

Beautiful Monster

Kate McCaffrey

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Synopsis

It only takes a few blood-stained seconds for Tessa's life to change forever. Her brother is gone and now she wants her old life back. She wants her mum and dad the way they were. If it wasn't for Ned, she'd be all alone. He's her greatest support and her staunchest ally, privy to her deepest secrets. Ned is like her other half, and he has the answer. If Tessa can just be perfect, life will get better. Perfect grades in school, perfect performance in sport, the perfect daughter for her parents ... perfect weight.

But as Tessa, encouraged by Ned, continues to eat less, her life begins to fall apart. When she collapses at the school dance, she has to face her problem.

Two years later, after a stay in hospital and continuing support from her family and friends, Tess has recovered. Ned's negative influence is no longer a part of her life. Until he shows up one night. Tess knows he's not real, and she knows she shouldn't let him control her again, but he convinces her to let him stay. When Ned leads her to the top of a bridge and she almost falls, Tess realises she needs to be free of him once and for all.

The novel ends with Ned introducing himself to a boy named Bobby, leaving us unsure about the future of this new victim.

About the Author

Kate grew up in Perth's northern suburbs. She always wanted to be a writer and dreamed of the day she'd see a novel with her name on it in a bookshop. After teaching English to kids who hated reading, she decided she would write books that those kids would want to read (or even if they didn't want to, would at least say 'it was s'alright'). She lives on eleven acres with her partner Jason, two daughters, two dogs, a cat, a rabbit and six chickens. She still teaches English and is constantly writing stories.

Study Notes

Reading outcome: Comprehension questions

After you have finished reading each part of the novel, explore your understanding by answering these questions in your Journal. Support your answers with references to the text, including direct quotes and page numbers.

Part 1:

1. We are introduced to Tessa in the first sentence of the novel as she gets on to the school bus. What information are we given about Tess in the first four pages? What impression of her character does this give you? Give evidence for your impression from the text.
2. What kinds of language does the author describe the car accident? What techniques has she used? What effect do the techniques have on the reader?
3. Describe the effect that Brodie's death has on his mother. What clues does the author give us that the effect is beyond that of ordinary grief?
4. How does Tess react to the death? What does this show about her character?
5. What tense is the novel written in? Why do you think the author chose to write in this tense?
6. From whose perspective do you, as the reader, experience the action of the novel? Is this perspective in the first, second or third person? How does this affect the way we interact with the other characters in the novel?

Part 2:

1. Where is the novel set? Can you identify any of the locations where the action takes place?
2. For what reasons does Tess take up rowing? Support your answer with reference to the text.
3. Who is Ned? What do we learn about him in this part of the novel? How would you describe his character?
4. How does Tess react to her mother's unusual behaviour? What does Ned say to help her understand her reaction?
5. Why is Debbie nasty to Tess and the other girls?
6. In the rowing race between St Bridgit's and St Joseph's on pages 49-50, the race ends in a dead heat. How does Tess explain the result? How does Ned's explanation differ? Who do you think is right? Why?
7. Why does Tess decide to lose some weight? Do you think her reasons are good?
8. How does Ned react to Tess's decision? How does Tess feel about it?
9. List the effects of Tess's weight-loss that become evident in this part of the novel. Include references and page numbers for each effect.
10. What story does Annalise tell when the family goes out for dinner? What does it show about her character? Why do you think the author chose to include this story at this point in the novel?
11. In what ways is Tess like her mother? How is she different? List some examples from

the book that support your case.

12. Why does Tess pass out after the second rowing meet?
13. Ned says that Tess “looks like an African child”. What does he mean by this? How does Tess react?
14. On page 91 Tess compares her life to a reality TV show. What does Tess mean by this comparison?
15. Why does everyone start at Tess when she arrives at the dance?

