

**Teachers' Notes**  
**by Nita Jonsberg**

**My Life as an Alphabet**

by

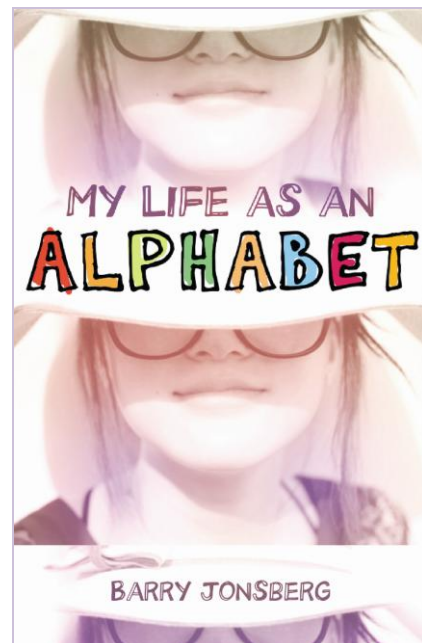
**Barry Jonsberg**

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Recommended for ages 10-13 yrs

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **PLOT SYNOPSIS**

Candice Phee is herself. The reader quickly becomes aware that she is an idiosyncratic narrator who has a poignant story to tell. She worries about her family, including Earth Pig Fish, who, she suspects, may come to view her as a God. She is concerned about her mother who has retreated from the family after the death of Candice's sister, 'Sky'. Candice has few friends, until she meets 'Douglas Benson From Another Dimension', who gives her a new perspective and enables her to see that all things are possible – even re-uniting Rich Uncle Brian with her father. Ultimately, Candice sets out on a daring mission to mend her fractured family – whatever it takes.

### **USE IN THE CURRICULUM**

This book is suitable for students of English in Years 6 to 8. It demands a level of understanding and the ability to explore complex relationships. It is valuable for more abstract and complex exploration at older levels, too, because of the nature of the complex themes explored.

It lends itself to the:

- Study of structure
- Study of characterisation
- Study of the writer's craft

### **Links**

*My Life as an Alphabet* could be studied in comparison with other texts such as *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (novel), *Little Miss Sunshine* (film) and other texts with idiosyncratic narrators and characters.

### **BEFORE READING**

**NB: please check *all* websites and pages for suitability on the day of proposed use.**

Douglas Benson is convinced his real parents exist on another planet. His earthly parents have much less fascinating jobs. Find out about theories regarding other dimensions here (you may wish to consult a science teacher for collaboration across subjects depending on the level of your class):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZiROWO6iVs> (Parallel Universes Part 1)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0vAnVJaRU0> (Parallel Universes Part 2)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nN7C22u74sQ> (Parallel Universes Part 3)

Have students consider what their 'alternative' family would be like: what jobs would they do? How might students' lives be different from the ones they have?

## **OVERVIEW**

### **CHARACTERISATION**

Authors create a sense of character using these main techniques:

- Direct description
- The character's speech
- The character's actions and reactions
- How others interact with the character
- What others say about the character
- The settings with which characters are associated

Rich Uncle Brian has a strange mannerism that helps define his wealthy status – the jingling of coins reminds readers of the rift between him and his brother. The focus on his yacht also shows his sense of position

Candice is defined mostly through her speech and in the different ways she is treated by her father, mother and uncle. Her relationship with Douglas shows readers her accepting nature and willingness to understand another's point of view. The things Candice does emphasise a sense of hope and absolute belief in her ability to mend her family.

Candice's mother is defined initially by her withdrawal from family life because of her depression, as is Candice's father, and readers are able to empathise with Candice's apparent isolation until she meets Douglas Benson.

### **STRUCTURE**

The novel is structured according to the letters of the alphabet. This allows the narrator to go back and forth in her story while appearing to adhere to a linear technique. Candice often chooses somewhat strange titles and then conveys facets of her life and experiences in a non-sequential way. Her letters to Denille add detailed insight and comments about the events of

the novel. In this way, the structure helps to communicate Candice's unusual thought-patterns and perspectives.

