

CONTENTS

Book Summary.....	1
Themes.....	1
About the Author.....	3
Reasons For Studying This Book.....	4
Key Curriculum Areas & Learning Outcomes.....	4
Discussion Questions.....	5
Activities.....	8

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**Kate Gordon is available for author talks and workshops.
Contact Wombat Books for more information.**

Spirals & Stars Teachers' Notes can be used in schools (independent learning, small groups, and whole classes); at home with caregivers; and as part of mental health support programs facilitated by counsellors, psychologists, children's charities, etc.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kate Gordon grew up in a small town by the sea in Tasmania. She is the author of six novels for teenagers, as well as the picture books, *Bird on a Wire* and *Amira's Magpie*, and the junior fiction series, *Juno Jones*. She now writes middle grade fiction.

The Heartsong of Wonder Quinn was published by UQP, in 2020. *Aster's Good, Right Things* was published by Riveted Press in 2020. *The Ballad of Melodie Rose* was published in 2021.

Kate has been long-listed in the 2019 CBCA Awards and shortlisted and longlisted in the 2021 awards. She received the 2016 IBBY Ena Noel Award. In 2018, Kate was shortlisted in the Dorothy Hewett Awards for an Unpublished Manuscript, and was commended in the 2018 Vogel's Awards. In 2021, *Aster's Good, Right Things* was shortlisted in the Speech Pathology Book of the Year Awards and won the CBCA Book of the Year for Younger Readers.

Kate's books have been published internationally. *Girl Running*, *Boy Falling* and *Aster's Good, Right Things* have both been adapted for the stage.

When not writing, Kate reads, listens to Josh Ritter, has grand adventures with her daughters, and is (finally) learning to drive a car.

AUTHOR NOTES

I grew up in a small town in coastal Tasmania, in the eighties and nineties. I've long wanted to write a book about my experiences growing up, my friendships and finding my people. This book is about honouring my birthplace and the people I love who lived there or live there still. Much of what is in the book actually happened. Some of the people are real. I really did have a best friend, called Julia, who I met in grade six, when she was talking to her feet. She really did introduce me to "nerd culture", sci fi and fantasy, and I never looked back. Prior to meeting Julia, I never felt like I fit anywhere. I did have a best friend, who lived in a caravan park, who one day abandoned me to be part of the "cool gang". I felt lonely, isolated and weird, until I met Julia. She changed my life and is my best friend to this day. I wanted to talk to other kids who might be struggling to fit in and find their people, and give them hope that one day they would find somewhere to belong. I also wanted to explore concepts of growing up, changing bodies, the desire to break out and be your own person. In all my writing, I want kids to know they're not alone. I hope this book contributes to young people feeling like they're not so odd or out of place after all. Finally, it is my fervent hope that this book brings back both *Enya* and *Crowded House*, into the zeitgeist of Gen Alpha. You never know!

[You can read more from Kate Gordon in an interview on the Wombat Rhiza Blog!](#)

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REASONS FOR STUDYING THIS BOOK

Spirals and Stars offers a compelling exploration of growing up, friendship, and identity through the lens of rural Tasmanian life in the 1990s. The novel addresses the challenges of changing friendships, the pressures of social hierarchies, and the journey of self-discovery, all while gently introducing themes of diversity. Set against a nostalgic backdrop, it provides a rich context for discussing universal themes like self-acceptance and finding one's place in the world. Beth's struggle with past trauma and her evolving relationships, alongside a diverse cast of characters, make it a valuable text for exploring personal and social dynamics in a relatable and engaging way.

