

Snakes and Ladders

Author: Mary-Anne Scott

Synopsis

Finn Fletcher's life is complicated. His druggie father is on trial for manslaughter after a girl is killed with his van. He is fighting with his girlfriend Alison and the small-town rumour mill is working overtime. Eager to escape, Finn takes up his grandmother Valerie's suggestion of moving to Auckland to attend boarding school.

Finn finds life at boarding school difficult. He has trouble fitting in with the wealthy students and struggles to keep his own family background a secret. There are up-sides, however. He makes friends with Andy and Hobbsie. He begins dating Mia, one of the most popular girls in school. He begins to enjoy his new life. That is, until Eddie, who knows about Finn's family, begins to blackmail Finn. If Finn doesn't do exactly what Eddie wants, Eddie will spill the beans about his father.

Then a tragic event occurs that changes Finn's life forever. His friend Hobbsie drowns at an illicit after-ball party. Finn feels deep grief and guilt. This event becomes the turning point in his life and gives him the strength to confess to something that has been plaguing his conscience for months.

Text Type

Snakes and Ladders is a gritty and realistic novel based on the life of a New Zealand student called Finn Fletcher. Finn comes from what could be considered a dysfunctional family. His dad is an old-school musician who does drugs and is more of a friend to Finn than a father. His mother, Anne, is a struggling single mother who has trouble relating to her son and providing him with the boundaries that young teenage boys need.

Finn has a number of issues to deal with including relationships with girls, fitting into his new school and feeling ashamed of his family and his father's impending sentencing. His life revolves around his sport, music and friends. Finn feels like the adults in his life just don't understand him.

Finn's experiences with trying to fit in with people, drinking, partying and trying to make sense of his life will be easy to relate to for teenagers – especially boys.

Throughout the story the reader is aware that Finn might be hiding something that is tormenting him. It is not until his friend Hobbsie dies that Finn comes to a realisation about what is important – honesty and accepting responsibility for your own actions. Dealing with the guilt and grief that surrounds Hobbsie's tragic death gives Finn the courage that he needs to face up to his past.

Set in New Zealand, written in easy-to-understand colloquial language and containing topical issues, *Snakes and Ladders* is a fast-paced novel with broad appeal. The novel deals with issues such as relationships, family, fitting in, keeping secrets, friends, bullying and taking responsibility for your own actions.

Sharing the Novel

The novel has been divided up as follows: Chapter 1 (pp. 5–17), Chapters 2–6 (pp. 18–100), Chapters 7–13 (pp. 101–202) and Chapters 14–18 (pp. 203–286).

During the shared sessions, encourage students to make predictions and inferences about what they have read. Encourage them to clarify words and ideas within the text. Wherever appropriate, have students relate their own experiences to Finn's. Have them examine how Finn's character develops and changes throughout the course of the novel. Encourage students to study the motivations behind Finn's actions, his relationships with others and what lessons his experiences teach him. Identify major conflicts that occur in the story and how themes are developed by the author.

Introducing the Novel

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

- How you ever played the game Snakes and Ladders? How might this game be a metaphor for life?
- Based on the cover photograph, what do you predict this novel might be about?
- Who is the main character in the story? Why is his father in trouble?
- Why does Finn decide to move away from the small town where he lives?
- How you ever moved to a new place and had to begin afresh? What aspects of starting again were the most difficult and why?
- What is blackmail? Have you ever been the victim of blackmail? What do you believe is the best way to deal with blackmail?
- What significant event do you think might happen at the after-ball party?

Teacher reads Chapter 1 (pp. 5–17) aloud. Students follow along in their books.

Comprehension Chapter 1 (pp. 5–17)

- Why has Finn's grandmother come to visit?
- Why does Finn's mum want him to change schools? How did Finn's grandmother convince the school near where she lives to take Finn?
- Who is Alison? How is she different to other teenagers that Finn knows?
- Describe Finn's father. What does he do for work? How do we know that he has a problem with drugs? What clues are included in the text that suggests Finn's father often lets him down?

