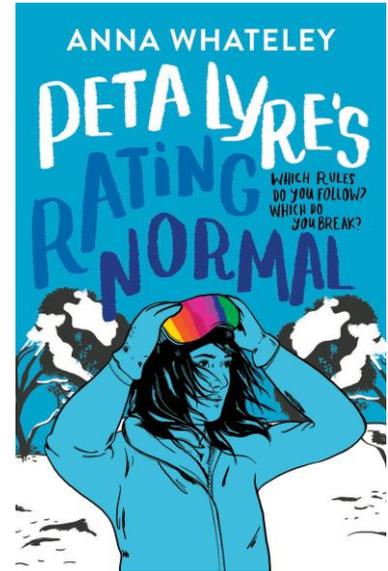


Peta Lyre's Rating Normal

By Anna Whateley



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 Paperback
 Recommended for 13-18-year-olds

Summary

Peta Lyre is far from typical. The world she lives in isn't designed for the way her mind works, but when she follows her therapist's rules for 'normal' behaviour, she can almost fit in without attracting attention.

When a new girl, Sam, starts at school, Peta's carefully structured routines start to crack. But on the school ski trip, with romance blooming and a newfound confidence, she starts to wonder if maybe she can have a normal life after all.

When things fall apart, Peta must decide whether all the old rules still matter. Does she want a life less ordinary, or should she keep her rating normal?



Anna Whateley powerfully captures the gamut of Peta's anxieties, uncertainties and self-regulating rules by focusing much of the story on her almost continuous internal monologue. This is particularly effective as it gives the impression that the reader is privy to Peta's unmediated thoughts, revealing more about her than she herself might reveal if she were a more typical narrator. This same technique is also used to show the collision between the worlds of imagination and reality that occurs within Peta's psyche.

Use in the curriculum

This book is suitable for Years 11 and 12, or extension classes in Year 9 & 10. Also, for university literature courses, and teacher training/librarianship degrees.

In a literature class, in addition to the features of style pointed out above, *Peta Lyre's Rating Normal* fits into the study of Romantic literature (in particular, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*); Australian (specifically Qld) YA fiction; and contemporary fiction dealing with diversity/own voices, feminism, low SES representation.

It is a valuable resource for people working in psychology, occupational therapy, special education and for people who are experiencing, teaching, treating or parenting those with autism/ADHD/sensory processing disorder/giftedness, or 'twice exceptional'.

Visit <https://www.allenandunwin.com/resources/for-teachers> for free down-loadable teachers notes, reviews by teachers, extracts and more. And sign up to the Allen & Unwin e-newsletter to receive monthly updates on new resources!

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Themes

- Disability and neurodiversity
- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- LGBTQI
- Romance
- Teenagers
- School trips
- Mental illness (anxiety, depression, suicide)
- Social class
- Own voices
- Representations of gender/masculinity/femininity/sexuality
- #metoo movement (especially within the disability community)

Discussion questions and activities

Pre-reading activity

Research the following and write a short definition for each:

- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD)
- Giftedness

Chapter 1

1. How did you respond to Peta in the opening chapter? Is she a believable character and someone you care about enough to want to discover more about her life? Give examples of things she says or does in the chapter to illustrate your answer.
2. Do you think the novel helps readers relate to real people with any of the diagnoses it deals with? In the previous part of this question you were asked if you cared about Peta. Is relating to and caring about a character the same thing? Do you believe it is important to care about and relate to a central character in a YA novel?

Literary style

1. What is stream of consciousness? In your opinion, is *Peta Lyre's Rating Normal* a stream of consciousness novel?
2. Why do you think the author chose this literary device to tell the story of a neurodivergent character?
3. In what person is the story told?
4. Is that choice of person especially important in the context of this story?
5. In what tense is the story told?
6. Is that tense especially important in the context of this story?
7. What purpose was served by including Peta's self-rating at the end of certain chapters?
8. How and why do you think this device changes as the novel progresses?
9. '*It is true, we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world; but on that account, we shall be more attached to one another.*' (p. 37)

'Frankenstein's monster is made up of all different people, and he needs to learn how to be a person by watching. Just like me.' (p. 45)

- Why do you think Peta is especially moved by reading Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: or the Modern Prometheus*?
- **Extension question:** How might the Greek god Prometheus relate to Peta's own story?

Themes

1. "What did you lose when you got the rules? All those unsaid things, for a start." She smiles but it's not in a happy way. Pity. A leaning-in kind of smile. I'm disappearing and all she'll see is the letters.' (p. 131)
 - What do you think Peta lost after all the extensive therapeutic and psychological intervention she underwent as a child?
 - Would she have been a happier person if she had not had the intervention?
2. "You know that feeling of pretending because you were afraid? That's what it's like when I don't take my meds, or if I do take them but I'm overwhelmed. I process outwards first, instead of giving myself time to choose what to do or say, and then I can't take it back." (p. 231)
 - Describe in your own words how Peta feels about taking ADHD medication.
 - Is she ultimately pro-medication or anti-medication?

Own Voices

1. How important is it to you that the author of a book has experienced many of the same issues faced by their characters?
2. Does the fact that Anna Whateley says of herself that she is proudly autistic, with ADHD and Sensory Processing Disorder change your reading of *Peta Lyre's Rating Normal*?

Related texts/Further reading

Fiction

Bargiela, Sarah and Sophie Standing. *Camouflage: The Hidden Lives of Autistic Women*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers (UK) (a Hachette imprint), 2019. Graphic novel.