KEY CURRICULUM AREAS & LEARNING OUTCOMES

CURRICULUM V9

YEAR 5

English, HASS, Visual Art, Music

AC9E5LE03	AC9E5LY05	AC9E5LE03	AC9E5LY01
AC9HS5S01			
AC9AVA6D01	AC9AVA6C01		
AC9AMU6E01			

YEAR 6

English, HASS, Visual Art, Music

AC9E6LY05	AC9E6LA02	AC9E6LY01	
AC9HS6S01			
AC9AVA6D01	AC9AVA6C01		
AC9AMU6E01			

YEAR 7

English, Civics and Citizenship, History

AC9E7LE01	AC9E7LE02	AC9E7LE03	AC9E7LE05
AC9E7LE06	AC9E7LA03		
AC9HC7K05	AC9HC7S01	AC9HC7S03	
AC9HH7S01	AC9HH7S07		

YEAR 8

English, Civics and Citizenship, History

AC9E8LA02	AC9E8LE01	AC9E8LE02	AC9E8LE03
AC9E8LE05	AC9E8LY05		
AC9HC8K05	AC9HC8S03	AC9HC8S04	
AC9HH8K09			

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

GENERAL

- Find three ways that Beth was brave in the book.
- Can you find a justification for Ashlee's behaviour in the book?
- Did you find any aspects of the story particularly relatable or different from your own experiences? Why or why not?
- If the story were set in a different time or place, how might the plot and characters change? What elements of the story are crucial to its setting in Tasmania in the 1990s?
- What role do personal interests and hobbies play in shaping the characters' social identities and relationships? You can discuss elements at play like those brought up in Nerd Club, or music discussed in the book.
- How does the book balance the serious themes of bullying and social exclusion with lighter elements like Jools' Nerd Club and pop culture references?

FRIENDSHIP

- Find three ways that Beth's new friends showed true friendship.
- Write about a time in your life when you had to make tough decisions about friendship.
- How does the evolution of Beth and Ashlee's friendship reflect the complexities of growing up and changing social circles?
- What qualities make Jools a good friend to Beth, despite their different backgrounds and interests? How does their friendship develop over the course of the book?
- How does the author portray the process of making new friends and forging bonds?
- Beth is in a tough transition period, does this pose a challenge in the process of making friends? If so, how does Beth overcome this?

HIGH SCHOOL TRANSITION, BELONGING, SUBCULTURES

- What are Beth's fears about transitioning to high school, and how do these fears manifest in her actions and relationships?
- How is the transition from upper primary school to high school portrayed in the book? What are the main obstacles they face during this time?
- If you had to start a group at school, what would your group do?
- How does Jools' passion for science fiction and the formation of the Nerd Club illustrate the role of subcultures in creating a sense of identity and belonging?
- What strategies do the characters use to include others and create a sense of community?
- What does the narrative suggest about subcultures and personal interests in high school? How do they influence social dynamics at play and students' relationships with one another?

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- How does Ashlee's new friendships represent a shift in her 'social identity' in high school?
 - Do you think being a "nerd" looks the same in the 2020s as the 1990s? What has changed?

BULLYING, SOCIAL EXCLUSION

- How does Kristy and her friends' behaviour towards Beth reflect the dynamics of bullying? Can you identify specific actions or words that are particularly hurtful?
- What was the impact of the 'popular girls' and their behaviour on Beth? In your opinion did Ashlee joining their group make things better or worse?
- How does Beth's perception of Ashlee change throughout the story? What does this reveal about how bullying can affect friendships?
- In what ways does Jools experience or react to bullying at the new school? How does her response to being an outsider differ from Beth's?
- Why does Beth feel socially excluded in her new homeroom, and how does this impact her self-esteem and actions throughout the book?
- How does the author use Beth's and Ashlee's changing friendship to highlight themes of social exclusion? What does it suggest about how people change and grow apart?
- Discuss the role of the Nerd Club in the story. How does it provide a sense of belonging for its members, and how does it contrast with the exclusion Beth experiences in other parts of her life?

RELATIONSHIP BREAKDOWNS

- What role does the secret from Beth's past play in her relationships with others, including Ashlee and her mother? How does it contribute to the breakdowns in these relationships?
- How do the different characters in the story handle their own relationship breakdowns? Compare Beth's approach with Jools' and others.
- In what ways does the book suggest that friendships can be repaired after experiencing a breakdown? Are there specific actions or changes that help mend Beth's relationships?

