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TEACHING NOTES

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Finding Violet Park

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Book description

16-year-old Lucas Swain becomes intrigued by the urn of ashes left in a cab office. Convinced that its occupant – Violet Park – is communicating with him, he contrives to gain possession of the urn, little realising that his quest will take him on a voyage of self-discovery, identity and lead him to unravel the mysteries surrounding his absent-possibly-dead father.

Ages 12+



About the author

Jenny Valentine moved house every two years when she was growing up. She has just moved house again, probably not for the last time. She worked in a wholefood shop in Primrose Hill for fifteen years where she met many extraordinary people and sold more organic loaves than there are words in her first novel. She has also worked as a teaching assistant and a jewellery maker. She studied English Literature at Goldsmiths College, which almost put her off reading but not quite. Jenny is married to a singer/songwriter and has two children.

In 2007, Jenny won the Guardian Prize for Children's Fiction with her debut novel FINDING VIOLET PARK. Her second novel, BROKEN SOUP, is to be published in 2008.

Themes

Family, absent parent, disappearance, chance/destiny, death, mystery, humour, love, memory, grief

Style

This story is written in the first person present tense and narrated by Lucas, the main character. This gives a sense of immediacy and engages the reader. Internal monologue in first person present tense reveals Lucas's feelings and has the effect of making us feel

intimately connected to his world, as if he were speaking directly to us.

There are also a number of stylistic features including lists and marked dialogue of past conversations such as the one between Lucas and "Tony Soprano" at the cab office. Also discuss the different uses and effectiveness of dot and numbered points. Why do you think the author uses these different techniques and what is their effect?

Setting

Inner-city 21st century London

Characters

Lucas Swain, his brother Jed and sister Mercy, Mum Nicky and his absent Dad, Pete, Ali the cab driver, "Tony Soprano", the cab company boss, Bob Cutforth, Dad's friend and Jed's godfather, Gran Pansy and Grandad Norman, Mum's boyfriend David, Janie Golden, Mum's therapist, Ed, Martha, her parents Wendy and Oliver, Natalie

Structure

Finding Violet Park is divided into numbered chapters without chapter headings. The novel is a chronological narrative in the present tense with past events revealed to us through the narrator and devices such as the use of taped and overheard conversations. Past secrets are also revealed through dialogue with other characters in the novel.

Language

The language of the novel is that of its first person narrator, Lucas Swain. It reflects his sensitive, intelligent and thoughtful nature, is rich with detail and provides an insight into his character and those of his family.

It also demonstrates the complexity of his thoughts and the potential difficulties he faces in interpreting the things that those around him say and do as well as the unspoken communication he tries to understand.

Some examples of Lucas's thoughts include:

These quotes could be used as discussion points. Please note, unless stated otherwise, all quotes are attributable to Lucas.

- *"It's funny when you start thinking about pivotal moments like this in your life, chance happenings that end up meaning everything."* P.6
- *"I'm always wondering what happens to all the choices we decide not to make."* P.6
- *"Like Mum says, as soon as she married Dad, she realised she'd done the wrong thing and as she was walking back down the aisle, she could practically see her single self through the arch of the church door, out in the sunlight, dancing around without a care in the world, and she could have spat."* P.6

