

## TEACHERS NOTES

# Take the Shot



By Susan White

Themes

- Identity
- Health
- Secrecy
- Friendship

Suitable For

Ages 11-14 (Grade 5 - Year 8)

## Description

Bug has a secret. Actually, he has a lot of secrets. By this point, Bug's secrets have secrets. Like...

Number one: he's formed a basketball team at his new school based on a giant lie.

Number two: his parents don't know he's playing basketball again.

Number three: his new teammates have no idea he isn't allowed to play, and they definitely don't know why.

Bug will do anything to keep his secrets, keep his new team and keep his life from falling apart. Because no one can know the biggest secret of all: Bug risks his life every time he steps out onto the basketball court.

## About the Author



Susan is a doctor and a writer. As a clinical geneticist, Susan hunts for answers to undiagnosed genetic conditions in children – a kind of DNA-sleuth for kids, minus the trench coat. Susan's writing takes the reader inside the medical world, without the boring bits. Her novel, *Cut*, was shortlisted for the *Kill Your Darlings'* Unpublished Manuscript Award in 2017. Her writing has been published in *The Big Issue*, *The School Magazine*, *Melbourne's Child* magazine and *The Reader* anthology from the Emerging Writers' Festival.

When she is not drumming up new ideas for stories, or feeding her obsessions with coffee and young adult fiction, Susan hangs out with her husband, their two kids and their gorgeous neurotic dog Snowy.

## A Note from the Author

I wrote this book because I'm very interested in individual differences, and how they shape how we feel about ourselves and our world. When I am not writing fiction, I work as a genetics doctor, seeing children with suspected genetic conditions. Part of my job is to catalogue the features of genetic conditions in children, in doing so drawing attention to how the genetic condition makes that child different. Sometimes that makes me, the young person or the parents – or all of us! – uncomfortable, especially if the differences are about appearance. I remember as a teenager desperately wanting to look and be different to how I am. In this novel, I wanted to explore that idea, particularly our internal perception of ourselves, compared with how others see us. This feels especially important in adolescence, when the need to belong clashes directly with the reality of being different.

While Bug is different, and Marfan syndrome is a big deal in his life, it is only one part of him. He also happens to be funny, a good communicator, and learns to be a good friend. I wanted to show how multi-faceted we all are and celebrate identity in all shapes and sizes. I hope that Bug's story encourages the acceptance of difference, explores the importance of authenticity and conveys the belief I hold that being different does not preclude any of us from finding a tribe where we belong.



## Themes

### Identity

Basketball is the most important thing in Bug's life. When Bug is diagnosed with Marfan Syndrome and is forced to retire from competitive basketball, everything he's ever known is called into question. 'The thing I loved most in the world was ripped away,' he says. 'I have a syndrome...I feel like it's all of me, there's nothing else.'

Bug is cast adrift: a new house, a new school and a new life to navigate without basketball. He can't come to terms with his diagnosis, so it consumes him. It's only after some home truths from the Fidos that Bug realises that our adversities don't need to define us. 'You think that it's just you who feels different,' Elodie tells him. 'Everyone has something.'

'When I'm on the court, I'm just me, Bug. Not some kid with a syndrome, not Marfan, just me. I don't want to be different. I just want to play.'

Reconciling his diagnosis with his passion for basketball is no easy task, especially after a collapsed lung lands him in hospital. However, Bug's friends and family show him how to accept his health problems as part of his identity, without letting it overwhelm him. His future as a basketball player is in doubt by the end of the novel, but he makes his peace with the decision: 'you might see me on the court,' he tells Tickets, 'or you might not.' However, he knows that his support network will be there for him, and his sense of self is solid enough to withstand any setbacks.

### Secrecy

Bug keeps 'sumo-sized' secrets from his family and friends so that he can carry on playing basketball. While he succeeds in the short term, the tangled web of lies inevitably comes undone and fractures his relationships with the people around him. Bug's parents feel horrified at how he risked his health, Bug's teammates feel betrayed because he didn't confide in them and Bug's Nana feels blindsided because Bug let her believe Marfan only affected his eyesight. Once Bug's lies are all exposed, he feels liberated. He's able to make a fresh start with his friends and family, and continue his involvement in basketball with appropriate medical advice.

'I want,' Nana says. 'I want.' She breathes heavy and hard. 'I want to tell the truth. It will hurt, but it can heal. I'm sure of it.'

Of course, Bug isn't the only character with a secret: Nana has concealed the truth of her son's parentage for decades. When Nana starts feeling Archie's presence in the family home, she takes the first step towards honesty. Like Bug, her decision to withhold the truth has ramifications

for those around her. Bug's Dad is faced with the revelation that Poppa Jim was not his biological father, and the family learns that Marfan Syndrome reaches further back into their family than they originally thought.

*Take the Shot* emphasises the weight and unhappiness that comes with big secrets – honesty may be more difficult, but is ultimately more freeing.



## Health

Several characters in *Take the Shot* struggle with physical and mental health issues. Bug and his father both struggle to come to terms with Marfan Syndrome: Bug plays basketball despite warnings from his doctors, and Bug's father wrestles with the decision to explain his Marfan diagnosis at the inquest into Andy's death. However, Bug learns that people with Marfan Syndrome can still live healthy, productive lives. Bug realises that he and his fellow sufferers are still valid, that 'Marfians are just people housed in tall, wonky bodies.'