FAMILY, GROWING UP, BREAKING RULES

- Was Beth right to stand up to her mum?
- Why do you think Beth's mum behaved the way she did?
- What is a rule in your family that other people might find "weird"?
- Do you think Beth's dad is a good dad? Why? Why not?
- What are some good and not so good things about growing up?
- In what ways do Beth's evolving relationships with her friends and family reflect her growing up?
- How do these changes impact her sense of identity and self-worth?
- How does the author use Beth's interactions with other characters, like Jools and Ashlee, to explore the

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theme of growing up? Are there particular scenes that emphasize this theme?

- How does the book depict the influence of family expectations and pressures on Beth's relationships and personal growth?
- Are there 'norms' or 'rules' presented in the book? How are they presented? And how does Beth, Jools, and Ashlee interact with these norms and rules?
- Are there any instances where breaking rules lead to a positive outcome? Are there any that lead to a negative outcome?
- How does the act of breaking rules play a role in Beth's problems and solutions throughout the story? Is this a part of her growing up or something separate altogether?

PERIOD AND PLACE (1990S, RURAL TASMANIA)

- Do you think life was easier in the 1990s? Why? Why not?
- In what ways does the book reflect the technological and social changes of the 1990s?
- How does the setting of Tasmania in the 1990s influence the characters' lives and experiences? Are there any particular details about the time period that stood out to you?
- How does the setting of rural Tasmania contribute to the plot? Are there any specific locations or elements unique to Tasmania or rural living that play a significant role?
- What songs from now do you think would make it into a book about the 2020s?

ACTIVITIES

CHARACTER DIARIES

Try to get into the headspace of the characters by choosing one to write diary entries for. It can be during any period of the book, however reflect not only on the character's feelings and thoughts but also the setting and era and how that might impact the character's actions. For example, the limitations and the freedoms of life without mobile phones and social media.

STORY SOUNDTRACK

Reflect on the music mentioned in *Spirals and Stars* and create a soundtrack for the novel. You don't have to be limited to the choices mentioned, but consider music from the period and why you might choose a particular track.

Alternatively, create a mixtape for one of the characters. You can create a cover as if you're going to hand it to them, and pick songs you think they might like from the period.

SOCIAL RESEARCH

Using some internet sleuthing see if you can find sources for the period, both for Tasmania and Australia, to tell you what life was like. It can be for adults or for teens, but you must use what you find to create one of the following:

- A trivia quiz
- A small skit
- A magazine article

And see if you can relate your findings back to the book, e.g. your magazine article being something that might interest Beth or Jools.

If you're unsure where to start for sources here are a few links:

- [Tasmanians in their 'poor, dumb' state were asked in 1999 to dream big about 2020](#)
- [Tasmania: The Video \(1990, 1995\)](#)
- [43 Things Australian Kids Of The '90s Know To Be True](#)
- ['90s fashion revival is here and these Aussie style icons have the answers](#)
- [Dolly magazine: looking back at 46 years of covers](#)
- [Girlfriend Retro Issue](#)

CREATE A MOODBOARD

Using images online create moodboards for each character to reflect their style, clothing, and interests. These can be paired with your story soundtracks, character mixtapes or character diaries.