- *"There were a few runners on the athletics track ... and plenty of dog walkers and little kids, but not many old ladies and that set me wondering what all the old people in London got up to with their time."* P.15
- *"What did the old lady in the cab office do before she did nothing all day in that urn?"* P.15
- *"... I was really and truly concerned about what it was like to be old and stuck in London ..."* P.16
- *"A dead old lady was trying to educate me about the over-sixties from her place on the shelf."* P.16
- *"The thing about my dad though, he didn't just look cool, he actually was... I remember him as the man in the room that people wanted to be next to... I'm more like the one in the room that people forget is there."* P.21
- *"It makes me determined to do life with my eyes open, even if it means making no decisions at all."* P.23
- *"Mum says Mercy has low self-esteem. If you ask me, low self-esteem is what girls live on, instead of food."* P.46
- *"The main thing about my mum is that she's sad."* P.46
- Pansy to Lucas and Norm *"I never thought I'd die before he [Pete] came back."* P.121
- Nicky to Lucas *"You're a fanatic, Lucas. You're a walking shrine to your father."* P. 135
- *"When a family falls apart it puts itself back together around the thing that's missing."* P.136
- *"...I was thinking how ironic it was, how unfair that I'd been mad for so long at the person who stuck around instead of the one who abandoned me."* P.149
- *"I can't believe how people turn themselves in circles and repeat the mistakes that screwed them over in the first place."* P.169

General questions after reading the novel

- Compare the different ways in which Lucas and his extended family deal with their grief?
- What sort of comfort, if any, do they gain from those around them?
- Do Lucas's family seem united in their grief or alienated from one another?
- Why was it so important to Lucas to rescue Violet? How might his decision have been linked to his own family circumstances?
- Family secrets can include small or complex issues. How might secrets impact on the life of the people involved?

- What was it about Martha that enabled Lucas to open up to her and express his grief openly?
- For Lucas and his family, what possible benefit could be gained by getting rid of Pete's belongings? Why were Lucas and Nicky so opposed on this matter?
- What sense do you make of the section on the tape in which Pete discusses Lucas with Violet?
- Consider the following possibilities and discuss how it alters your perception of Pete and Lucas's image of him? 1. He disappeared intentionally with the money Violet left him and is living a decadent life in another country. 2. He was involved in an accident and has amnesia or is dead. His whereabouts are unknown.
- If Pete had disappeared and assumed the identity of Violet's son, why would he leave behind the box containing the taped interview?
- How do you interpret the ending of the novel and did you find it satisfying? What are the remaining unanswered questions? How might you rewrite the ending?

Activities

- Write and illustrate a character profile on one of your family members such as the one Lucas wrote on his mum in the beginning of Chapter 6.
- Research and create a report about a missing person and outline the kinds of difficulties faced by the loved ones of someone who disappears without a trace. Include a description of some of the services available to people searching for their lost relatives or friends.
- Research and write about crime writer Agatha Christie's disappearance in 1962? http://observer.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,,1922888,00.html
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agatha_Christie
- As a young person, Lucas worries about the life of the elderly and believes they must be lonely. Do you think this is true? Conduct a questionnaire and interview some elderly people you know about their lives and the difference between perception and reality in this instance?
- Why do you think Violet might have wanted to die? Look at some case histories of people who have chosen to die by assisted euthanasia and see if there are any similarities. Write up and present one of the cases as a class report.
- Complete a small group project on burial practises of people in different cultures; consider countries like India, Indonesia, and China etc. Note the religious or spiritual aspects of burial rituals and give your opinion of the different outcomes for grieving relatives.
- Have a class discussion on Lucas's way of dealing with the loss of his dad. What other ways do people have of dealing with grief?
- Imagine you could ask a person close to you 5 important questions in relation to their disappearance. What might you choose?
- Imagine there is a sequel to this novel. Write Chapter One of the next book.

Discussion topics

These questions could be used to generate class discussion or students could be asked to prepare a summary of answers to one or a range of chapters to later be shared with their peers.

Chapter 1

- How did Lucas's interpretation of his father's absence differ from that of his mother Nicky's?
- Describe the circumstances that led to Lucas's discovery of the urn containing Violet Park's ashes and the way in which each part of the decision and action process was uniquely linked to the next. Do you believe these kinds of occurrences happen by chance or are they predestined? What did Lucas think?

Chapter 2

- Lucas had a thoughtful way of describing his brother Jed. What impressed Lucas about his younger brother?
- Describe a couple of possible scenarios in relation to the disappearance or whereabouts of Lucas's dad.
- What triggered Lucas's thoughts about Violet Park the morning after he first saw the urn? And how did he interpret these thoughts about Violet and the elderly population in general?