Elements of structure can be viewed here:

<http://www.teachit.co.uk/attachments/5023.pdf> (a 'teachit' worksheet on types of narrative structure – you need to register)

<http://johnwatsonsite.com/MyClassNotes/Topics/Narrative/NarrStruct.html> (includes a useful link to Freytag's triangle)

[http://www.narrati.com/Narratology/Narrative\\_Structure-Plot.htm](http://www.narrati.com/Narratology/Narrative_Structure-Plot.htm) (a comprehensive glossary of narrative structure techniques and terms)

## **NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE**

*My Life as an Alphabet* is told by a first person narrator. The narrator seems a little odd at first, but readers quickly realise that she believes in 'precision' (p. 1), which reassures us that her tale will be told with exact detail. This makes Candice a 'reliable' narrator, though readers must always be aware that first-person narratives are necessarily subject to a single person's understanding and interpretation of events.

## **LANGUAGE AND STYLE**

Candice's favourite book is a dictionary and this is reflected in her sophisticated vocabulary. It contrasts sharply with the register used by some of her schoolmates; notably Jen Marshall, who tells Candice to 'shut up' and labels her an 'Essen', or special needs child. This title is ironic – Candice may have some special needs, but her needs are related to her especially analytical mind, not a lack of intellect or ability.

However, Candice's age and naivety are not obscured by her language; her speech features some childish expressions. When Candice visits a solicitor, she thinks the way the receptionist talks about her is 'not fair' (p. 145).

Dramatic irony is created by the juxtaposition of Candice's interpretations of situations and the reader's own. For instance, she describes how she has her 'own seat that the librarians reserve' for her and that 'they don't even mind if [she] occasionally eat[s] a sandwich, despite the rules saying it's forbidden' (p. 5). One of Candice's defining characteristics is her overwhelming need to be clearly understood. This is evident in her explanations to readers (often in parentheses) and in her letters to her pen-pal Denille. In one letter, she says that her mother describes the colour of Candice's eyes as 'like corn flowers [not to be confused with cornflour which is white and used in baking]' (pp. 7-8). When Candice talks about her dead sister and her mother's illness, she is matter-of-fact and her narrative does not

obviously reflect an emotional response. As the story progresses, Candice's narrative style becomes very familiar to readers, who are therefore positioned to wonder about the things she *doesn't* explain in extreme detail.

## **THEMES**

Thematic studies include:

- Relationships between parents and children
- Relationships between siblings.
- Loss and grief
- Depression
- Family
- Truth and fiction
- Labelling
- Acceptance of difference

## **ACTIVITIES DURING READING**

**(Choose preferred activities based on the level of your class.)**

### **CHAPTERS A –B**

- In your own words, describe Miss Bamford.
- Write a letter from Miss Bamford to a friend in which she describes Candice.
- Discuss the initial impression of 'Rich Uncle Brian' in chapters A and B.
- Look at Rich Uncle Brian's use of extended metaphor (p. 14). Is it effective? He is a keen fan of boats and sailing. Try to describe Candice's birth using an extended metaphor from the point of view of a car enthusiast e.g.: 'you roared into our lives like a Ferrari Berlinetta...'(extend).

### **CHAPTERS C-D**

- Candice lines up all her pencils the same way in her pencil case and keeps them separate from her pens. Discuss in pairs, or think about individually, some habits that you have that others may consider odd. (The writer of these notes *must* have her special pen and propelling pencil on the desk before she can mark students' work. She gets very worried indeed if she can't find them.)