Butters, Simon. *The Hounded*, Wakefield Press, 2016.

Although the topic is different (teenagers' parents neglect them for various reasons, including mental health) this novel shares the strategy of portraying the protagonist through his internal thoughts and feelings, which contrast with his outer appearance and lead to bullying.

Earp, Michael (ed). *Kindred: 12 Queer #LoveOzYA stories*. Walker Books, 2019.

Fornasier, Kylie. *The Things I Didn't Say*, Penguin Random House Australia, 2016

Piper suffers from Selective Mutism and the book plots her final year of school at a new school, her experience of romance and her experience of group therapy.

Haddon, Mark. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*. Penguin Australia, 2017.

Lim, Rebecca and Ambelin Kwaymullina (eds). *Meet Me at the Intersection*, Fremantle Press, 2018.

An anthology of short fiction, memoir and poetry by authors who are First Nations, People of Colour, LGBTIQ+ or living with disability.

Merriman, Eileen. *Invisibly Breathing*, Penguin NZ, 2019.

From New Zealand. Felix wishes life had rules which everyone could follow. Bailey has problems of his own. 'A gripping account of two young men on the brink of manhood, uncertain and deeply involved emotionally, facing the reactions of their family and friends. It is also a story about infinity, prime numbers, text messages, prejudice, breathing, Facebook, acceptance and anagrams. It is a moving story, well told.' — Trevor Agnew in *Magpies The Source*

Tillman, Don. *The Rosie Project* (and sequels). Text Publishing, 2013

Toten, Teresa. *The Unlikely Hero of Room 13B*, Doubleday Canada, 2013.

Winner of the Canadian Governor General's Award for English-language Children's Writing. Adam is a member of a Young Adult OCD support group. Though the novel suggests social/family issues may be the cause of his OCD, rather than a neural condition, he finds acceptance and support in the group, whose members suffer from a variety of problems.

Van Essen, Susanna. *A Trick of the Light*, Pan Macmillan Australia, 2004.

The theme of vision refers to both sight and insight/understanding. Likeable but grumpy and self-obsessed Josie, who, amongst other 'eccentricities' refuses to have a small operation to correct her eyesight, must learn empathy for others and see beyond herself. Plot features diverse family and living choices.

Non-fiction

Armstrong, Thomas. *The Power of Neurodiversity: Unleashing the Advantages of Your Differently Wired Brain*, Da Capo Lifelong Books (US) (a Hachette imprint), 2011.

Cook, Barb (ed). *Spectrum Women: Walking to the Beat of Autism*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers (UK) (a Hachette imprint), 2018.

Cook, Rachel. *Closets are for Clothes a history of queer Australia*, Black Dog Books, 2010.

Non-fiction, but with fictional introductions to chapters.

Gay and lesbian history of Australia written for teenagers.

Findlay, Carly. *Say Hello*, HarperCollins Australia, 2019. Autobiography.

Findlay, Carly. *Growing Up Disabled in Australia*, Black Inc., 2020.

Silberman, Steve. *NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and How to Think Smarter About People Who Think Differently*, Allen & Unwin, 2015

Simone, Rudy. *Aspergirls: Empowering Females with Asperger Syndrome*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers (UK) (a Hachette imprint), 2010.

Resources

Kids Helpline www.kidshelpline.com.au (ph. 1800 55 1800)

Beyond Blue: anxiety, depression and suicide prevention <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/>

Author's inspiration

In May, I went to a "LoveOzYA" day here in Brisbane, and the speakers were asking for "own voice" writers. To be clear, I'm a white woman who now lives a very middle-class life. I didn't think I had anything to offer until I thought of my ADHD: and couldn't think of any female characters in YA with ADHD.

I asked myself questions about the social training of autistic and neurodivergent kids and wanted to know what would happen if it worked. What would life be like if you got it all right, followed all the rules, and did everything they asked so you could appear neurotypical? A story started to form, but I knew I was missing something.

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'I went to a book launch for author Claire Keegan, at Avid Reader. I'd never heard of her or read any of her work! There is still that teenage part of me who jumps head-first into everything. Claire had me enthralled. One comment – that writers need to "go where the pain is" – stuck with me. Peta Lyre's voice came flooding out like I'd broken a dam. I needed to brave those moments in my own young adult years that held the most intense emotions, the deepest physical memories. Those are the ones I used to build Peta's story. Yes, there's rejection and sadness, but there's also passion and exhilaration.

'I didn't want Peta to be rich, or come from a typical family, or be straight, because it came down to "write what you know" to some extent. I worried there were too many labels on this one character, she was too Other, but her voice was so strong I couldn't argue. A little research showed that there is a higher rate of these things occurring together.

'I feel the book is quite separate from me now, and I owe Peta to get it into the hands of readers like my teenage self. I also want the chance for neurodivergent people who don't fit the gendered norms of their own condition to have an opportunity to discuss and explore what that means for them, and their society. I wasn't diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder until after I had written this novel. So, on a personal level, I also owe Peta Lyre for a lot more than sharing her story.'

— Anna Whateley

The author

Anna Whateley lives in Brisbane with her husband, three children, two dogs, and two rescue guinea pigs. She has always worked in literature and education and holds a PhD in young adult fiction. Now, Anna is an 'own voices' author, proudly autistic, with ADHD and sensory processing disorder.

Follow her @AnnaWhateley.

