoy Iris?
- What does Che call Sidney that shocks Iris?
- Why is Iris annoyed when Sidney sits down next to her?
- Describe Morgan. Why doesn't Iris like her? Are Iris's feelings towards Morgan justified? Why/why not?
- Who hits Sidney in the head with the ball? Why is Sidney annoyed when Iris starts yelling at Che?
- What is Sidney's exciting news?
- What does Iris plan to do with her share of the prize money?
- How does Iris react when Sidney says he's "over the whole vampire thing"? What does he want to do for the talent show?

- Why does Iris suggest that they do their own performances? Who does she tell him he should be best friends with instead of her? How do you know that Iris regrets her words as soon as she has said them?
- Where does Iris go every Monday?
- What has Gran taken out to show Sidney? Why does her interest in helping Sidney annoy Iris?
- What is behind Iris's sudden interest in her appearance?
- Why is Iris's mum reluctant to let Gran help her out?
- What is Iris's favourite photo in Gran's house? Who is James?
- Who is Sidney sitting with when Iris arrives at school? Why do you think Sidney does this?
- What is Morgan doing for the talent contest?
- Why is Sidney really interested when Elijah mentions what his brother does at polytech?
- Who is going to be the special guest judge at the talent contest? Why is everyone so excited about this?
- How does Iris convince her mother to let her enter the talent contest?
- Describe Iris's shopping trip with Gran.
- Why doesn't Iris hand in her entry form to the contest while she is at the mall? Why does she begin to panic when she thinks about the contest? Who reassures her?
- Who does Iris see working at the Guitarium? Where is the purple ukulele that Iris has had her eye on?
- How does Iris's mum react when she meets Paddy?
- Describe the incident that Iris witnesses between Che and his dad. How does Che react when he sees Iris watching?
- How does Iris feel in her new clothes? Why do you think she feels like this?
- How does Morgan react when she sees what Iris is wearing? How does this make Iris feel? How does Elijah react to Iris's new look?
- What does Che do when he enters the classroom? Why do you think he does this? What does Iris say to Che that she immediately regrets? How does Sidney react to what Iris has said? How does Iris upset Morgan?

Discussion

- Have you ever been the victim of a bully? Why do you think some kids bully others? What is the best way to deal with a bully?

- Why does Che decide to victimise Sidney?
- To what extent does Che's home life explain his behaviour?
- How does Sidney deal with Che? What would you have done in his position?
- Describe Iris's relationship with Gran.
- In what ways do you think not having a father has affected Iris's upbringing?
- Imagine that you are an advice columnist. What advice would you give Iris about her current predicament?
- Predict what will happen next in the story.

Students read Chapters 9–16 (pp. 99–186) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 9–16 (pp. 99–186)

- What does Paddy say to Iris that she finds strange?
- What does Iris see Che take out of Sidney's sewing bag?
- How does Che use Sidney's cape to taunt him? Why do you think some of the other students in the class laugh at his antics? Why is Iris unsure about what to do to help her friend? Who jumps to Sidney's defence? What does Sidney say to Che? How does Che react to this comment? Who ends up pulling Che off Sidney? How do you know that Elijah is disappointed in Iris?
- What does Iris's name mean? Why did her mum call her that?
- Why is Iris surprised when Gran turns up at her house? Where does her mother go?
- How does Iris feel about her mother's date? Why do you think she feels like this?
- What news does Mrs Garrett give the class?
- How does Iris let Sidney know that she wants to talk to him? What does Sidney say to Iris that lets her know he forgives her? How does Sidney make Iris feel better?
- Why does Sidney believe that it is important that he learns to stand up for himself?
- What suddenly occurs to Iris and Sidney while they are discussing their respective ideas for the talent contest? What idea do they eventually settle on?
- How do Iris and Sidney prepare for the contest?

- Why can't Gran pick up Iris and Sidney and take them to the contest? How do they decide to get there? Why do Iris and Sidney feel conspicuous while they wait for the bus? What goes wrong with their plan? Who comes to their rescue?
- Who is performing when Iris and Sidney arrive at the contest? Who do they see in the crowd?
- What does Paddy lend Iris that allows her to perform?
- Who turns up to watch Iris and Sidney's performance? What does he say to Iris before she goes on stage?
- How does Iris feel after her performance?
- How does Iris react when Morgan compliments her on her performance? Why is her reaction different to normal?
- Who wins the contest? Why isn't Iris upset about this?
- What realisation does Iris come to when she looks around her group of supporters after the contest?
- Who offers Iris a job?
- Who does Elijah invite to join the group while they are celebrating? What does Iris notice about him? How does Sidney react when he meets him? What do the boys have in common?
- What does Iris realise about Elijah when she meets his brother?
- What gifts does Iris buy for everyone? What does she get for herself?

Discussion

- What kind of "statement" do you think Iris makes when she fails to stick up for Sidney?
- What does Iris miss the most about Sidney? What qualities do you think a good friend has?
- What important lessons do you think Sidney's experiences have taught her?
- What does the fact that Iris buys the people she cares about presents rather than buying herself the purple ukulele suggest about her priorities? How have these changed since the start of the story?

Activities

Plot – Choose 10 important events that occur in the story. Draw a flow diagram that lists the events in the order that they occur.

Character – Draw a picture of Iris on a large piece of paper. On one side of the paper list all of her positive characteristics and qualities. On the other side list her negative characteristics. Include quotes and evidence from the story to back up your ideas.

Theme – Choose an important idea or theme developed in the novel. Design a collage that uses images, words and symbols to portray this theme.

Issues – Did anything in the story make you change your mind about something? If you did, what was it in the story that caused it and why?

Play – Choose an exciting event that occurs in the story and write a script for it. Include a list of characters and stage directions. Practise your play and present it to the class.

Letter – Write a letter to the author explaining why you enjoyed reading her book and what it taught you.

Static Image – Design a poster advertising Iris’s Ukulele that is suitable for displaying in your school library. Combine verbal and visual features to convey your ideas.

Poster – Create an anti-bullying poster that could be displayed in your classroom.

Monologue – Create a monologue for Iris in an important part of the novel. What is she thinking and feeling in that moment? Why?

Writing – Rewrite a Chapter from the book from Sidney’s point of view.

Notes written by Vicki Ladd