

Missing Girl is a psychological thriller centred around the Herbert family and their five young daughters: Beauty, Mim, Faithful (aka Stevie), Fancy and Autumn. The girl's mother, Blossom, is struggling to deal with raising the family on a slender budget while her husband recovers from an accident that prevents him working and often leaves him sitting in the car outside struggling with depression.

The five daughters are an interesting blend of characters, providing an effective contrast that students will be intrigued by. Beauty, who ironically is plain looking longs to take off when she is 18; Mim is secretly a lesbian struggling with her secret in their small town; Stevie constantly has dramatic outbursts that test the family; Fancy is mentally disabled; and Autumn, the youngest, feels lost and constantly ignored by her family. Woven into the tale of the Herbert family is a sinister undercurrent in the form of chapters told from the perspective of a paedophile. "Wayne" (aka Nelson) describes in chilling fashion in early chapters how he watches the girls as they travel to and from school each day deciding which one to "choose". Eventually he takes the long brown haired, little Autumn who wanders into his yard lost one afternoon and asks his advice on getting back home. The scenes of abuse are not highly sexual, but still powerful as this predator kisses Autumn's feet, strokes her hair and keeps her locked in a room in his house.

Many interesting literary techniques are used throughout the book, which is told from multiple perspectives. Second person perspective is worth analysing in the novel, particularly how it is used effectively to detail Autumn's captivity and escape – allowing the students to place themselves in her position and feel empathy. Structurally the book is presented in four parts: 'Who they are and how it happens', 'In the shadow of Autumn', 'Flying' and 'Last report from the fairly happy Herbert family' unravelling the family slowly before, during and after Autumn's abduction. Contrasting the creation of atmosphere and character development in each section could be ongoing task during individual or class reading. Newspaper articles are also used to recount events in Parts 3 and 4, detailing Autumn's disappearance and escape, and the death of "the man" just before police discover his identity through Autumn. Students could look at how they contribute to the novel through their inclusion. I would also look at dialogue as a technique, as we learn so much about the daughters and their connection through powerful, emotive dialogue. Opportunities for creative compositions are endless, particularly given the ending of the novel where Autumn returns to the family but yet so many issues are left unresolved. Issues covered in the novel include family, growing up, abuse, disability and relationships, making the novel relevant to students in Stage 5 and even Stage 6 Preliminary. A thoroughly enjoyable novel certain to have the class discussing!

Emma Stevenson, Port Hacking High School, NSW

The "funny, sad, scary" story which Fancy shares with her class, the story of a princess, held captive in a cave by a creature, a monster, is indeed far from the stuff of fairy tales, but frighteningly real – representing the abduction of her younger sister, Autumn, and the horror of the abuse she endured at the hands of The Man. Presented in three parts—the "before", the "during" and the "after"—it is also a story of family dynamics, of an unemployed father and an anxious mother, always mad at each other and of the five Herbert sisters, as told through their individual voices, coping with the difficult circumstances of their lives. Beauty is the oldest, bright yet lonely, plain, armed with Le Plan, ready to leave her stultifying life in Mallory. Min is the quiet one, noticed by no one, followed by the emotional, bossy Faithful, now to be known as Stevie. Then comes Fancy, the joyful, over talkative twelve year old and the youngest, eleven year old Autumn, scared and wanting to belong, receiving support from the school counsellor for her issues. Feeling neglected that fateful Sunday, she leaves the house unnoticed, planning to run away.

Run away she does, right in to the arms of The Man. Respectable looking, but obsessive and unbalanced, he had been systematically stalking the girls (his gift, his reward), even rationalizing his irrational behaviour, waiting to pounce, making his pick between Belly Girl and Hair Girl. With alternate Dad Voice and Cosy Voice, he keeps Autumn prisoner, deprived. Yet he is caring, showing emotion, kissing her feet and stroking her hair and face. The tension builds, the reader deep in the mind of The Man, and with the suffering but strong girl, as she plans her possible escape, with the family, in the wake of her disappearance and finally, the aftermath, the would-be return to normalcy when Autumn is reunited with her family and goes back to school.

