

'I want everyone  
to read this book  
right now.'  
Fiona Wood

# Between

# US

CLARE ATKINS

TEACHING NOTES BY BEC KAVANAGH

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## ABSTRACT

*Is it possible for two very different teenagers to fall in love despite high barbed-wire fences and a political wilderness between them?*

*Anahita is passionate, curious and determined. She is also an Iranian asylum seeker who is only allowed out of detention to attend school. On weekdays, during school hours, she can be a 'regular Australian girl'.*

*Jono needs the distraction of an infatuation. In the past year his mum has walked out, he's been dumped and his sister has moved away. Lost and depressed, Jono feels as if he's been left behind with his Vietnamese single father, Kenny.*

*Kenny is struggling to work out the rules in his new job; he recently started work as a guard at the Wickham Point Detention Centre. He tells Anahita to look out for Jono at school, but quickly comes to regret this, spiralling into suspicion and mistrust. Who is this girl, really? What is her story? Is she a genuine refugee or a queue jumper? As Jono and Anahita grow closer, Kenny starts snooping behind the scenes...*

*From the award-winning author of Nona & Me comes a new novel about two teenagers separated by cultural differences, their parents' expectations and twenty kilometres of barbed-wire fence.*

## TITLE

The title of the book, *Between Us*, suggests a number of things about the story. It points towards the three-character narrative. The ‘us’ could refer to the romantic relationship between Ana and Jono, with Kenny coming between the two, or it could refer to the ‘us’ of Jono and Kenny as a family unit, with Ana coming between them. More broadly it points towards one of the central themes of the book, which asks readers to interrogate perceptions of ‘us’ and ‘them’, inviting questions like: Who decides whether someone is ‘us’ or ‘them’? What does it do to someone’s sense of self to be cast out of a group as a ‘them’? How does separating people into groups like this set up particular structures of power and privilege that have the potential to shape a person’s life?

We are asked to reflect on our own behaviour with a critical eye and to consider the ways our attitudes, behaviours and language become inclusive or exclusive. Is ‘us’ an inclusive or exclusive word? Why? What about ‘them’?

## CHARACTERS

In *Between Us*, Clare Atkins explores the experiences of many by narrowing her gaze to three central characters – Ana, Jono and Kenny – who connect us to themes of displacement, trauma, grief, loss and identity in a variety of ways. Each of these central characters narrates their chapter in first person point of view, which not only offers an intimate insight into their perspective on the world, but also plays tug of war with the reader, challenging their perception of events, as each of them experiences shared events differently. How do these differing experiences challenge your own understanding of the events in the story? Do you find yourself agreeing with one more than another? Why do you think this is?

### ANA

In the opening chapter of the book, Kenny identifies Ana as ‘KIN016’. When he uses this number to identify her rather than her name, Anahita, he takes ownership over her identity. Although she is telling the story, she is not in control of her place in it. Being renamed KIN016 positions her outside the normal bounds of the society in which the narrative takes place. When she is away from the confines of the detention centre and addressed, for the first time, by her name, she is aware that it is a brief reprise. ‘I think KIN016.

But I nod.’ (7) Later, when she meets Jono’s friends for the first time, she again experiences this sense of disconnect: ‘My mind goes blank. All I can think of is KIN016.’ (50)

**How is Ana’s name used to position her in the story? What does it tell us about her? What power structure does this introductory scene set up?**

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Names are important to Ana – they give her control, offer connection and represent meaning. Consider the meaning that Ana gives to the names in the following examples:

- I silently practise the names I need to remember. Strange sounds. New words. Kenny Do. Jonathan. (3)
- I’ve always loved the name Pari. It suits her too; she’s short and elfish and seems to float around the classroom, a secret light behind her eyes. (15)
- It breaks my heart. She’s always been so proud of the names she chose for us. Anahita is the goddess of water, and Arash was Maman’s favourite character from the *Shahnameh*, a national hero who saved Persia. I say, ‘What about Setareh?’ It means star. (168)

**What do these names mean to Ana? What does each represent to her beyond the person?**

**Given that names are so meaningful to Ana, how must she feel having hers replaced with a number?**

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Ana badly wants to fit in. More than that, she wants to find a place where she belongs – somewhere safe, and free. ‘*I am one of them*’ (19) she says, as she twirls happily in her school uniform on the first day of school. She looks like she might belong. It is something many of us take for granted. Leaving the restrictive walls of the detention centre behind each day gives her a taste of this freedom, but Ana is constantly reminded that she is different:

- He’s staring at our bus in something like confusion. Or shock. Or distaste. His mouth is half open, like he’s saying, ‘Oh ... you’re one of them.’ My heart drops into my stomach. (25)
- My face flames with embarrassment as I unpack my pathetic sandwich, an apple and an orange juice. (52)
- But there’s no way I want him to see me in there, like that. Like someone who should be kept out. I remember his expression when he

first saw me on the detention centre bus. That stare of sudden realisation that made my face burn with shame. (105)

**Why does Ana feel ashamed and embarrassed? What do you think the cause of these feelings is?**

**How does shame shape and limit her interactions with Jono and his friends? Why does she feel a shame that they do not?**

**Is Ana correct in assuming that Jono thinks differently of her because she's from the detention centre? Does Jono believe that she is equal to him? Why or why not?**

**How is language used in the text to show Ana's sense of not belonging?**

**What are your first impressions of Ana? Is she someone you would try to include in your circle of friends? Why or why not?**

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When Jono describes his vegetable garden, and the market to Ana, 'His descriptions are so vivid that, for long minutes at a time, they are enough to quench my thirst for the outside world. Almost.' (88) Why does she add 'almost'?