- Describe Alison's house. Why does Finn think that his girlfriend is tough? Why doesn't Finn like Alison's father?
- How does Alison react when Finn tells her that his mother and grandmother want him to go to boarding school? What does her reaction suggest about her character?
- Why is Alison so dedicated to working and earning money?
- Why doesn't Finn want Alison hanging around with Ramesh?

Discussion

- How do you know that Finn isn't old enough to buy or drink alcohol? What are some of the issues associated with underage drinking?
- Why might it be difficult for teenagers living in small towns?
- What kind of relationship does Finn have with his mother? His father?
- Why don't Alison and Anne like Finn's friends? What kinds of influence do you think these friends have over Finn?
- Predict what will happen in the story next.

Students read Chapters 2–6 (pp. 18–100) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 2–6 (pp. 18–100)

- How does Finn feel when he wakes up after his night out? What does he remember doing that makes him feel like a loser?
- Why does Finn feel like his whole family is ganging up on him?
- What shocking news does Finn discover when he arrives at his father's house?
- How does Duggie react to the suggestion that he is responsible for a hit and run? Why can't he remember the events of the previous evening? In what ways does Finn take charge of the situation?
- What does Finn take out of the back of his father's van before it is taken away? Why does he feel so strongly about doing this?
- What does Finn overhear the two policemen talking about? How does Finn react to the policeman's plan?
- Why doesn't Finn get charged with assault?
- What does Alison ask Finn that annoys and upsets him? Why does Alison think that Finn should take up his grandmother's offer?

- What shocking news does Anne give Finn when he arrives home?
- What are Duggie's bail conditions? Why can't he work?
- Why doesn't Finn like the way he is behaving in the weeks leading up to moving to Auckland? Why do you think he is behaving so badly?
- Where has Mrs P arranged for Finn to stay the night before he starts school? How does Finn feel about this suggestion?
- What changes in Finn has Alison noticed since the night of the accident? What does she put these changes down to?
- What information does Eddie give Finn about his new school? Why doesn't Finn like Eddie? How does Eddie react when Finn turns down his offer of help to settle into Henley?
- What is Finn's first impression of his new school? Which house has Finn been assigned to?
- What does Eddie do that shows Finn that he is out to get him and any new friends that he makes? What advice does Eddie give Finn about the boys he sat with at lunch?
- What sport does Finn sign up for? Who else is on the team?
- Who does Andy introduce Finn to at band practice? What is special about his instrument?
- Why is Hobbsie determined to be in the band despite not being able to play an instrument?
- Why does Finn exaggerate his clarinet playing abilities?
- How does Finn ensure that he will see Mia again?
- Why does Finn feel uncomfortable when Hobbsie and Andy start making jokes about his background?
- What does Eddie want Finn to do for him in exchange for keeping his mouth shut about Finn's background?
- What does Finn put in Eddie's assignment that gets him into trouble? Why do you think Finn decides to take Eddie on?
- How does Finn impress Mia at the sevens game? What does Mia invite him to? What does Finn find out about Mia's family from Dave? What does Finn tell Dave his own father does?

Discussion

- How does the alcohol that Finn drank influence his behaviour? How does alcohol affect people's ability to drive?
- What do you think Finn and his father communicate to each other when their eyes lock and they say "more to each other than they'd ever said in Finn's lifetime"?
- Who do you think is responsible for the hit and run? If Duggie didn't do it, why would he cover for someone else?

- Is Finn's assault on the policeman justified? Why/why not?
- Describe Alison. Why do you think she is so mature? What is her relationship with Finn like? How might she be a positive influence on Finn?
- Describe Eddie. What do you think his problem with Finn is?
- Predict what will happen next in the story.