Part 3:

1. What has happened between the end of Part 2 and the beginning of Part 3? How has Tess changed?
2. What happens to Tess when she is in the bath? How does this change the way you understand the relationship between Tess and Ned?
3. Tess starts seeing Ned again after a long time apart. Why does Tess decide to do this?
4. Who is Ned? Write a description of his character and influence on Tess. Once you have done that, research the phenomenon of “voice” that victims of eating disorders often experience. How does your understanding of “voice” change your understanding of Ned?
5. Based on your understanding of the relationship between them, how will Ned’s return affect Tess?
6. Why does Sharla apologize to Tess? What does Sharla think she’s done wrong?
7. Why is the text on pages 178-179 in italics? What new information do we discover? Why has the author decided to tell us this part of the story in this way?
8. Why does Tess climb the bridge at the end of the novel?
9. Do you think Tess will still see Ned in the future? Why or why not?
10. In the Epilogue, Ned introduces himself to a boy named Bobby. Why has the author included this short section at the end of the novel? What do you think will happen to Bobby?

Writing outcome: Expository article

Beautiful Monster explores a range of themes relating to emotional and psychological disorders. Choose one of the themes below. Research your theme using resources on the internet and in your library.

- Grief
- Low self-esteem
- Anorexia
- Bulimia

The following questions may be useful:

- What are its effects?
- What causes it?
- How is it diagnosed?

- How is it treated?

Explore how the novel portrays your theme. Collect evidence and quotes from the novel that illustrate the way that the novel portrays your theme. Use the following table to collect your evidence:

PAGE NUMBER	EXAMPLE OF THEME	WHAT THE EXAMPLE SHOWS	QUOTE

Write an expository article explaining your theme, its effects, and how it is treated.

Compare your findings to the portrayal of your theme you found in the novel, and make an argument for whether you think the novel portrayed the theme well or poorly.

Make sure you back up your argument by referencing the text of the novel and citing your other sources.

Illustrate your article with pictures or diagrams where appropriate, and format for publication in a magazine.

Viewing outcome: Advertising campaign

Using the findings from your research into one of the themes in the novel, create a print advertising campaign to raise awareness for your theme. You will need to design a print advertisement for magazines, and a large billboard advertisement. You could do this exercise in groups of three or four.

You will need to:

1. Work out the message that your print advertisement will give to its audience. Write your message in one simple sentence.
2. Work out who your audience is. Who do you want to communicate with? How will you do this?
3. Look at some print advertisements in magazines and work out which print ad conventions you could use to create your ad. What would best communicate your message? What would best communicate with your audience?
4. Brainstorm some ideas for your ad. Sketch out a few of your ideas and work out which ad would communicate your message to the audience most effectively.
5. Create your ad. You could do this by drawing it, making a collage of collected materials, or using software like Photoshop.

Speaking and Listening outcome: Advertising campaign

In the advertising industry, advertisers need to convince their client that their ad will work. To do this, they pitch ideas for ads to the client. If the client likes them, they will pay the advertiser for their work.

Imagine that you need to pitch the advertising campaign you created in the previous exercise.

Create an oral and visual presentation for your class that showcases your advertising campaign. Your job is to convince the class that your ad will raise awareness of your particular theme.

You will need the advertisements themselves, and a persuasive speech of at least three minutes. You may also choose to create a Powerpoint or other type of presentation to complement your speech.

Writing outcome: Creative writing

Beautiful Monster leaves Tess on the bridge, having just climbed down from the high pylon. Ned has left her for the moment, but will he return?

And what will happen between Tom, the kind cyclist introduced near the end of the novel, and Tess? Will they meet again?

Has Tess beaten her eating disorder for good, or will it plague her longer? And what about her TEE exams and aspirations to study Law at uni? Will she fulfil her goals?

Who is Bobby? When he meets Ned at the end of the book, how will this affect his life? Will he have similar or different experiences to Tess? What will his story be?

All these questions remain unanswered at the end of the novel, so it's up to you to continue the story.

