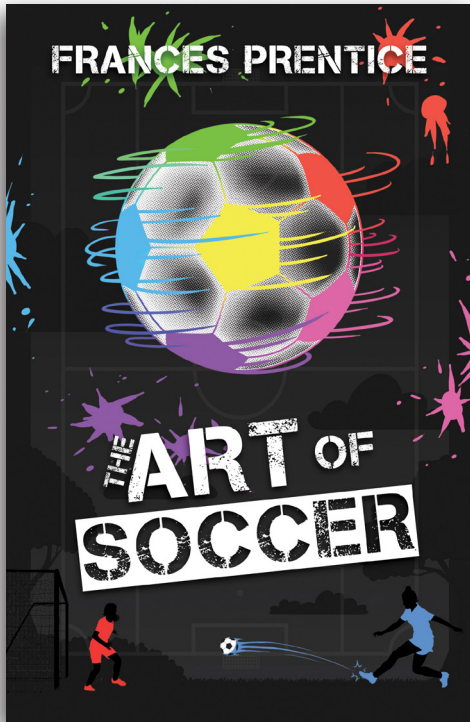

Teachers' Notes



THE ART OF SOCCER

Frances Prentice

ISBN: 9781761113451

Reading level: 14+

BOOK SUMMARY

Fifteen-year-old Skyla is a keen soccer player. Known as the 'playmaker', she dreams of being a professional and is on track for selection in the regional and state teams. But after she contracts COVID, her health is shattered. It's hard to even stand up, much less run on a soccer field. Soccer has always been her focus. Who is she without it?

THEMES

- Ambition & Sports ▪ Friendship & Family Relationships ▪ Chronic Illness ▪
- Resilience ▪ Coming-of-Age ▪ Self-image ▪ Art ▪ Self-expression ▪

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**Frances Prentice is available for author talks and workshops.
Contact Rhiza Edge for more information.**

The Art of Soccer 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



Frances Prentice lives on a rural property near a small country town in SE Queensland, with her grazier husband and their two youngest children.

Like *The Art of Soccer*, her previously published books *Always Your Sister* (middle-grade book, shortlisted for the Speech Pathology Australia Book of the Year awards) and *Holding Back* (another Rhiza Shorts novella) also share a rural setting.

Frances has had a varied career, including working as Speech Pathologist, teacher, Advisory Visiting Teacher, Learning Support Teacher, tutor, phonics instructor, homeschooling parent and Irlen diagnostician.

Frances has three adult children, all creatives, and two still at home. She has mentored two small groups of students, assisting them to write their own chapter books, self-publishing these under the pen name of Kip Aider. (*The Guinea Pig League: Captured!*, *The Guinea Pig League: Rescue!* and *Crystal Chronicles: Shattered!*). Frances has enjoyed witnessing how becoming published authors has given her students a greater confidence in their own written expression.

Frances' debut novel, *Always Your Sister*, released in March 2025 was shortlisted for the Speech Pathology Australia Book of the Year awards (8-10year old category). She has a teaching and speech pathology background and has done school visits for all year levels from Kindy to Year 12.

Frances may be contacted via her website: www.exploringliteracy.com.au or her email: frances@theprentices.net.

AUTHOR NOTES

In 2023, after contracting COVID and going through a number of stressful life events, I began experiencing similar symptoms to Skyla, consistent with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and Fibromyalgia. I have learnt to manage the symptoms, and researched the conditions. Others spoke to me who contracted this long-term illness in their teens and have lived with it all their lives. There are not many books which represent those who battle this condition. I wanted to highlight this condition so that others may gain a greater sense of what it can be like to have an 'invisible' illness – one where you can appear fine one day and 'crash' the next.

The soccer angle came not from personal experience (I am not sporty) but from talking to a family friend whose daughter was successful in the soccer arena, becoming known as the 'playmaker'.

High school is a tricky time for many teens, particularly as they navigate the waters of relationships for the first time. I wanted to show how there is not just one way to approach high school relationships, but it varies with people and circumstances. Some people start a permanent long-term relationship, others date for the experience, others prefer to wait. Perhaps in reading *The Art of Soccer*, students may be able to meet a character who reflects their own position.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

GENERAL

- How are friendships affected when one of the friends begins a romantic relationship?
- What actions strengthen friendships?
- What circumstances can build resilience?
- What impact might chronic illness have on a teenager's life?
- How can art help someone process emotions?

AMBITION & SOCCER

- Is it a good or bad thing to have a strong ambition?
- In the *Art of Soccer* how did Skyla's ambition affect her choices?
- How did other characters (like Lilli, Will, Dana, Meg) view her ambition?
- How did it affect Skyla when she thought she may not be able to achieve her ambition? How was this resolved?

FRIENDSHIP & FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

- In Chapter 5, Skyla says to Will, 'Why can't people wait until they have their lives sorted out before looking for a relationship?' Do you think people should wait until they have finished their studies or at least high school before having a relationship? Why or why not?
- When Lilli begins going out with Seth, how does Skyla feel about that? Does it change their friendship?
- What happens later to strengthen their friendship again?
- Do you think it is important to maintain your friendships when you enter a relationship? Why or why not?
- How do Skyla's friendships help her through her illness? What does she do to damage or strengthen her friendships at this time?