Chapter 3

- This chapter focuses on Lucas's understanding of his parents and the reasons he believes the family need to stay in London. It also outlines Lucas's thoughts about the sort of person his dad was. How and why did Lucas think he was different from his dad?
- According to Lucas's interpretation of his mum and dad's life together, getting married was the thing that wrecked everything because his dad "*hated doing what he was told.*" What did Lucas determine to do as a result of his parents' apparent mishandling of their life and do you think this made him more determined to find out more about Violet Park?

Chapter 4

- Discuss Lucas's description of "readiness potential" in relation to the incident in which he returned to the cab office to find out about the person in the urn?
- Lucas thought a lot about dead people and saw no disadvantage in finding out about them just because they were no longer around. How does this compare with your own thoughts?

Chapter 5

- Lucas contemplates his choices for a final resting place. Do you think this is an unusual way to think and what do you make of his choices?
- What did Lucas's thoughts about people dying alone lead to?
- Lucas describes the instant change that took place in his mother when she learnt of her husband Pete's disappearance. Discuss the description and what it invokes for you?
- How did the family's connection with people alter after his father disappeared?

Chapter 6

- In this chapter Lucas's thoughts focus on his mum and how she felt prior to and following the disappearance of her husband. Why did she blame herself after he was gone?
- Lucas feels quite annoyed that his mother acts like a victim. Do you think this is a good way to live? Give reasons for your answer.

Chapter 7

- Name a positive outcome of Lucas's encounter with Violet Park?
- Who did Lucas choose to confide in about Violet and why did he make this choice?
- What made Pansy wish she'd had a stroke like Norman?
- How did Pansy respond when Lucas first told her about Violet and how did she assist him in rescuing the urn from the cab office?
- While in hiding at Pansy and Norman's place, what did Lucas contemplate?
- How did Lucas feel once Violet had been delivered to his grandparents' house?
- According to Lucas, what did his dad and Violet have in common?
- Discuss Lucas's family secrets. What impact might family secrets have on the relationships amongst family members? Could there be good reasons for some secrets?

Chapter 8

- What did Lucas like most about Bob Cutforth and why? What was the other big thing about Bob that impressed him?
- Which questions did Lucas not want to consider if his dad had disappeared by choice?
- What gave Lucas hope that his dad might turn up one day?

Chapter 9

- Which simple plan did Lucas anticipate for Violet's ashes and how did it become complicated?
- What did Lucas learn about Violet while watching some film credits while at the cinema with Jed?
- Make a list of the things Lucas learnt about Violet from the Tasmanian Significant Women website at the library.

Chapter 10

- Where did Lucas learn private details about his mum, Nicky? What did he learn and how did this information make him feel?
- Was Lucas justified in his belief that he and his siblings were a hindrance to their mum and do you think her diary paints a complete picture of her feelings? Give reasons to support your answer.

Chapter 11

- Where was Lucas when he was shocked to discover a portrait of Violet and what new information did he learn?

Chapter 12

- Which question was raised in relation to Lucas's dad after he visited Violet's house and how did it challenge his perception of his own memory?

Chapter 13

- What might explain the strained relationship between Nicky and Pansy? Which question did this lead Lucas to consider?
- What led to the removal of the urn from Pansy and Norm's?
- How did Lucas feel when he confessed to Bob about reading Nicky's diary and what was Bob's response?

Chapter 14

- What was the outcome of Lucas's reluctant night out at the pub with Ed?
- On their second meeting, why did Lucas suddenly want to marry Martha?

Chapter 15

- While walking the dog, what new information did Lucas gain from Norman and Jed about the connection between his dad and Violet?