Students read Chapters 7–13 (pp. 101–202) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 7–13 (pp. 101–202)

- What news is contained in Duggie's letter?
- What is Mia's house like? What other clues are there in the story to suggest that her family is wealthy?
- Why does Finn get the impression that Mrs Lo-Giacco doesn't approve of him?
- What happens to Finn in the toilets? Why do you think he doesn't tell Mia about this? Who do the perpetrators turn out to be?
- What does Mia's dad invite Finn to do before he goes home?
- Why is Finn so embarrassed when Mrs P's package arrives? Who does Finn find in his room when he goes back to eat the cookies? What does Finn do to him? Is this action justified? Why/why not?
- What advice does Hobbsie give Finn about dealing with the Eddie situation?
- Why does Hobbsie think that Eddie might be picking on Finn?
- What does Valerie tell Finn about Eddie's injuries? Why doesn't Finn get into trouble over the incident?
- How is Valerie's house different to Anne's? What advice does Valerie give Finn about Duggie and the accident? Do you agree with her? Why/why not?
- Describe Finn's day out on the Trelinoe. What explanation does Mia give him for why her mother doesn't like him?
- What does Mia invite Finn to? What problem does this create for Finn? What offer does Hobbsie make?
- Why does Andy think that Finn and Eddie need to learn to get on? How does Finn react when Eddie tells the others about his father? Who sticks up for Finn?
- Why is Mia annoyed with Finn when she rings him?

- Why does Finn get into trouble at school again? What advice does the headmaster give Finn?
- Describe Finn's reunion with his mother.
- How does Finn describe talking to Alison? Why does Finn find it so difficult lying to Alison about Mia? How does Alison react when Finn says that he has been seeing Mia? What is surprising about this reaction?
- Why does Finn get angry at his mother? Why do you think Finn's mother agrees to try to get him the money even after he nearly makes her cry? Why doesn't Finn want to listen to his mother's advice?
- Why is Finn so surprised when he goes to his father's house?
- When does Finn decide to return to Auckland? Why does he agree to go back?
- How does Mia react when she sees Finn's hotel room?
- What does Finn find Hobbsie doing in the storage room?
- Why is Mia so determined to get hold of Finn on his cell phone?
- What does Eddie threaten to do if Finn doesn't let him take Trina to the ball?
- Why does Finn panic when his grandfather says that he and Anne are coming to Auckland?
- Why do you think a "cool wind" has blown through the group of friends?
- What does Hobbsie talk about in his impromptu speech that resonates with Finn? Do you think Hobbsie's speech topic is merely a coincidence? Why/why not? What shocking secret does Hobbsie disclose during his speech? Why do you think that Finn doesn't take this opportunity to reveal his own secret?
- Who does Mia find to go to the prom with Hobbsie?

Discussion

- What positive changes does Duggie make while he is awaiting bail? Why is this ironic?
- In what ways is Finn different to the people that he meets at Henley? Why is Finn reluctant to let his new friends know about his family and background? Do you think they would accept him for who he really is? Why/why not?
- Why does Finn feel compelled to tell so many lies? What would you do in his position? What might the consequence of all these lies be? Why is honesty often the best policy?
- What does Finn mean when he says that telling his friends about his father would be like lifting a lid and letting out a monster that might never be able to contain?
- What lessons do you think Duggie has learned from his ordeal?
- In what ways is Mia different to Alison?

- What do you think Eddie is referring to when he says to Finn that no one ever looks out for “the likes of us?”
- Describe Hobbsie. How is he different to his friends? What qualities and characteristics does he have? How do you know that he is comfortable in his own skin and has confidence?
- Predict what will happen next in the story.

Students read Chapters 14–18 (pp. 203–286) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 14–18 (pp. 203–286)