CHRONIC ILLNESS & RESILIENCE

- How does Skyla react to her chronic illness when she first hears her possible prognosis?
- How does Skyla treat her friends and her mum when she is dealing with the early stages of her illness? Is this understandable? Why or why not?
- How does Skyla change as a result of her illness? Does it only change her choices or does it also affect her character?
- In what ways does Skyla's illness help her to become a more resilient person? Give some examples of how she demonstrates resilience.
- There could be some discussion of COVID and the need for isolation during illness to prevent spread

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of disease etc.

- Skyla's mother suggests finding things to be grateful for after watching others overcome chronic fatigue, a suggestion Skyla angrily rejects. Later, however, Skyla does find genuine gratitude in art, coaching, and her friendship with Cat. Was her mother's advice right but poorly timed, or is urging gratitude during intense suffering always unhelpful? When is the right time to offer this perspective?

COMING-OF-AGE & SELF-IMAGE

- Skyla's identity was entirely soccer until illness forced her to discover art, coaching, and a close friendship with Cat. Did she have to lose her sport to find these other paths, or would she have discovered them anyway?
- What are the dangers of a single-focus identity, and how do you protect against them without losing your ambition?
- The book treats Skyla's loss of her soccer career as a form of grief, even though nobody has actually died. Do you think grief is the right word for losing an ability or a dream? Can you think of other situations - not involving death - where people experience real grief? What does the book suggest about how to move through that kind of loss?

ART AS SELF EXPRESSION

- How does Skyla use art to help her process what has happened to her?
- Investigate other artworks that express feelings about a personal situation the artist experienced.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

THE ENERGY BUDGET

Skyla's doctor tells her to 'pace herself' - do some activity everyday but not too much.

Give each student 10 tokens (coins, counters, paperclips). These represent their energy for one day. Display a list of daily activities, each with an energy cost:

- getting out of bed and getting dressed (1 token)
- showering (1 token)
- walking to school (2 tokens)
- one class (sitting, listening, taking notes) (1 token)
- eating a meal (1 token)
- a conversation with friends at lunch (1 token)
- PE or sport (3 tokens)
- homework (30 minutes) (1 token)
- cooking dinner (1 token)
- watching TV or scrolling phone (0 tokens, but doesn't replenish tokens either)

Students plan a whole day using only their 10 tokens. They quickly discover they cannot do everything. Then reduce the tokens to 5 - this is Skyla's daily budget at her worst.

Discussion: what did you have to cut? What surprised you about what costs energy? If you had to live on 5 tokens everyday for 6 months, what would you prioritise and what would you grieve losing? How does this change your understanding of Skyla's frustration when Mr Ramsay tells her to 'get back in shape'?

FRIENDSHIP VENN DIAGRAM

Three overlapping circles labelled Lilli, Will, and Meg. Students write specific examples from the text in each section: what each friend uniquely provides, what any two share, and what all three have in common.

A prompt below asks: 'Cat doesn't fit neatly into this diagram because her friendship with Skyla exists only in the art room. Draw a separate circle for Cat. What does she offer Skyla that none of the other three can? Why do you think Skyla and Cat keep their friendship separate from their other social groups?'

REDESIGN THE SOCCER BALL

Give each student a printed outline of a soccer ball (hexagonal pattern). Students redesign the ball so each hexagon represents one element of their identity - a skill, a relationship, a memory, a hope, a fear, a favourite thing. They can use colour, patterns, words, symbols or a mix.

Rules: at least two hexagons must represent things about yourself that other people don't usually see. At least one must represent something you lost or left behind. At least one must represent something new you discovered about yourself in the last year.

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Display the balls on the classroom wall. Students do a gallery walk and write one observation on a sticky note for three classmates' balls: 'something I didn't know about you' or 'something we have in common.'

INVISIBLE ILLNESS POSTER

Working in small groups, students research chronic fatigue conditions, ME/CFS, or Long COVID to design a youth-focused awareness poster.

Identify common misconceptions surrounding "invisible" health conditions (e.g., mistaking severe fatigue for laziness or assuming someone who looks fine on the outside is healthy).

Create messaging that promotes empathy, inclusion, and practical ways to support peers facing long-term health changes or energy limits.

GRIEF TO DISCOVERY VISUAL ART COLLAGE

Students create a dual-part visual collage (physical or digital) representing Skyla's identity transition throughout the novella.

The Loss: Incorporate textures, imagery, and short textual quotes from the book that evoke the feeling of losing an ability/dream (e.g., soccer field motifs, dark tones, fragmented words, heavy textures).

The Discovery: Layer in colors, patterns, and symbols representing new avenues of self-expression, coaching, art, and deeper connections (e.g., art room themes, warmer tones, symbols of resilience).

KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

CURRICULUM V9

YEAR 8

English, Health and PE

AC9E8LE01 - explain the ways that ideas and points of view may represent the values of individuals and groups in literary texts, drawn from historical, social and cultural contexts, by First Nations Australian, and wide-ranging Australian and world authors

AC9E8LE02 - share opinions about the language features, literary devices and text structures that contribute to the styles of literary texts

AC9E8LA03 - explain how texts are structured depending on their purpose and how language features vary, recognising that some texts are hybrids that combine different genres or elements of different genres

AC9E8LA01 - recognise how language shapes relationships and roles

AC9E8LE03 - explain how language and/or images in texts position readers to respond and form viewpoints

AC9E8LY03 - analyse and evaluate the ways that language features vary according to the purpose and audience of the text, and the ways that sources and quotations are used in a text

AC9E8LY05 - use comprehension strategies such as visualising, predicting, connecting, summarising, monitoring, questioning and inferring to interpret and evaluate ideas in texts

AC9E8LA02 - understand how layers of meaning can be created when evaluating by using literary devices such as simile and metaphor

AC9E8LE04 - identify intertextual references in literary texts and explain how the references enable new understanding of the aesthetic quality of the text

AC9E8LE05 - analyse how language features such as sentence patterns create tone, and literary devices such as imagery create meaning and effect

AC9E8LY04 - analyse how authors organise ideas to develop and shape meaning

AC9HP8P01 - analyse and reflect on the influence of values and beliefs on the development of identities

AC9HP8P02 - analyse the impact of changes and transitions, and devise strategies to support themselves and others through these changes

AC9HP8P03 - examine how roles, decision-making, and levels of power, coercion and control within relationships can be influenced by gender stereotypes

AC9HP8P04 - examine the roles of respect, empathy, power and coercion in developing respectful relationships

AC9HP8P05 - investigate strategies that influence how communities value diversity and propose actions

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they can take to promote inclusion in their communities

AC9HP8P06 - analyse factors that influence emotional responses and devise strategies to self-manage emotions

AC9HP8P07 - explain and apply skills and strategies to communicate assertively and respectfully when seeking, giving or denying consent

AC9HP8P08 - refine protective behaviours and evaluate community resources to seek help for themselves and others

AC9HP8P09 - investigate how media and influential people impact attitudes, beliefs, decisions and behaviours in relation to health, safety, relationships and wellbeing

YEAR 9

English, Health and PE

AC9E9LA01 - recognise how language empowers relationships and roles

AC9E9LA02 - understand how evaluation can be expressed directly and indirectly using devices such as allusion, evocative vocabulary and metaphor

AC9E9LE01 - analyse the representations of people and places in literary texts, drawn from historical, social and cultural contexts, by First Nations Australian, and wide-ranging Australian and world authors

AC9E9LY01 - analyse how representations of people, places, events and concepts reflect contexts

AC9E9LY02 - listen to spoken texts that have different purposes and audiences, analysing how language features position listeners to respond in particular ways, and use interacting skills to present and discuss opinions regarding these texts

AC9E9LY03 - analyse and evaluate how language features are used to represent a perspective of an issue, event, situation, individual or group

AC9HP10P01 - analyse factors that shape identities and evaluate how individuals influence the identities of others

AC9HP10P04 - evaluate the influence of respect, empathy, power and coercion on establishing and maintaining respectful relationships

AC9HP10P05 - propose strategies and actions individuals and groups can implement to challenge biases, stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination, and promote inclusion in their communities

AC9HP10P06 - evaluate emotional responses in different situations to refine strategies for managing emotions

AC9HP10P08 - plan, rehearse and evaluate strategies for managing situations where their own or others' health, safety or wellbeing may be at risk

AC9HP10M02 - create and refine movement strategies to achieve successful outcomes across a range of challenging movement situations

AC9HP10M03 - apply movement concepts in new or challenging movement situations and analyse the

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impact each concept has on movement outcomes

YEAR 9

English

AC9E10LA01 - understand how language can have inclusive and exclusive social effects, and can empower or disempower people

AC9E10LA02 - understand that language used to evaluate, implicitly or explicitly reveals an individual's values

AC9E10LA03 - analyse text structures and language features and evaluate their effectiveness in achieving their purpose

AC9E10LA04 - understand how paragraph structure can be varied to create cohesion, and paragraphs and images can be integrated for different purposes

AC9E10LE01 - analyse representations of individuals, groups and places and evaluate how they reflect their context in literary texts by First Nations Australian, and wide-ranging Australian and world authors

AC9E10LE02 - reflect on and extend others' interpretations of and responses to literature

AC9E10LE04 - evaluate the social, moral or ethical positions represented in literature

AC9E10LY03 - analyse and evaluate how language features are used to implicitly or explicitly represent values, beliefs and attitudes

AC9E10LY04 - analyse and evaluate how authors organise ideas in texts to achieve a purpose

AC9E10LY05 - integrate comprehension strategies such as visualising, predicting, connecting, summarising, monitoring, questioning and inferring to analyse and interpret complex and abstract ideas