- Write a five-page story that continues from where we leave Tess at the end of *Beautiful Monster*. You may like to search the novel for clues to the future, or just make it up. You may like to imitate the author's writing style, or you may like to use your own style. It's up to you.
- After you have finished your story, write a one-page explanation of the choices you made. Why did you choose to continue the story in the way you did? And what choices did you make about the writing style you employed. Make sure your teacher knows why you wrote the story that you have.

Interview with Kate McCaffrey

Your previous books for young adults tackled cyber bullying and drug use. You take on another teenage issue in *Beautiful Monster*: that of eating disorders. Was there a particular reason why you engaged with this topic?

I have seen first hand the effects eating disorders can have on girls, in particular — from a mild obsession with body shape to the compulsive and obsessive disorder that Tess demonstrates. The far reaching consequences can be disastrous. Not only for the victim, but also the friends and family. Often the discovery is so late, that friends and family wonder why they didn't see it earlier and then for the victim they are trapped in a head space from which it is difficult to emerge.

The style of *Beautiful Monster* takes us into the psyche of a girl suffering from anorexia (and bulimia) in a different manner to many novels – it becomes a thriller. Was this your intention from the beginning, or did the story grow that way?

Beautiful Monster had a clearly defined narrative structure in my head as I was researching the disease and when I sat down to begin writing. Ned was the character who came to me first, and I knew given the nature of his character that this book would become a thriller.

A lot of observers of people with eating disorders think it's about a decision to be thin — but an eating disorder is far more complex and psychological than that. I wanted to delve into the psychology of it, so my aim was to take *Beautiful Monster* from the 'teen issue' genre and place it in a psychological/thriller genre with the hope of showing the complexities of the disease.

What was the most difficult aspect of writing this novel?

The fear of triggers. With a novel of this nature it is really important to have reliable information on which to base characters and actions. They must operate within the realm of realism. To do this I had to talk to people suffering from the disease and read a lot of personal stories. Research shows that people trying to recover can be triggered by information like weight loss amounts, or foods to avoid — anything that reminds them of that type of behaviour. So there was a real fear not to put in triggers for people who might be recovering.

It was also difficult to listen to the stories of girls who were so beautiful and clever yet trapped in a cycle they were struggling to get out of — one that consumed their every waking moment.

How do you stay up-to-date with 'teen-speak'?

I stay employed in a high school! I actually went back to teaching part-time after the publication of *Destroying Avalon* for the purpose of staying up-to-date. It's difficult to stay current with language because it's geographic. So what might be current here on the West coast may make no sense on the east, or overseas. But that is one of the difficulties of writing in this genre. Language is so quickly outdated.

One of the most significant characters is Ned. How did he take shape?

Ned was the underlying premise of the novel and he was formed during the research phase. Most sufferers of eating disorders all talk about the “voice” that drives their insecurities. And from all the stories I listened to that voice was the same, it told them the same thing, made all the same promises. The voice was manipulative, calming, controlling and charismatic. The voice becomes the master, the victim becomes the slave. And (even though most girls say their voice is female) I saw this love/hate relationship from which Ned was born.

Can you explain Tessa’s drive to achieve, to be perfect?

I think it goes with the psychology of bulimia/anorexia. It’s about achieving goals and maintaining control. I have that same psychology — the obsession with perfection, the need to achieve 100%. In fact, I can remember every bad review I’ve ever received for my novels — but not the good ones. I think I understood how easy it was to let the desire for perfection overshadow your life — which is why I could relate so well to Tess. I was lucky, I had parents who were involved in my life, who encouraged me and built my self-esteem.

What do you hope teenagers will learn – or at least think about – by reading *Beautiful Monster*?

I hope they like the novel — for the strength of the characters and the story. Maybe it will help them understand other people around them better — how we really don’t know someone past the concept we have of them. The girls in the novel all see Tess as beautiful and clever (which she is) and have no idea of her insecurities.