**What does Jono represent to Ana? Do you believe that her feelings for him are real?**

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Ana defends Jono when Zahra suggests that he's not good for her. Zahra argues that '*They don't know what it's like to be scared for their life. They'll never understand what it's like to be us.*' (127) Can Jono ever understand Ana? Is Zahra right to think that they can never have a relationship because of this?

Zahra and Ana's friendship is 'instant' (34) because of the close bond between their mothers. But they are also very different. Zahra can't believe that Ana enjoys listening to Jono's music (70). Ana describes her several times as 'my little mother' because Zahra looks out for her.

**Do you think their friendship would be different if they weren't in the detention centre?**

**How do their shared experiences allow Ana and Zahra to understand each other better? Is the connection between Ana and Jono as meaningful?**

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What do you think Ana wants most of all in the story? How does the fact that she is being kept in detention limit her potential to achieve these goals? Do you think the things she wants are unreasonable? Think about the things you would like to achieve (small and big). How difficult will it be for you to achieve each of these things?

**How do the things Ana wants motivate her decisions and actions?**

## JONO

Jono is first introduced by Kenny, when he tells Ana to look out for him at school: 'His name's Jonathan. He's in Year 10.' (3) Later, as Kenny defends his decision to tell Ana about Jonathan, he says that Cara 'clearly doesn't know Jonathan'. (9)

Why does Kenny use the word 'clearly'? What does he mean by this? How does this fit with the image of Jono you get from his first chapter, where we learn that he spent 'last night, smoking with the boys', and that he 'reluctantly' swings the soles of his feet to get out of bed (4).

**What impression do you get of Jono from the way he is introduced into the story? What do you think his relationship with Kenny is like?**

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Jono's opening chapter is written in verse, so sparse that there is often only a single word on a line:

'Too  
stoned  
to  
string  
words  
together  
to  
make  
a  
sentence.' (5)

Kenny reads his reluctance to speak as laziness and disobedience. But how do the lines 'Heart like lead' and 'I hate that name' and 'I place / my friends / my games / my music / my life / into his hand' suggest that Jono's behaviour is because of his relationship with Kenny? Is this different to the way Kenny sees their relationship? What does the sparse language in this chapter tell you about Jono?

### **Does Jono feel as though he has control over his life?**

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Jono signals the importance of music in his life by giving it equal status with his friends, his games and his life. When Ana runs out of class he uses music to reach out to her: 'When I feel how you looked, music is the best medicine.' (69)

### **What do you think Jono was thinking when he wrote this?**

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When Jono shares his music with Ana he creates common ground between the two of them. There are many differences in their lives, but music allows them a place where they can share their emotions and experiences.

- 'Ugly is good ... if it is honest. / If it mean ... you have something to say. / Then it is beautiful ugly.' I know exactly what she means. (77)
- I tell him this music is illegal in Iran. (86)
- We stay below sharing soft-spoken stories and loud-played beats, only resurfacing when the bell goes to signal the end of lunch. (88)
- I was so low I couldn't get out of bed for days, maybe weeks. I just listened to beautiful ugly music and cried. In class. Over dinner. At soccer. At home. It poured out of me, uncontrollable, until Dad snapped, yelling at me to stop being so pathetic and weak. (124)

### **How do Ana and Jono use music to communicate with each other?**

#### **What does music allow them to tell or show each other that they otherwise wouldn't be able to?**

Jono's music offers Ana a place where she is happy, where she feels transported 'into another world' (95). When she hums one of his songs around her mother, her mother hums a song back to her. The gift of music offers them a shared moment of joy that they haven't shared since they left Tehran. 'Maman keeps singing, and I join in. I search out her eyes. *Is this okay?* She's teary, but her heart seems to be smiling as she nods. *Yes, my daughter, yes.*' (96) Do Ana and her mother share music in the same way that Ana shares it with Jono? Why is this moment significant?

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When Ana first sees Jono she sets the tone for their relationship by looking at him 'like she knows herself; / maybe even knows me' (17). When she walks away he sees her look 'at me / – me! – / with a question in her eyes.' (18) What does the repeated me, with the exclamation mark tell you?