- As a class, discuss the word 'truth'. Candice says that 'one person's truth doesn't necessarily coincide with another person's truth' (p. 27). Why might that be?
- Discuss which truth the reader is tempted to believe at this point and why (does everyone agree?).
- Douglas Benson reveals that he is from another dimension (p. 36). How does the reader react to this?
- Candice indulges in some word-association as Douglas explains the theory behind his presence in this world. As a class, try word association – the teacher can begin and each student can come up with a new word that links in some way (no repeated words). Go all around the class.
- Candice writes down any complicated thoughts for Douglas to read. Why do you think she does this?
- Find out what quantum physicists do here: <http://www.informzoo.com/cat/7/312> (NB religious comment at end of article)  
Find out what 'experimental musicians' do here:  
<http://everything2.com/title/experimental+music> (This is a simple explanation for the teacher. You will find lots of examples of experimental music on YouTube)

## CHAPTERS E-F

- Readers discover that Candice's mother is not well. What specific words and phrases convey this?
- Candice talks of her memories – describe the earliest thing you can remember.
- Why does Candice call her sister Sky?

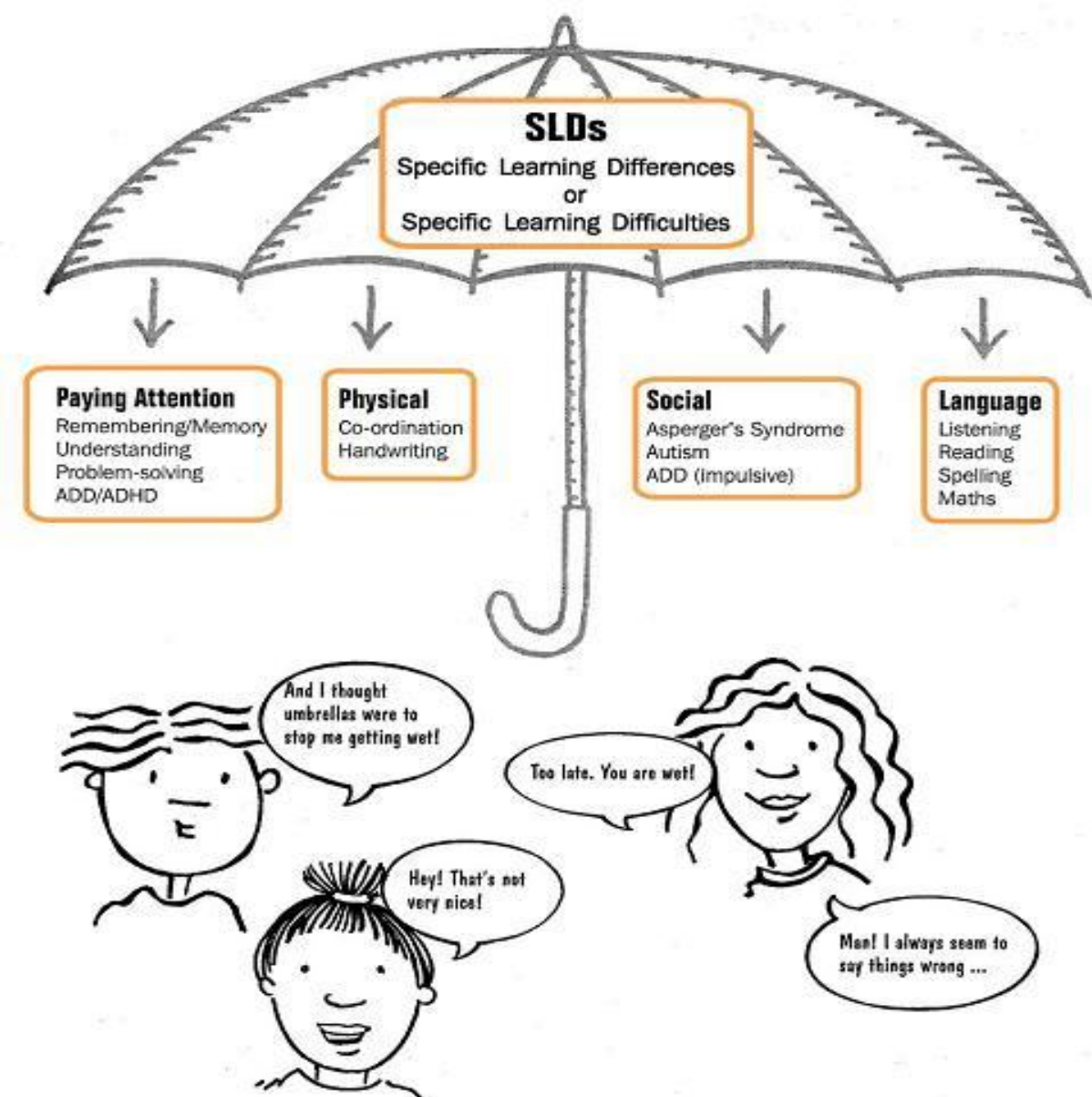
## CHAPTER G

- Douglas Benson tries to explain tesseract to Candice – see one rotating here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-WyreE9ZkI>
