

This is one of a series that should find instant appeal with girls in Years 8 – 10. It has a lot going for it: diary format, authentic dialogue, genuine issues, realistic character development and thoughtful presentation.

Teenager Holly Holley (thanks Mum!) is our major character and she deals with increasing maturity with embarrassing conversations with her mother in public and the disruption to their lives and problems with her school friends caused by the arrival of her aunt and her cerebral palsy affected cousin Cassandra.

Amy proves to be a true friend to Holly and Holly finally comes to recognise this in time to save further hurt and embarrassment. Cassie develops as a personality as Holly comes to appreciate her, and even to be fond of her. (I'm left with questions as to how exactly Cassie's sophisticated non-verbal communication with her mother works.) A missing full stop (p.56, paragraph 3) is the only technical flaw I detected in this well-bound, well-designed paperback.

This is a warm and positive story, helping to reshape some stereotypes of disability and loyalty. Recommended for high school girls; keep an eye out for the others in the Girlfriend series too.

**Julie Davies, Sutherland Shire Christian School, NSW**

Told in segments, alternating between Holly (the main character), Cassie (her cousin with cerebral palsy) and various other characters, the reader sees the metamorphosis of Holly from a self questioning, anxious and confused teenager to a young woman, poised, self-assured and able to think beyond the surface. The change for Holly is brought about with the inadvertent help and integrity of her cousin, Cassie. In Cassie's own particular way, Holly comes to see that superficial appearances mean nothing and friends can be found almost unexpectedly. Whilst living through the ups and downs of major change in Holly's life, she learns about what is really important.

Realistically written, this book would appeal to female readers of around 12 years and up. It could pose as a great starting point for discussing friendship and what it constitutes, how it can be varied and what makes a true friend. It is easy to read and flows logically from each individual point of view. Holly has many experiences that readers might be able to relate to, the pressures and anxieties many young people find in their lives, including peer pressure and individuality.

**Francesca Ann Massey, Queechy High School, TAS**

*Cassie* is one of the *Girlfriend Fiction* series exploring teenage relationships. Holly Holley (poor girl having to cope with this name) is forced out of her bedroom into the poky, smelly spare room when her aunt Fern and cousin Cassie come to stay. Cassie, a cerebral palsy sufferer, communicates with grunts and shrieks, embarrasses Holly when she is enrolled at Holly's school and thoroughly disrupts her home life. It's already bad enough that Mum expresses her love in ways that Holly doesn't feel appropriate and I am sure that many girls will empathise with this. When Holly takes Cassie to the cinema, a group of boys (including Holly's great 'love' Raph) bully them into leaving because Cassie is laughing so loudly at the film and disturbing their expectation of a quiet environment. This would make a great Personal Relationships discussion starter, as would several other incidents in the book. The in-crowd girls invite Holly for a make-over shopping spree but she finally recognises that they are not the friends she needs to have and loyal Amy is recognised for what she has to offer. Holly slowly realises, too, all the strengths and qualities of Cassie's personality.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book and know that it will prove very useful in helping students understand the problems faced by people with cerebral palsy as well as realising that though their communication abilities are poor, they are not stupid. The themes of disability, friendship, family relationships, peer pressure and young love/infatuation would make it a suitable novel for small group study or quick class study in a girls' school – I don't think it would work very well with boys, though the more sensitive ones would enjoy it and be able to explain why. Jonsberg's writing is tight and well-crafted and he has used multiple voices to tell the story. Comparisons could be made with other examples written the same way.

Look for others in this series.

**Maureen Mann, TAS**

Cassie has cerebral palsy. Holly Holley lacks self esteem and becomes even more vulnerable when Cassie and her mother join the Holley household. She looks to the most popular girl in school for some solutions, but ends up finding her answers much closer to home. Together the cousins find the “wings” that allow them to unlock their inner selves and learn how to fly. This is an inspiring novel. Aunt Fern and Greg represent those special individuals whose life work is helping others to understand that the true value of a person is not what can be seen by all, but rather it is what is within. Through Holly’s experiences readers learn how to recognize this inner person – Cassie as the intelligent, sensitive, loving individual trapped inside an uncontrollable body and the handsome Ralph Macdonald as the boy who doesn’t even have “the brains of a brick” and is “pathetic”.

*Cassie* is for a very different audience to Jonsberg’s other novels such as *It’s Not All About You, Calma!* and *Ironbark*. However, it is sure to appeal to the readers of the *Girlfriend Fiction* novels and could be a great discussion starter for self-esteem and acceptance sessions.

**Patricia Andersen, Nanango State High School, QLD**

*Cassie* was a fantastic read for me. I really enjoyed the wholesome morals and standards set by Jonsberg. It’s definitely a book that I would encourage my children to read; in fact I’ve already recommended it to a fifteen year old girl who is interested in studying disability.