From the cowering girl on the cover, through the sparse prose, written with honesty and insight, *Missing Girl* is an excellent psychological expose, sinister and sickening in its content, the deluded man convinced he loves his "good girl", exploring the criminal mind of the abuser, the evil, the fear of the victim. With themes of family, identity and belonging, personal strength, secrets and survival—physical, emotional and psychological—this revealing story of captor, captive and those left behind in "waiting mode" is suitable for individual borrowing from the secondary school library and as a shared class reader for students aged 13+. By the "open-ended" nature of the resolution, the

far reaching implications of the capture, the reactions of others, the unanswered questions of The Man's presumed death and other unresolved issues, *Missing Girl* provides extensive thought-provoking discussion starter material for Year 8-11 English classes.

Alison Cassell, QLD

Mazer's *Missing Girl* is a deceptively 'pleasant' book: deceptive because, we are drawn imperceptibly into the mind of a child abuser, and simultaneously into the minds of the five children he is observing. The girls are 'a flock of birds', they are 'his' girls; they are a pleasing mass spectacle. For me, myself the eldest of five sisters, the relationships, little jealousies, and kindnesses between these five sisters are familiar; immediately and uncannily vivid. The sense of being responsible for her family emanates from Beauty Herbert, the eldest. There is also the portrayal of school and small town society, and the hardships caused by poverty.

The 'kidnapping' of eleven year old Autumn Herbert is prefigured from the moment we step inside the mind of 'the man', in the first line of the novel. 'The man' is later to identify himself to Autumn to be 'Wayne', or to use his secret name, 'Nelson'. In the newspaper reports, which are printed as photo extracts, he is to be identified only as "The badly decomposed body of a white male".

It would be difficult to teach 'compassion' for the complex nature of 'the man's' crime. The news that he has fallen into the water (probably) is greeted with a sense of relief by the reader; the hope that this is indeed him, as we have seen from the innermost workings of his mind that he will not be able to prevent himself from future similar acts if he is alive. We are spared the certain knowledge that his death is suicide, because we have the prefiguring event of his nervous crossing of that particular footbridge; and the possibility of falling accidentally was made clear at that time.

The novel is laid out in small chapters, with the smallest being the fragments of eight lines on a single page. Various voices are employed, with characters referring to themselves as 'you' as well as 'I'. The third person is also employed. This gives insight for the reader into the psychology and character of each individual. Each chapter is entitled with brief comments which hint at the content of the chapter; or at its significance in the overall structure, or at whose story is continued in the chapter.

The themes of this book are powerful and challenging. The novel starts with the omniscient author providing 'the man's' perception:

'If the man is lucky, in the morning on his way to work, he sees the girls. A flock of them, like birds.'

and ends with Fancy Herbert's voice:

'But next comes the good part of the story! One day the princess *made up her mind*. Yes, she did! She was going to get out of the tower. So she just jumped right out! And ran home. And the king and queen gave her a million hugs and kisses and everybody was happy again. The end.'

The power of this author is that in between she brings us to the edge of terror, but we trust her to bring us safe home.

Helen Wilde, SA

The Herbert family is struggling to cope with Poppy's long enforced time off work because of his back. Mommy, overweight and lethargic, leaves many of her parenting responsibilities to her oldest daughter, Beauty, who is aware of the anomaly between her name and her physical plainness. Mim, next in line is quiet and reserved and struggling with her sexuality. Fiery and moody Faithful (Stevie) has already discovered boys but this does not make home life easier for any of them. Fancy, the slow thinker and learner, is tolerant of her sisters' moods and foibles. Autumn the prepubescent youngest member of the family, tells her own story and is the one whom the man fixates upon. This is the story of a paedophile, of his actions and their consequences, not only on the immediate victim, but also on everyone around. The abuse is not explicit or graphic but powerful enough for the reader to develop great anxiety for Autumn while incarcerated as well as for her future physical and mental well-being, even after her escape.