- Explore other dimensions here: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Q\\_GQqUg6Ts](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Q_GQqUg6Ts) (only parts suited to the intended age-group for the novel – some parts are very sophisticated).  
And here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-x4P65EKjt0&feature=related> (hyper cube that demonstrates a sixth dimension; mind-bending! Good for students to see, even if they join the majority of us in not quite understanding it fully.)
- Douglas's 'facsimile' mother assumes that Candice is autistic or suffers from 'Autism Spectrum Disorder' (p. 64). What is autism? Do all people with autism have the same behaviour? (See sites below.)

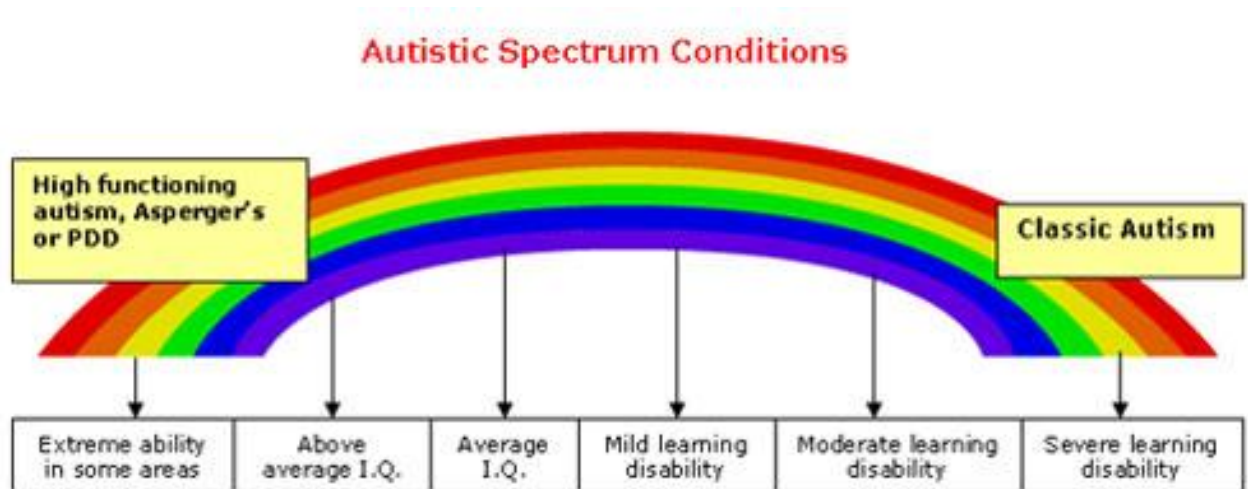
Some very famous people have been described as being on the Autism spectrum:

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7lQa3q\\_OAk&feature=fvwrel](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7lQa3q_OAk&feature=fvwrel) (features well known people from the past and present who would conform to the 'symptoms' of Asperger's Syndrome – part of the spectrum – as we now understand it.)

Here is one visual interpretation of where the 'disorder' sits from some perspectives <http://aspierhetor.com/tags/autism-spectrum/> - must be looked at in context with comments from the site. )



Here is another (from <http://www.cornwall.gov.uk/default.aspx?page=27969> )



- Are labels helpful in any circumstances? Discuss.

