

A River I Must Be

AUTHOR

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RECOMMENDED FOR: Lower Secondary



THEMES

- **Inclusion/exclusion:** There is real irony at play here in that the private school which calls itself 'exclusive' in the sense that it caters to the elite, is quite literally the opposite of inclusive relating to the support and care for diverse students' needs. The novel also reflects the importance of 'inclusion' being active and ongoing, not just a box to be ticked.
- **Bullying:** *A River I Must Be* explores the way that bullies and bullying can come in many forms; while a classmate or another child is a familiar bully in literature, adults can also be bullies. For Bec this is particularly devastating as her primary bully is her teacher, and her bullying means that Bec's struggle with change and academic life becomes more difficult than it needs to be.
- **Neurodiversity:** While Bec is open about her autism with the reader (and many characters), it becomes apparent across the course of the novel that other characters are/may be neuro-diverse. While these characters have different ways of experiencing neuro-diversity, they are all united by feeling excluded in some or many aspects of their lives.

STUDY NOTES

- The title typography and cover art all indicate that the character is likening herself to a river. Introduce or revise the literary concept of an extended metaphor.
 - Brainstorm ways in which a person could connect to or be like a river: e.g. 'going with the flow,' turbulence, calm surface.
 - Have readers consider to what geographical or natural feature they would relate best; e.g. are they a rock or mountain, a tree or waterlily, an eagle or a wren?
- Bec says she feels completely at home at the gym, that it is "somewhere I can be fully myself" (p 17). What do readers think she means when she says this?
 - Why do students think Bec can't "be herself" everywhere?
 - Do students have places, events or people with whom they are able to be fully themselves?
 - What makes these places, events or people that enable students to feel this way?
- What are the most striking differences between the way Bec feels at gymnastics and the way things are at the new school?
 - Identify key words and phrases that inform the reader's understanding of Bec as neurodiverse; her difficulties with personal interactions and friendships and the various struggles, both mental and physical, she is having at school.
 - How does the author use literary devices to share how challenging Bec is finding her new school? Provide

examples.

- Bullying in schools is often a reality but most novels feature students being bullies. This one presents a teacher who is a bully. Mrs Rivers is deliberately cruel and torments Bec. Bec's friends use the term 'gaslighting.'
 - What does gaslighting mean?
 - Do some research including the origin of the term and create definitions.
 - How does this form of bullying express itself in *A River I Must Be*?
 - What effect does Mrs Rivers' gaslighting have on Bec?
- *A River I Must Be* is a verse novel. Why do students think Kate Foster has chosen to tell this story in this form, rather than the more typical novel format?
 - How does telling a story through verse differ from telling a story through prose?
 - Because this is a verse novel, there is a visual element to the novel that would not be present in a prose novel. What visual techniques have been used in *A River I Must Be*?
 - Ask students to select one poem where visual techniques have been used to help communicate with the reader and analyse how the visual and literary techniques work together.
- While we all want to belong somewhere, sometimes "fitting in" requires us to change ourselves. Sometimes these changes can help us grow - learning new skills, getting better at listening - but sometimes they can require us to change in ways that are unhealthy or challenge important parts of our identity - giving up passions, changing how we dress.
 - What are some examples of positive ways to change for a new group?
 - What are some examples of changes that some people might be okay with, but may make others uncomfortable, or may even be/become unhealthy?
 - While some changes might be obviously negative because they are unhealthy - modifying your diet or breaking the law - some changes are not so clear cut. What are some ways we can 'sense check' our own level of comfort with changes a group or person might want us to make to ourselves?