Ginny's brother Rufus is in a dark place after being dropped by Melbourne United. Though it is never explicitly stated, Rufus has all the hallmarks of depression. He has lost his passion and meanders through life. When he agrees to help coach the Fidos, he's listless, disengaged and prone to napping in the middle of training sessions. However, the Fidos' enthusiasm reignites Rufus's spark. 'I wanted to you know,' he tells Bug, 'this team – it's been important. For me. Reminded me why I love the game.' *Take the Shot* shows readers that physical and mental health issues can be managed, and that we are not defined by our illnesses.

## Friendship

### Bug and Doof

For Bug and Doof, a viral dacking incident blossoms into an unlikely friendship. After convincing Doof to join the basketball team, the boys find common ground and start to connect off the court. Bug learns about Doof's difficult home life, and Doof forges a beautiful friendship with Bug's Nana. The friendship between Bug and Doof stands in stark contrast to the friendship between Bug, Spud and Oscar, which has been irrevocably tainted by the Marfan diagnosis. Spud and Oscar are fickle friends, but Doof looks past Bug's sporting ability and values his personality.

'I don't give a rats about your syndrome,' he says, kicking at the ground. 'I just like to know where I stand with a mate. I don't like to be the last to know.'

### Ginny and the Fidos

'She was there when I went to bed that night, and gone when I woke up in the morning. Goes to show, you can't trust anyone, right?'

When we first meet Ginny, she is combative and untrusting. She charges Bug with creating a basketball team, but disapproves of his choices. On the court, she is unwilling to share the ball and doesn't support her teammates. Her parents' divorce and her mother's new relationship have left her with deep scars and a reluctance to let anyone in, but playing with the Fidos helps her to let down her guard and gain new perspective.



## Study Notes

Nana says to Bug and Doof: 'I've realised something over the past few months...keeping secrets is not a good way to live your life.' Think about Bug and Nana's secrets over the course of this book. Why do they keep these secrets? What are the consequences of their decisions to hide information, and what happens once these secrets are divulged?

Andy's death sends shockwaves through the Fyfe family, particularly Bug's parents. How do his Mum and Dad handle the loss? Can you point to some examples that demonstrate how their grief and guilt is manifested in their parenting?

When Doof has dinner at the Fyfe household, we learn about his family life: 'Mum's always on the pokies, and Dad...he'd pick a fight in a church. Dane comes along to tell me the thousand ways I stuff up.' How do you think Doof's family life has shaped him? Do you think it explains his behaviour? Do you think it *excuses* his behaviour?

People in Bug's life behave very differently once they learn about his Marfan diagnosis. Take a look at the characters listed below, and describe how Bug's condition influences, or does not influence, the way they treat him. Provide quotes to support your argument.

- Tracey Fyfe
- Tickets
- Spud
- Summer
- Doof
- Elodie
- Nerdy Boy, Riley & Fast-talker (the medical students)

Bug looks at pictures of other people with Marfan Syndrome and starts to call them the Marfia. However, he soon starts having nightmares about them. He says that 'I know they are going to consume me until there is nothing left of me and I become one of them.' How do these dreams represent Bug's struggle to reclaim his identity?

How does Bug's Dad cope with his own Marfan diagnosis? How does Marfan factor into his guilt over Andy's death, and why do you think he's reluctant to tell the inquest about Marfan?

*Take the Shot* is written in the first person. This means we see everything from Bug's perspective. Do you think your interpretation of events may have changed if the book had been written from Bug's Mum's perspective? What about Ginny's or Tickets' perspective?

There are other books featuring protagonists with life-altering conditions. Read one of these books, then compare the way that Bug and the other protagonist deal with their conditions and the impact these health issues have on their lives. You could read *She is Not Invisible* (Marcus Sedgwick), *Wonder* (R. J. Palacio), or *Turtles all the Way Down* (John Green).

Why is it important to see young people with medical conditions represented in fiction? Does Bug – diagnosed with Marfan Syndrome but still living a normal life – change your perception of people with genetic conditions or chronic illness?

As a class, discuss the different medical professionals who treat Bug. There's Doctor Howe, Doctor Lemke, Doctor Kind-Eyes, Doctor Petra and the three medical students. How do their responses to Bug's Marfan Syndrome differ? Who do you think treats Bug best?

## Activities

### Writing Task: On the Court

There are lots of basketball games in this book. Re-read some of these games and pay close attention to how the author handles these scenes: there's lots of description so you know exactly what's happening, but there's not *too* much description. The games feel quick and exciting, so we can see exactly why Bug loves basketball.

Every basketballer lives for this moment. With fifteen seconds to go, we're trailing the Eels by one. The ball is in my hands, and with it, the game...

Think of a game you played recently. You might play netball after school, or you might have had a close athletics race in PE. You might have even played an intense game of chess! Write a scene describing what happened. Make sure the reader knows how you felt when you got swept up in the game: they should feel elated if you won, or disappointed if you lost.

I wish I could cut out the Marfan bits of me and throw them in the pond, but it's all over me like a spotty rash, and it's going nowhere. I have to face it sometime.

### Research Task: More than a Syndrome

Choose a genetic disorder from the list on Health Direct's website: <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/genetic-disorders>. Write a report about the symptoms, treatment and outlook of people who have that particular condition.

While you should look at medical information for this report, try to find interviews with people who have been diagnosed with that genetic disorder so you can get a sense of how the condition has changed their life. While it's important to understand the medical side of these conditions, we can't forget that behind each diagnosis is a real person, just like Bug, and that person has a right to be identified as more than their syndrome.