Look at these websites if you would like further information about some ASDs:

<http://www.nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/asd.cfm> (teacher should select links suitable for age/level of class)

<http://www.autismspectrum.org.au/a2i1i1l237l113/what-is-autism.htm> (scroll past advertisements featured at top of page).

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WsgwezeTsQY&feature=related> (very good subjective account of living with Asperger's syndrome specifically – deals with hypersensitivity and the narrator is extremely articulate and positive).

## CHAPTERS H-J

- Rich Uncle Brian buys Candice a tricycle. Is this a good idea given his strained relationship with her father?
- Discuss the positive and negative things about having money.
- Discuss the positive and negative things about having money.  
You could contrast your expectations about how life might change if you had lots of money by reading these stories: <http://www.money.co.uk/article/1002156-how-the-lives-of-10-lottery-millionaires-went-disasterously-wrong.htm#ixzz2D7BoHtwk>
- How does the author make seasickness seem funny? Discuss in pairs and collate answers as a class.
- In your own words, describe Candice's home life.



- How does the author's use of dialogue in the scene where Candice speaks to Miss Bamford about her 'ocular problem' help to build Candice's character? (p. 91)
- Chapter J contains elements of reverie to give readers hope. Discuss how this is achieved. Re-write the scene to have the opposite effect.

### **CHAPTERS L-M**

- In this chapter, Candice forces her mother to face the truth of 'Sky's' death. Is it always better to face reality or are some things better left alone? Discuss in pairs and then review your opinions at the end of the novel.  
This link may be helpful for teachers: <http://www.sidsandkids.org/wp-content/uploads/2012-May-FAQ.pdf>
- Write a description of what happens in chapter 'M' from Candice's father's point of view. Make clear what he is thinking about the two other members of his family.

### **CHAPTERS N-P**

- What do you think of Douglas Benson's 'unusual' birthday gift?
- Stop reading on page 135 and predict what Candice may be planning. Then read on and see if you are close!
- List the things that could have gone wrong with Candice's plan. How else could she have achieved the same effect?
- Candice attempts to divorce her parents – but finds herself speaking to a property conveyancer. What does a property conveyancer do? Do you think it sounds like a boring job? Explore other people's jobs and find three that you think would not be fun.

### **CHAPTERS Q-S**

- Candice writes to Denille and asks: 'Why are lawyers in New York very young, intelligent, exceptionally well-dressed and bursting with enthusiasm?' (p. 150) Jonsberg shows that Candice's ideas almost certainly come from the media and television series in particular. What other jobs are presented as being extremely glamorous but are probably very hard work? Brainstorm in groups and draw two columns representing your impressions of five careers. Then research what they actually involve.
- Read the rest of Candice's letter and think about Douglas Benson's language compared with Candice's matter-of-fact replies. What is the reader's response to this scene? Is it sad, funny or both?
- Look at the metaphor of a remote-control plane for a family (p. 167). Explain the effect it has on Candice's father. How does what happens to the 'plane' next emphasise

Candice's point? Look at the metaphor Candice decides *not* to share (p. 170). What do the two images have in common?

- The reader's understanding that Candice's mother is depressed is articulated on page 173. Find out what depression is here:

[http://www.beyondblue.org.au/index.aspx?link\\_id=7.980&http://www.beyondblue.org.au/index.aspx?link\\_id=6.1068&tmp=FileDownload&fid=946](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/index.aspx?link_id=7.980&http://www.beyondblue.org.au/index.aspx?link_id=6.1068&tmp=FileDownload&fid=946) (This is a useful and easily-understood downloadable fact sheet which also explains some things that can help, as well as some causes, of depression.)

<http://teachers.reachoutpro.com.au/> (A resource designed for teachers when dealing with mental health.)