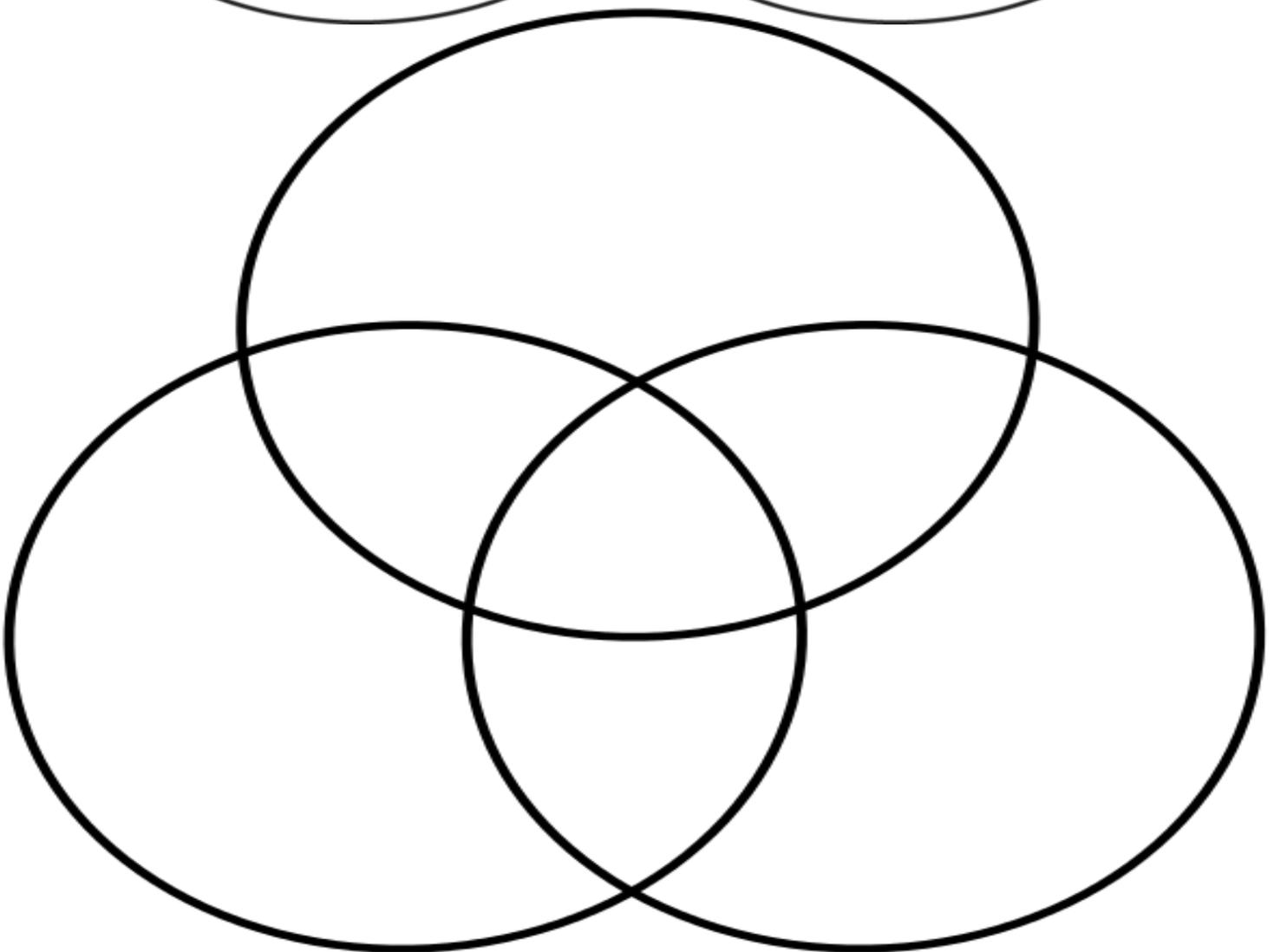
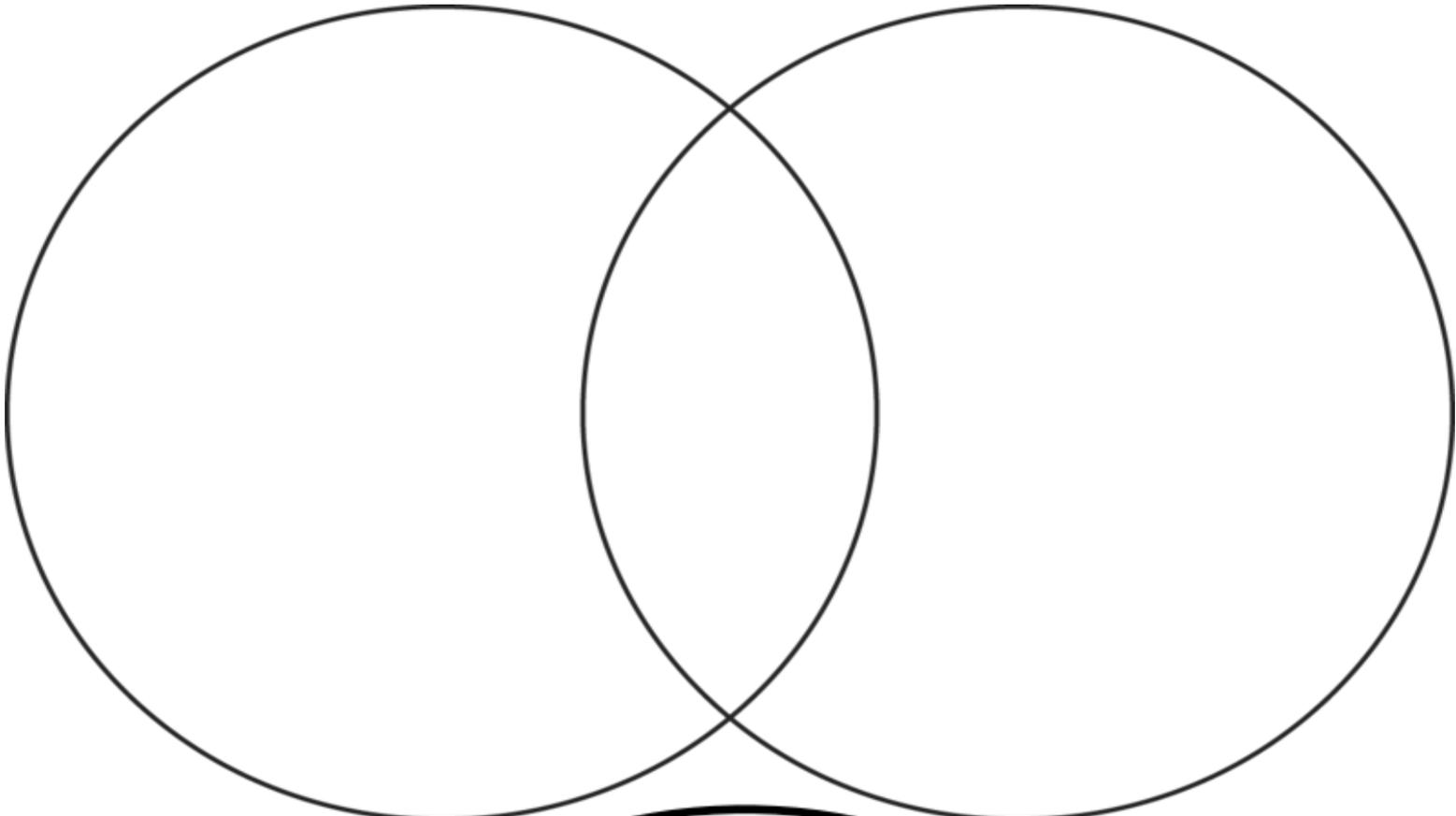
COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Compare life as shown in the *Spirals and Stars* novel to 90s life in popular TV shows and movies. Using a table you can demonstrate what elements are the same and what are different. Remember to be specific about which show or movie you are comparing to.

Reflect on why that might be.

VENN DIAGRAMS

Using the Venn Diagrams provided on the next page take characters from the book to see what they have in common and how they differ. Any combination will work, but consider crucial relationships like Beth and Jools and Beth and Ashlee.



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