Somehow, Jonsberg had a way of making me feel like I was the one with the disability, not Cassie, who has cerebral palsy. I think he did an excellent job of challenging my preconceived ideas about cerebral palsy. Holly was certainly challenged when Cassie came into her life, her bedroom, her school. It took her a little while to get to know and appreciate Cassie, however in the end they did form a meaningful friendship and Holly was able to reaffirm her values and stand up to peer pressure.

I was really proud of Holly and Cassie and the choices they made around issues such as wagging, stealing, boys, friendship and forgiveness.

*Cassie* would be suitable for any high school student I think, especially Years Seven to Nine. It is easy to read and enjoyable.

**Linda Marx, Mountain District Christian School, VIC**

Don't let the "Girlfriend Fiction" label put you off. This book with its themes of Peer Pressure, Teen Culture, Body Image and living with Disabilities, looking beyond surface beauty, etc, would sit comfortably in any year 7 or even 8 classroom, depending on the reading level.

The story of Cassie, a quadriplegic Cerebral Palsy sufferer and her efforts to communicate, and therefore be heard is told from several perspectives, including her own. As such this story is actually about Cassie's cousin Holly who is displaced from her bedroom when Cassie's mother makes the painful decision to leave Cassie's Father and take her south from Darwin to what is assumed as Adelaide. Though it's never named, the reference to the local shopping centre, and the change in climate would lead the reader to assume as much.

It's Cassie who sees Holly's personal pain as starting with her appearance, she tries to invent herself. She alienates her only friend in favour of the attention of the popular girls. She also aims to attract the attention of her dream boyfriend, only to discover, with Cassie's extraordinary efforts to communicate, that it's all an illusion.

**Melanie Williams, St Paul's Anglican Grammar School, VIC**

With valuable input and inspiration from Barry Jonsberg's past pupil, twenty year old Indigenous Australian, Cece Adams, herself with cerebral palsy and quadriplegic, Jonsberg's latest title, *Cassie*, an addition to the popular *Girlfriend Fiction* series, is a heart-warming, sometimes gut-wrenching exploration of life with cerebral palsy, told from the viewpoint of teenager Cassie, with reactions as well from extended family and community alike. Honest and direct in its telling, the book has a message for readers of all ages – that of misguided perceptions, inner beauty and superficial, outward appearances, acceptance and personal growth, and resilience, courage and strength in the face of adversity.

Cassie's cousin, Holly Holley, doesn't cope at all well when Cassie and Aunt Fern come to stay with Holly and her mum, Ivy. A creature of habit, big on routines, she craves her 'old' life. Holly

is rude and hurtful, avoiding and ignoring her 'new' family. From being quiet and dependable, Holly actually does an about-face, feeling annoyed and embarrassed by the 'sacrifice' she is 'forced' to make. That the Demi Set, led by the 'cool' Demi Larson, has a part to play in this change, as does 'hot shot' basketballer, Raph McDonald, the reader is set to discover. Friend Amy, the Science nerd, is forced to take a back seat, as Holly pursues her plans to become beautiful and popular.

An easy-to-read, compassionate and simply told story, laced with humour, yet no less poignant and 'real', *Cassie* is hard-hitting, Jonsberg effectively using the separate voices of Holly, Cassie, Ivy and Fern, demarked by the creative use of a butterfly (as a 'freedom' motif), to tell the story from each one's perspective, a clever style which reveals the inner self. Cassie is smart and sensitive, intellectually gifted, struggling with her innermost thoughts and frustrations, using her 'mental discipline to control her physical reality', yet 'for them, I am an empty space'. '....I am buried, fold within fold, and only those who look can see me'. She tries to escape her physical limitations, people's judgements and sympathy, her life-affirming determination both inspirational and filled with hope. Holly, too, is struggling to fit in. 'I don't know who I am anymore', 'a pygmy in a sack..... with the body shape of a stuffed sausage', she feels lonely and unhappy, taken for granted, her would-be transformation an attempt to spread her freedom wings, unfortunately with serious consequences.

Exploring 'big' issues with empathy and insight – family relationships, the changing nature of friendship, peer group pressure in the school setting, identity and belonging, freedom and trust, self-loathing, humility and humiliation, societal perceptions of beauty and disability – *Cassie* is a thought-provoking, conscience-raiser, a valuable addition to the secondary school library collection, to be enjoyed as 'something different' in the *Girlfriend Fiction* series by readers aged 13+. Indeed, as 'things come together in new shapes', the reader is left to ponder 'What really matters?'

**Alison Cassell, QLD**