Students can access the website here: <http://au.reachout.com/>

If you choose this activity, you may wish to have the school counsellor on hand to support you in answering any questions or revelations from students.

NB: Emphasise the number of ways students can get help if they recognise any of the symptoms in themselves or others.

## CHAPTERS T-V

- Candice is paired with Jen Marshall for an assignment. Describe what you think might happen before reading on.
- Chapter 'T' ends with a pun (a play on words). After the teacher has demonstrated some, see if the class can come up with a few new ones.  
Find examples here: <http://www.buzzle.com/articles/puns-for-kids.html> or <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20081215033931AAPpIke>
- How does an understanding develop between Jen Marshall and Candice? What do they find out about each other?
- Candice's father asks Douglas Benson what he can offer in return for Candice's hand in marriage (p. 197). In some cultures, the families of the bride and groom exchange money and goods during a marriage. Find out more here:  
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/170540/dowry>
- Candice's father is working on a new computer program, which Candice explains to Denille. It is similar to the novels that let the reader choose from a series of possible endings. Think about times in your lives when a different decision could have altered everything (moving house is one example).
- What do you think of the new computer program? Can you imagine talking to another you? Would you like yourself? What things about you might you find irritating?

## **CHAPTERS W-X**

- When Miss Bamford returns to school dressed as a pirate, she says “Would anyone care to take this black spot to Blind Pugh?” (sic). This is an allusion to *Treasure Island* which helps to convey the humour of the scene. (There is an allusion to Jonsberg’s first book *The Whole Business with Kiffo and the Pitbull* on the same page and an allusion to ‘Macbeth’ on page 235.) Can you find any others?
- In her description of her mother’s birthday dinner, Candice repeats: ‘Albright is that kind of place.’ Describe Albright in your own words, using clues from the novel so far.
- Candice gives her mother tickets to go to New Orleans. Re-write what happens next from her mother’s point of view.

## **CHAPTERS Y-Z**

- Look at chapter Y. How is the tension built and released here?
- The reader discovers something about Douglas Benson on pages 246-7. Does it change our view of him? Is it made clear whether or not he is from another dimension?
- How does the tone of the last section of the novel change?

## **FURTHER ASSIGNMENTS:**

### **CREATIVE**

1. Choose a scene from the book and recreate it in a short film or photo-story.
2. Interview a character from the book about some significant things that happen.
3. Write an extra chapter to be inserted at the beginning, end or a specified place in the novel.
4. Present a monologue in character as ‘Rich Uncle Brian’.
5. Make a fake Facebook Page for Candice (this can be done in Word if you like). Think carefully about what would feature on her page. Annotate with reasons for your choices. Write two letters: one to yourself and a reply from your ‘facsimile’ self.

### **ANALYTICAL**

1. Present an oral presentation exploring the character of Candice Phee.
2. How important is humour in the story?
3. Explore autism and write a report on what it is and how others can help those affected.
4. Write a detailed review of the novel.
5. Explain the importance of chapter F in terms of the novel as a whole.
6. Choose one main theme of the novel. Identify where and how the theme is explored in the text. Present your findings to the class, using PowerPoint or Prezi.

## **ABOUT THE WRITERS**

### **BARRY JONSBURG**

Barry Jonsberg's young adult novels, *The Whole Business with Kiffo and the Pitbull* and *It's Not All About YOU, Calma!* were short-listed for the Children's Book Council Book of the Year, Older Readers, award. *It's Not All About YOU, Calma!* also won the Adelaide Festival Award for Children's Literature; *Dreamrider* was short-listed in the NSW Premier's Awards for the Ethel Turner prize and *Cassie* (Girlfriend Fiction) was short-listed for the Children's Peace Literature Award.

Barry lives in Darwin with his wife, children and two dogs. His books have been published in the US, the UK, France, Poland, Germany and China.

Visit [www.barryjonsberg.com](http://www.barryjonsberg.com)

### **NITA JONSBURG**

Anita Jonsberg lives in Darwin and teaches English at Years 10, 11 and 12.