

## **TEACHER'S NOTES FOR *THEODORK***

**Written by Jessica Green**

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**JESSICA GREEN** grew up in Sydney and one of her favourite subjects at school was composition. She loved reading, and although she didn't fit into the usual friendship groups, she found she could always retreat into the world of her imagination.

After she finished school, Jessica became a primary school teacher. She taught in the Hunter Valley for almost thirty years. She made up stories for her own children when they were small and it was while encouraging her students in their writing efforts that she began to write herself. She realised how much her students responded to her stories and used them as a medium for drawing her class into enthusiastic reading, writing, listening and discussion.

Her first two books, *Diary of a Would-Be Princess*, and *A Tyranny of Toads*, take place in a school setting. They have been published in Britain, the USA, New Zealand, Canada and Indonesia. Jessica has also written two books for younger readers, *Scratch Kitten Goes to Sea* and *Scratch Kitten on the Pirate's Shoulder*.

Jessica lives in Newcastle with her husband and numerous pets. Two of her children have grown up and left home, while the youngest is stretching her wings to fly off soon. Jessica has recently retired from teaching and now has lots of time to write.

### **SYNOPSIS**

When Theodore Daniels starts at East Cliff High, none of his old friends from primary school are there with him. He lives out of area and has had to go to a different school from them. His older sister Min is at the school, but she doesn't want to know him.

Day one is a disaster. Theo unwittingly insults one of the popular girls, knocks his teacher over and lands on top of her, gets the first detention in Year Seven and is dubbed 'Theodork' by his classmates. It is the first insulting nickname of many.

This dreadful day is a sign of things to come. As the year progresses, Theo tries all sorts of tactics to gain acceptance by his peers. He tries apologising for misunderstandings, but his apologies are misinterpreted. He hides in the toilets, but

teachers find him. He tries joining the nerds, but he can't stand Star Trek and doesn't want to learn Elvish. He tries being the class clown, but everyone hates him when no work gets done and they all get bad reports. He hides out in the protection of the Year Twelve girls who think he's cute. He even tries being nasty at the school dance, but realises he doesn't want to be as cruel to other kids as they have been to him. Whatever he does, the relief from merciless name-calling and humiliation is only ever brief.

Finally in an effort to get one of the popular girls, Courtney, on side in the hope that she will convince the others to accept him, he carries out a daring act of vandalism. But it's a trap. Courtney has no intention of spreading flattering words about him. She says she'll tell who marked all the toilet doors with the principal's stamp – unless Theo jumps off the highest diving platform at the pool on the school watersports fun day.

Theo feels he has no choice. He has to go through with the dare. Encouraged by kind words from Shane, a Year 10 boy who likes Min, Theo leaps from the top platform. He is thrilled to survive, and by the cheers from the whole school, until he realises they are cheering because he's lost his board shorts. Rescued by Shane and the teachers, Theo listens with dismay as the latest nickname is invented: Nudeburger.

It is all too much. Theo makes a run for it across the playground, crashing into the chain mesh fence, which collapses, and over the cliff the school is named for.

Lying in hospital with severe injuries, Theo contemplates his first year of high school. He decides against stepping under a bus to end all his troubles. He decides against one last over-the-top act to let everyone know how truly courageous he is. Instead he makes a decision to accept who he is. And luckily his parents agree to let him go to West Park High in Year Eight. Maybe Theo will be able to link up with his old primary friends, and maybe make some new ones. He isn't sure of his future, but he knows he can't give up.

### **WRITING THEODORK**

Jessica Green has a lot of experience with the difficulties kids face as they grow up, both as a kid herself, a teacher and as a parent. Her first two novels, *Diary of a Would-Be Princess* and *A Tyranny of Toads*, deal with school life and friendships at primary school. The main character of these books is a girl, though the issues are common to both girls

and boys. Theo, the protagonist of *Theodork*, grew out of Jessica thinking about how boys cope with friendship issues and bullying. These are challenging and important subjects for children, and for the adults who care for them.

The book opens with Theo lying in hospital with serious injuries. We, the reader, can't begin to imagine how he ended up there. He starts to write down everything that's happened to him in Year Seven at East Cliff High, and because Jessica has Theo tell his own story, nothing is hidden. We hear everything that happens to Theo, and what he thinks of everyone involved, including himself. This makes the story painfully honest.