The reader is introduced to the main characters in the opening chapters, though for some time the links between them all are not obvious. The novel, divided into 4 sections, is complex in both narrative style and structure, but easily readable. The narrative changes between first, second and third person. This is a good example of the use of this and it would make an interesting study: does this perspective of each voice change the reader's sympathy/empathy? There is a chilling undercurrent in the man's chapters as he tries to convince himself and the reader that he is not unbalanced. Characterisation is effective and realistic and the tensions of family life come through. This would make a good class novel for mature students who could understand and respond to the many serious themes, including family and school relationships, developing sexuality and sexual

awareness, identity, paedophilia, and counselling. It is sure to trigger some wonderful creative writing pieces.

Maureen Mann, TAS

A great read. Part thriller, part mystery this book gets you in from the first page. The title and the blurb both allude to a missing girl, but when the book opens with the voice of a middle aged man watching five girls whom he calls “a flock of birds”, you get a hint of what is about to happen. Five sisters are being watched by this nameless man; a man who “could be any man, any respectable, ordinary man”, yet as he talks about his “job description” and describes the girls as being “an unexpected gift...because he has been good for so long” you know he is not an ordinary man. The five Herbert girls, going about their everyday lives, oblivious to this man, are his “reward”. As each of them tells us about their dreams and life in alternating chapters and voices, you know one of them will be the “missing girl”. As the tension builds you find yourself unwittingly being drawn into how this predator will make his choice.

Yet this is also a story of courage and family; each of the girls has their own anxieties set inside a family that is falling apart, and each one is tested by trials that go beyond the abduction and its aftermath.

In the classroom, this story would be ideal to explore the way an author draws a character. Each character (or a selected chapter on that character) could be given to students for them to work on.

Describe their character: Explain using examples from the story

- Facts (age, place in family, job etc)
- Person (whose point of view is the story written from)
- Personality (what is she or he like)
- Words (which words are common to this character)
- Adjectives (list 5 adjectives to describe this character)

Lynne Moller, Eumemmerring College, VIC

Missing Girl is an interesting book in my opinion, because it is full of suspense. Norma Fox Mazer brings home the reality that a kidnapping can occur to anyone when you least expect it – that a predator could be anywhere.

The kidnapped victim, one of the five sisters, in *Missing Girl* is clever and brave and, I think, gives hope that escape and empowerment is possible.

There is an insight into the minds of these five sisters, as the reader tries to identify who will go missing.

An interesting read, recommended to readers from Year 8 upwards

Linda Marx, Mountain District Christian School, VIC

Missing Girl is a gruelling read and certainly not for the faint hearted. From the outset the reader is left in no doubt about ‘the man’s’ evil intentions. He covets the four Herbert sisters, Beauty, Stevie, Mim, Fancy and Autumn. The five girls come from a relatively average family that is suffering due to the Father’s work injury and his unemployment. Beauty as the oldest has enormous responsibility and cannot wait to leave home in order to start her own life. ‘The man’ initially keeps his distance but as the book progresses he gets gamier in his interactions with the girls. The plot builds slowly and is told through the perspective of the sisters and ‘the man’. His deteriorating mental state and obsession with the girls is suggested in each chapter about him and the reader is able to fully understand his vile intentions with the girls.

On the day that Stevie was to be sent away to live with Aunt Bertha Autumn goes missing and falls fatefully into the clutches of ‘the man’. He holds her captive for five days and her family is understandably frantic. He beats her into submission and keeps her in an upstairs room of his house offering her only the basics for survival. He abuses her in the most bizarre ways which makes for awkward reading. There is repugnance at what he is doing which makes this book one that would have to be carefully monitored on the library shelves.

Miraculously Autumn escapes and finds her way back home. Months of therapy ensue. Meanwhile ‘the man’, who was a convicted paedophile throws himself off a building and falls to his death in a river to be found some time later.

Mazer is able to get inside the inner workings of this man’s mind and leaves no room for sympathy. Autumn admits that she was able to survive the horrendous ordeal because of the qualities that she has of each of her sisters.

It is this love and the theme of strong sisterly attachment that saves this book from being a voyeuristic examination of paedophilia. This book offers a sage warning to young girls to always be wary of strangers.

Sharon Marchingo, Crusoe 7-10 Secondary College, VIC