

***Liar* by Justine Larbalestier**

When Micah hears of Zach's death she is stunned. Not for her the tears and running to the toilet block as do the other girls in her senior class, but she asks questions of her biology teacher about how long bodies take to deteriorate. Her classmates stare at her, fascinated, wanting the information themselves but shocked at her callousness. Some take it further, resorting to the name calling they spat out when she first arrived. Back then when word of her lies spread around the school like a cloud, other students felt impelled to stare, ask questions and call her names. Now, the whispers and looks have come back, as some braver than the rest, mouth the word murderer as she passes.

So it is up to Micah to prove she did not kill Zach. She has seen a white boy hanging out in Central Park where she and Zack used to run, but fails to find him. She becomes closer to Sarah and Tayshawn, Zach's friends and they go to places where Zach used to hang out in search of some greater understanding. But Micah's self is changing and in that change her parents question her and attempt to place some controls over her. School is worse, with people staring and shunning her, only Sarah and Tayshawn showing any interest in her at all. And all the time she is aware of the suspicions of the Police, her parents and the teachers.

Divided into three sections, Telling the truth, Telling the true truth and The Actual real truth, Larbalestier keeps the reader guessing until the last page, and even then, questions will dog the reader for some time after. Nothing is solved, no truth is absolute, nothing is probably what it seems. Micah reveals what has happened to her to the reader, but then derides herself for telling lies, and purports to tell the reader the truth – again. So the reader is always on edge, wondering which piece of the narrative is true and which a lie. And this is kept up for the whole story.

Superbly written, tightly plotted, with believable and sympathetic characters, this book grabs the reader from the start. The tactile cover with its blobs falling into letter shapes, the size of the book, the lovely print, the short chapters, the chapter headings bringing the thought processes into play before the narrative begins – all is designed to entice, thrill and seduce the reader. I was hooked before I began to read. Then the words held me to the end. And I know the story will stay with me for a long while, and be the subject of discussions with others who have had the engrossing experience of reading a story by a clever and gifted writer.

Recommended for middle secondary readers who want a story unlike any other they have read, who are willing to suspend belief and take on a different set of values as they go into Micah's world. Set in New York, the city is more than a background against which the story is set, it invades every scene and inhabits every event which occurs, so that the reader will feel they know the city before they finish the book.

Fran Knight, SA

An unreliable narrator is certainly an interesting teaching point for students who quite often have a tendency to take things at 'face value'. The narrator of *Liar* is a self-confessed liar who, even in her desperate bid to tell the truth, finds herself lying repeatedly. Even after the book has been completed it is impossible to discern the 'lies' from the 'truth'. The reader has a choice, to believe the unrealistic version of the truth created by the narrator or to believe a more logical alternative based on the students' understanding of the world.

This novel could also be studied with John Marsden's *Letters From the Inside* as it touches on similar themes of dealing with life in jail (if the reader is to believe that this is the true location of the narrator). Other activities could include students returning to the novel to look for information the narrator gives about the techniques she uses when lying (e.g. threading the truth through her lies, adding unique and realistic details, including the senses) and use these to try and ascertain when the narrator is lying and when she is telling the truth. Many of the techniques the narrator uses when lying can be also techniques that we teach for creative writing. A discussion could be created regarding the similarities and differences between creative writing and lying.

A word of warning, this novel includes many instances of graphic language and a homosexual experience is also described. It would be recommended for Year 11-12 students only, possibly of interest to students of middle ability. Students may also be put off by the slow pace of the narrative as the narrator repeats many discussions as she unravels the details regarding the 'murder' of her

boyfriend. I would certainly recommend reading the text before deciding whether it is appropriate to use in your school.

Orietta Stokes, La Salle College, WA

I loved *Liar*. Larbalestier is a stunning writer, manipulating sections of spare, poetic prose and detailed internal monologue to produce insight, mystery and drama. The narrative voice is that of Micah Williams, a teenage girl born to a mixed race couple, born with a slight covering of fur; a girl who spent the first two days of freshman year as a boy; the girl who was the 'secret' girlfriend of Zachary Rubin; and a girl who actually *is* a Liar ... Micah even lies to us, the reader, although we don't learn that until later ... much later.

Larbalestier is able to draw the reader into the mind and emotions of Micah. We quickly accept that the life she lives as a werewolf (in Manhattan, right in the city of New York), where her parents must lock her in a cage in her room every month during her menses, is just as believable as her life as a teenage girl with no friends. Surprisingly, but totally believably, at the same time, Micah is sharing a secret sexual life with one of the most charismatic boys in school, Zachary Rubin. Micah is descended from immigrants who came to upstate New York from the Carpathian Mountains more than a century ago. Most of Micah's extended family now lives in a pack, living as Mountain people, farmers; and also as werewolves who roam wild each full moon. Each new generation is able to manage their condition through the support of the aging generations, and all are protected by the products and isolation of the family farm.

After the mysterious death of Zachary Rubin, Micah is suspected of being his murderer, and she even doubts herself for a time. But there is a mysterious, strange, wild boy whom she glimpses in a crowded New York street, and she comes to know that she must reach out and become involved in changing his life.