- According to Lucas, what was the cause of the special connection between Norman and Jed?
- Make a list of the things Lucas learnt from taping an interview with Jed.
- Why did Lucas believe that Norman may have known Pete was planning to disappear?

Chapter 16

- What did Lucas think it would really be like if his dad showed up?
- What realization occurred to Lucas when he asked Norman directly if he'd known that Pete was leaving? How did this knowledge affect Lucas?

Chapter 17

- From all the information you have learnt about Violet and Peter, describe the kind of relationship they may have had?

Chapter 18

- What did Mercy and Lucas argue about and how did their argument end?
- According to Nicky, why had she kept all Pete's belongings, stayed in the same house and remained stuck in a state of depression since Pete's vanishing act?
- Which role had Lucas unwittingly assumed in the family?

Chapter 19

- Describe the circumstances that lead to the discovery of the box marked VIOLET PARK in the attic?
- Which item that Lucas secretly rescued from being sent to the dump made him "go cold" when he saw it and why? What reason did he have for initially hiding that item from his mum?
- How did Lucas behave when Nicky took all Pete's things to the dump? Do you think he was justified? Explain your answer.

Chapter 20

- How did Martha comfort Lucas in his grief?

Chapter 21

- What did Lucas say as he left Bob's house with Martha and why did he immediately regret it?
- How were Lucas and Martha alike and what enhanced their understanding of one another?

Chapter 22

- What did Pete say about Lucas when he was interviewing Violet? How do you interpret his words? If you were Lucas, how might this make you feel?
- What else did Lucas learn about Violet from the taped interview?

Chapter 23

- If you were Lucas and had the opportunity to ask Pete 5 questions, what would you like to ask?
- What response do you believe Peter had when Violet asked him to assist her to die?
- What possible reasons might Violet have had for wanting to die?

Chapter 24

- When Martha's mum Wendy died, what did Lucas realize in comparison to his own situation?
- According to Lucas, what was impressive about Martha's dad's speech on death and dying?
- Why did happiness make Martha cry?

Chapter 25

- Why was it important for Lucas to know of Peter's part in Violet's death?
- What made him think that Peter was not involved in her death?

Chapter 26

- When Lucas discovered Bob drunk and miserable, what vital facts did Bob reveal? Describe them in a way that demonstrates your opinion about the real events associated with Pete's disappearance and Violet's death?
- Which idea had Lucas been subconsciously ignoring for a while?
- What conclusions did Lucas finally make about his father and why was he so angry with himself? Do you believe his anger was justified?
- What did Lucas finally determine as the reason for finding Violet?

Chapter 27

- Who had left Violet's ashes in the cab and which of the two scenarios Lucas contemplates in relation to his dad's disappearance do you find most plausible? Explain. What conclusions does Lucas come to in response to these two scenarios?

Chapter 28

- Why was Lucas finally able to scatter Violet's ashes?

Chapter 29

- What did Lucas realize when Bob told him that Violet's son Orlando had inherited her entire estate?
- What was Lucas's final action in relation to his dad and how did he feel as a result.

Web references

Missing persons

<http://www.australianmissingpersonsregister.com/>

<http://www.afP.gov.au/national/missing/index.html>

<http://www.missingpersons.com.au/>

http://www.wa.crimestoppers.com.au/missing_persons.htm

Euthanasia

<http://www.smh.com.au/specials/euthanasia/>

<http://www.dwdv.org.au/Home.html>

Additional books with relevant themes

Death or loss

Tuck Everlasting by Natalie Babbitt

Life and Death: A Collection of Classic Poetry and Prose by Kate Agnew

The Grief Book by Elizabeth Vercoe with Kerry Abramowski

Being Bindy by Alyssa Brugman

Missing Persons

Missing You, Love Sara by Jackie French

The Red Cardigan by J.C. Burke

Nine Letters Long by J.C. Burke

Lost property by James Moloney

Falling from Grace by Jane Godwin

griEVE by Lizzie Wilcock

