

***What Supergirl did Next* by Thalia Kalkipsakis**

This novel is an easy read suitable for students aged 10-15. The author explores relationships of various kinds. As a novel study it offers numerous focus areas for students to study, including relationships, resilience, gender division and the concept of winning at all cost. Students could readily explore the issues of sibling rivalry, jealousy and the need for parental attention. Jade and Samantha have a mother who appears to favour one daughter over the other but the novel explores the idea that they are both loved in different ways and, having different talents, the mother simply relates better to one than the other. A further relationship focus is the changing friendship Jade has with her best friend, Rene. How do we cope with friends developing new relationships which don't always include us? Do we really have a right to express an opinion which might jeopardise a friend's new friendship?

Jade has to deal with the disappointment of not achieving her goal, getting into the 'Nationals' for gymnastics, something which she has dedicated her life to. Always the winner Jade challenges a boy, Levi, she likes to a swimming race and beats him using techniques she does not let on she has. This offers an excellent opportunity for students to explore gender differences, Jade wins the race and Levi is insulted by being beaten by a girl. A class debate could be prepared examining gender sporting ability, exploring why competitive sports are not generally mixed gender. Essays, class discussions and debates could be framed around the following questions: Are girls the weaker sex? Is it possible for a girl to beat a boy in some sports and not others? How should Jade respond to Levi's response to her winning? How should Levi have responded to being beaten? Did Jade cheat by not letting Levi know her skills or is it fair in competition to have a hidden weapon?

Students could also examine sports psychology, as Jade finds herself unsure of her ability after her fall and injury at the gymnastics competition and discovers her body is not the perfect machine she had always believed it to be. What power does the mind have?

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Driven by selection for the State Squad and a medal chance at the National Championships, Jade Hopkins is 'in love with the floor', a talented gymnast who trains for twenty-two hours each week and enjoys the spotlight and the acclaim. The parallel bars of her routine mirror her parallel universe of success. Spurred on by her Terminator Mother, a woman 'who doesn't allow failure', victory is Jade's focus as she goes into 'the zone', a programmed state in which she competes. However, this psychological strength is tested when Jade suffers hyperextension of her knee. Her familiar world is seemingly shattered, Jade riddled with anger and disappointment. Things deteriorate quickly for the once doggedly-determined Supergirl, isolated and misunderstood in her self-loathing and resentment. Taking up lap swimming as a cardio workout, Jade's confidence returns as she embraces this new opportunity.

Interestingly, her relationships with best friend, Rene, 'distant' older sister, Sam, and with Marco and Levi add significant elements to the story. Sexist attitudes are explored from both male and female viewpoints ('sports are not a level playing field between boys and girls'), as are those to achievement and success in the sporting arena and in life itself. Pressure to belong, to perform and to please others threatens each one of these adolescent protagonists. Jade's emotional outburst to her mother and subsequent 'meltdown' prove a turning point in all their lives. Her mother's, 'No child of mine is a quitter', has taken its toll, as have Jade's ongoing love-hate interactions with Sam.

Simply written in teen vernacular and easy-to-read, *What Supergirl Did Next* is another title in the popular *Girlfriend Fiction* series, accurately capturing the adolescent voice (though too colloquial in places) and contemporary issues and attitudes in an honest and thought-provoking manner. When things become 'fuzzy and complicated' for Jade and she is 'moved beyond ruthlessness and jealousy', readers are presented with the hope of a positive, purposeful future. 'It's time we got your life together' and out of the Land of The Freakishly Bad Luck. Slow down and stop fighting!

With its focus on themes of identity, self esteem and self-discovery, family, friendship and loyalty, jealousy, resilience and 'tough love', control and weakness, sportsmanship and mind games and success and humility, *What Supergirl Did Next* is suitable for inclusion in the secondary school library for individual borrowing, to be enjoyed by readers aged 13-16. The 'laser beams of logic and cold hard jabs of truth' with which Jade is presented are also highly relevant to an adolescent audience.

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