The cruelty of children towards their peers and the range of tactics they use can sometimes be shocking. Through Theo's intelligent, sensitive eyes, we see many of them – name-calling, humiliation, threats of violence, ostracism – and we see his attempts to deal with them. On his first day in Year Seven, he makes a couple of wrong steps and becomes a target. From then on he is consumed by attempts to undo this damage and be accepted by the other students.

Throughout his story, Theo is very hard on himself, berating himself for not doing the right thing, whatever that might be. However, his story is not completely dark. At the heart of his voice is someone who believes he deserves to have a better time, who is worthy of having real friends. And some of the time Theo's tactics to gain acceptance seem to work. He also has a good sense of humour, making comments such as the only thing he regrets about being cast out of the nerd zone is that 'I had never learned to swear in Elvish.' Jessica comments that she thought including humour in the book was important because she, 'wanted to show that there are ways of coping with things. Knowing yourself, forgiving yourself and being able to find humour in dark things are good coping mechanisms.'

Theo is also honest where his parents are concerned. They irritate him, and sometimes only seem to make matters worse. Theo's mum tries very hard to be involved with high school, not seeming to understand that unlike primary school, kids don't really want their parents to hang around. Jessica notes that, 'As a parent I felt helpless to help my own children cope with these issues. All the advice in the world and parent-teacher interviews couldn't help. The problems would go underground and become more subtle. I experienced and observed this as a teacher, too.' In the end, she thinks that adult

intervention can make the situation worse, since seeking help is seen as weakness. ‘I think that teachers and parents need to undergo thorough training in the causes and issues of bullying, so they can detect the signals of both the sufferers and bullies, and have the awareness that can prompt them to intercept, intercede or deflect potential trouble, and also to be able to offer guidance and support to both sides, and address the underlying issues as well as the visible behaviour.’

Perhaps this book is all the more challenging because Theo’s ultimate fate, to fall off a cliff, is the result of unthinking actions by the kids who have taunted him. Their desperation to belong to their groups, ‘to put down before you get put down’ as Theo puts it, has made them blind to the effects they have on him, and on each other.

Ultimately, Theo walks away from East Cliff High. The book ends with the promise of a new beginning. However, Jessica doesn’t feel that walking away is always the only solution to severe bullying: ‘It is one way, but other ways might be successful for other personalities. The message is that if you try again and again, a solution eventually comes. Don’t give up at the first failure.’

The note of true hope at the end of the book comes not just from the promise of a new chance for Theo at a new school, but that he wants to find and accept himself. He has learned a lot about himself, most importantly, that to be happy, ‘I had to be what I really was’, and then ‘I had to work to prove to everyone else who and what I was’.

## **DISCUSSION POINTS**

1. As students read the book in sections, discuss the events of the story. What is Theo trying to do: be popular, or survive? What are the tactics he uses and how do they or don’t they work?
2. First, read the opening chapter of the book. Something pretty dreadful has clearly happened to Theo. Why do students think the author chose to open the story with the image of Theo in hospital? How does that image make students feel?
3. Read about Theo’s first day. Does he do much that is wrong? How does he ‘get off on the wrong foot?’ Why don’t the other kids give him a chance and try to get to know him? How can kids be welcoming to new kids?

4. Discuss Theo's exposition on friendship (pp52–54). How much do students think what he has to say is true? Perhaps they could write about what they think friendship is.
5. List all the names that Theo is called, in the order they appear in the book. Why do the names hurt so much? Is it the names themselves, or the fact that they single Theo out? Do they become worse as the year goes on?
6. The last name Theo is called, 'Nudeburger', is the last straw for him. Why is that? What does it prompt him to do?
7. How does Theo feel about himself at the beginning of the story? How have his feelings changed by the end?
8. We don't know what the bullies in the story really think. Have students write some questions they would like to ask the bullies about why they treated Theo the way they did.
9. Split students into pairs. Have one take on the role of one of the bullies from the story. The other student can interview the bully, asking them why they did what they did. Then students can swap roles. Discuss what kids learned about the bully's motives. Are they looking for acceptance as much as Theo is?
10. Theo says that 'One of the most vicious weapons in this war is to put down before you get put down.' Does school have to be like this? Discuss the old saying: 'You don't have to blow out someone else's candle to make your own candle burn brighter.' If people believed this, how might school change?
11. Have students think of some slogans to help others feel positive about themselves instead of feeling put down. Have students turn these slogans into posters and pin them up around the room.