The werewolf holds fascination for many people, not the least, teenagers. Larbalestier's keen observance of the teenage girl's thought processes and her ability to seduce the reader to acceptance of the wildly improbable makes this a riveting read, even for the non-believers.

Helen Wilde, SA

Liar's structure is compelling. Divided into three sections, Larbalestier plays upon the very idea of 'truth'. The first section is called simply 'Telling the Truth' and yet the narrator, Micah, supposedly is being honest and candid with her readers when she reveals she is a liar. Micah is also marginalized on so many levels - she's half-caste, slim and although a girl, so androgynous she can pass for a boy. Many adolescents would identify with her powerful feelings of aloneness, and differentness. After reading this novel, student discussions will focus on the nebulous notion of 'truth' and how each person with their own perspective believes they hold the 'truth'. From Year 10 onwards, students are increasingly media savvy and aware of how much the truth is massaged and manipulated in public life.

Is Micah a liar, a storyteller or a chameleon? By the end I found myself even questioning her calling herself a liar. Micah tells us her genealogy is one of lying – lying to protect and hide herself and her extended family. Yet pulsing through this story is the coming of age storyline, combined with the classic Romeo and Juliet plot. Micah's beautiful romance with Zac is forbidden by her parents, and also by their peers thus making them both liars. Add to this the murder mystery and I found I had to finish it – I so wanted to know what happens!

Zac, though absent, is a powerful presence throughout the book. He is only met through Micah's eyes and by the end I yearned for the story to twist and reveal him alive. His death provides much for a student discussion on the tragedy of dying young and the sheer waste and poignancy of it all.

On a final note, advise your students to go to Larbalestier's web site. Keen writers and readers will enjoy browsing through and she is very generous with ideas, tips and explaining her own writing process.

Molly Brumm, Noosa Pengari High School, Qld

Liar is one of the most controversial and thought-provoking books I have read in recent years. What is truth? What is untruth? Is the author speaking the truth? Or is she retelling **her** truth - a truth that is

true for her even if it isn't for anybody else. Or is she lying, even to herself? Is she experiencing the facts that she relates in a unique way that the reader can't understand? Or is she making it all up. Or only part of it? She tells half truths and untruths in her story. But are they untruths? Are they only untruths from a certain perspective, like an Escher drawing?

It is difficult to believe in somebody becoming a werewolf – but then, with the teenage market being flooded with vampire novels, sooner or later the trend had to shift to another changeling. So the girl becomes a werewolf at certain times. Or is she experiencing her bodily changes as being trapped in an animal body out of which she can't escape? Is she a compulsive liar, or just a girl with too much phantasy? A child having an imaginary friend is not called a liar; on the contrary, s/he can count on the understanding and sympathy of the adults. Why can't the same apply for a teenager, one that goes through a difficult time by the sounds of it? Or is the comparison not applicable here?

I found this book thoroughly absorbing. It is definitively one for the teenage market, one that can be used for many a discussion in class. Highly recommended.

Gilbert Van Kerckhoven, Noosa Pengari Steiner School, Doonan, Qld

Micah, is a liar. Everyone knows it. But when a boy in her class, Zach, who may or may not be her boyfriend; is brutally murdered, Micah makes a promise. She promises to tell her story, and tell it straight, no lies or omissions. So can you really trust a self confessed liar to tell you the truth?

Micah tells her story in three very distinct sections, Telling the Truth, Telling the True Truth, and The Actual Real Truth. Her story is told in parts under the subheadings; History of Me, School History, Before (the murder), After, and Family History. Bit by bit, Micah releases snippets of information in a non-chronological order. She seems to be on the straight and narrow, and her stories seem logical and believable. But then questions are raised. No one at school knew that she and Zack were boyfriend and girlfriend, in fact, Zack has another girlfriend, so were they really dating? Did they kiss? Was Micah the last person to see Zach alive? Why is Micah so interested in the process of decomposition?

Then there is the family secret ... Micah says it is the reason for her lying, and by all accounts, she seems to be telling the truth, but what is the family secret? After admitting to telling the reader a few small lies, and explaining the extenuating circumstances behind the lies, the reader is encouraged to believe Micah's story. Then she drops the bomb about the family secret and her story takes a wild turn.

Should the reader believe Micah? She has told the truth so far; aside from a few harmless white lies. Her story is farfetched, but she tells all the facts in logical ways and using science to back her up.

Micah's story is a web of secrets, lies, murder, and betrayal, but her promise to tell the truth, is fulfilled in the end ... that is... if you can believe the unbelievable truth given by a liar.

Liar was by far the best book I have ever read. I was blown away. The story is beautifully crafted, and written so well that I found myself really hooked and believing in things that I know are impossible. I could not stop reading, and even though it took so many weird turns, I just had to keep reading. The story is very graphic and gruesome details may offend some people, I would recommend it only for very mature, older high school students. I would present it as an example of purely brilliant writing.

Carolyn Hicks, Vic