- Why doesn't Finn want to wear all of the accessories that go with his suit? How do you think Mia will react to this show of independence?
- How does Finn react when his mother turns up to see him in his suit? Why do you think he reacts like this? How do you think Anne feels when her son lies to his friends about who she is?
- Why is Mia annoyed with Finn when he arrives at her house? What advice does Andy give Finn about his behaviour? How do Andy and Hobbsie show Finn support?
- How does Finn know that he isn't the only one that Eddie is blackmailing?
- What message does Miss Grieves deliver about the after-ball party? Where are Finn and his friends planning on going after they return to the motel?
- How does Finn placate Mia at the prom?
- Why do you think Finn finally confesses to his friends in the taxi on the way to the party? How do his friends react? How does Finn feel after he tells the truth?
- Where do Mia and Finn sneak off to at the party? Who do they discover there? What does Eddie tell Mia?
- Why can't Finn leave the party? Why does he begin to feel sorry for Shanti? What does Hobbsie come out of the sun house dressed in? How does Hobbsie fall in the pool? What kind of reaction is there to his crazy antics?
- Why does Shanti want to call the police?
- Who jumps into the pool and commands the attention of the crowd? What shocking discovery do they make when they lift up the white towel?
- Who drags Hobbsie out of the pool? Why is it significant that Eddie helps? Describe Finn's actions as he tries to save his friend. How does Andy respond to the tragedy? Who comes and picks Finn up from the hospital? Where is he taken?

- Who is sitting at Finn's bed side when he wakes up? What is the first thing that Finn says to her? Why do you think Finn is having trouble speaking?
- In what ways do Anne and Neville support Finn? Why is Finn relieved that Anne insists on coming with him to Shanti's?
- What range of emotions does Finn have to deal with after Hobbsie's sudden death?
- What decision does Finn come to while he is talking to Andy at the police station?
- Why do you think that Andy wants to go home with Finn?
- How does Finn feel about returning to school?
- Describe what happens when Finn goes to Hobbsie's house. Why do you think Hobbsie's dad wanted to talk to them about all the details of what happened?
- Why do you think Finn finishes with Mia immediately after the tragedy?
- Why do you think Finn and Andy allow Eddie to run with them?
- What does Mia give Finn?
- What has the most impact on Finn at Hobbsie's funeral?
- What decision does Finn reach after listening to Hobbsie's dad speak?
- Why is Preston reluctant for Finn to visit his father? Why does he want Finn to talk to his own father first?
- What confession does Finn make? How do the five people in the room react to this confession? How does Finn feel after he tells his father the truth?
- How does Alison react when she learns the truth? Why is she proud of Finn? How do you think Mia would have reacted in her position?
- What evidence is there to suggest that Finn's experience has changed him into a man?

Discussion

- Identify the climax of the story. Why is this event important? How does this event affect Finn?
- What are the main themes in the novel? How are they developed by the author?
- How does Finn's character develop and change as the story progresses? What lessons do you think he learns from his experiences?
- How do you think Finn's relationship with his parents will change after this tragedy?

Activities

Issue – Identify an important issue that is raised in this story. Explain the issue and give your opinion about it.

News Report – Write a news report about the events that unfold at Shanti’s after-ball party.

Plot – Design a flow diagram that identifies at least 15 important events in the story.

Setting – Write a paragraph that describes the various settings of the story. Discuss time, place and social climate.

Character – Write a character description for Finn. Include his age, likes, dislikes and personality traits. Use quotes and examples from the story to back up your idea.

Character – Write a paragraph that explains how Finn changes throughout the course of the novel and why these changes occur.

Character – Identify an important decision made by a character in the novel. Explain how the story would have been different if the character had made a different decision.

Static Image – Design a static image that reveals a theme from the story. Use any medium you like (collage, paint, digital etc.). Include a quote from the story that helps show the theme and remember to combine verbal and visual features to illustrate your idea.

Review – Write a book review for *Snakes and Ladders*. Include a brief plot summary. Explain the setting and the themes of the story. Include information about the main characters and explain whether you believe the characters are credible. Remember to include your personal opinion about the novel.

Writing – Write a poem that expresses Finn’s thoughts and feelings about the death of Hobbsie.

Writing – Write an epilogue for the story a year after the original events took place.

Research – Conduct a research assignment on the effects of underage drinking. Formulate 4 open-ended focussing questions and brainstorm possible sources of information. Record your research process in a log. Present your information on a poster, as a report, or as an oral presentation.

Advertisement – Design a poster for the library advertising *Snakes and Ladders*. Your poster should include a brief plot summary of the story and combine verbal and visual features to convey ideas. Remember that the purpose of your poster is to encourage people to read the book.

Notes written by Vicki Ladd