Consider the way Ana describes Jono in comparison to Kenny's descriptions:

- 'He's good at painting the world with his words.' (87)
- 'But I don't think you are weak. I think you are brave. You wear your feelings ... outside. I do not.' (125)
- 'You don't even know him, Zahra. If anything, he's more like Ponyboy. He's sensitive and smart.' (115)
- '... if anyone might understand, it would be this boy who wears his emotions like clothes, on the outside, for everyone to see.' (127)
- 'His gaze is hopeful and ridiculously sweet.' (191)

**How do Ana's descriptions of Jono differ from Kenny's? How does the way Ana sees him change the way Jono sees himself? How is the way you see yourself influenced by the way other people see you?**

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Ana accepts Jono as he is, but he allows himself to buy into suspicions about her because she is a refugee. Is this fair? Does it make you like Jono less?

Consider the following:

- So she's a detention kid ... But what does that actually mean? (26)
- Tonight, he says, 'The bloody detainees. They're always wanting things – and the Iranians are the worst.' (90)
- I ask about her past. First curiously: where in Iran did you live? And with who? Then guiltily, thinking of Dad's grumbles: what was your house like? Did you have a car? (91)
- Is she religious? Is everyone in Iran religious? Is that a stupid question? (99)
- 'I told you to stay away from those people. She'll use you. She'll use me.' He sounds so paranoid and ridiculous that I laugh. (137)
- I feel a lurch of doubt, then tell myself that Dad is crazy and none of this is true. (205)
- There is so much she hasn't told me. So much that I don't know ... *many of them aren't even real refugees ...* (238)

Where do Jono's fears and suspicions come from? How do we see these fears escalate in the conversations he has with Ana? He is frustrated because he feels that Ana is keeping things from him, but why might this be? Does he have a right to assume the worst?

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When Ana tells Jono that his dad pulled her hair, broke her watch and hurt her (237), Jono refuses to accept that she's telling the truth, hearing instead 'the roar of Dad's warnings in my head'. (237) What is the difference between what Jono really believes in this scene and what he is willing to acknowledge as the truth? How does the author show both?

**Why doesn't Jono want to believe that his dad could hurt Ana? What would this mean for him?**

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The scene at the detention centre is the last time Jono and Ana see each other. Jono doesn't realise this at the time, but it is clear from his behaviour in the scenes that follow that he is conflicted about his reactions and his feelings, and doesn't know how to process these emotions.

- My mind sifts back through time, making an inventory of things that don't add up. (241)
- And then I'm running. I don't know where or why or how. All I know is I can't stay there at home with him. (243)
- I'm still angry at Dad, but I'm more angry at myself. It wasn't his fault. It was mine. I didn't trust Ana. I let her down. (243)
- And suddenly I'm lurching to my feet, fists swinging, and I can hear guys hollering and cheering and my feet are flying and my fist impacts. Then his does. One, two, three. He's better than me. I taste blood. It tastes good. Salty. Bitter. Alive. (247–248)

What are the feelings Jono is trying to run away from? Who is responsible for these feelings? What hints are we given that he is becoming more aware of his personal responsibility?

**Do you think Jono can and will take control of his life? What might this look like?**

## KENNY

Kenny fears loss of control and change. When we first meet him he demonstrates empathy towards Ana, trying to ease her anxieties around starting school. He laughs off the idea that the detainees in the detention centre are dangerous: 'I'm not worried. My son can look after himself.' (10) But as he spends more time with the other guards and allows himself to see the refugees at the detention centre through their eyes, his capacity for understanding fades, replaced by a fear of losing the things that matter to him.

- As if she senses my presence, the girl looks up, sees me and smiles. (29)
- ‘I can play it soft. It’s for school ... well, a little bit.’ My heart seems to stop in my chest. Is she making a veiled threat, referring to Jonathan like that? (80)
- The girl pauses to close the door behind them, and catches sight of me across the yard. Her face lights up and she waves. The gesture is both pleased and familiar. I cringe. (132)

**Is Kenny correct in reading these examples as veiled threats?**

**What does Kenny believe are Anna’s motivations behind these comments? What are Ana’s real motivations for her comments?**

**What is Kenny afraid of?**

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When Ana asks Kenny if she can listen to some music, he sees that the handwriting on her arm is ‘sickeningly familiar’. (80) Why does he use the word ‘sickeningly’? How does this colour the way you read him?

Part of Kenny’s fear stems from a feeling that he doesn’t belong and therefore he needs to position himself on the ‘right’ (white Australian) side of the fence. Kenny’s uncertainty about where he belongs is at the root of some of his conflicts with both Jono and his sister, Minh.

- I watch my sister and son, the easy banter between them. Minh is getting into the story. She always tells it the same way, even using the same words. She never talks about the journey, only the arrival. I know it was a nightmare trip. Her husband and baby daughter died on the way. I’ve never pushed her to talk about it, too scared of dredging up tears. I wonder if Minh thinks I cheated, avoiding the journey, being sponsored out by her so many years later. (82)
- I feel the familiar sting of regret. I’d never admit it to Minh, but sometimes I wish I hadn’t dropped out. If I’d stuck at it, where would I be now? I know one thing: I wouldn’t be here. (131)

Are there similarities between Kenny’s family and Ana’s? Do you think he can see them? Why might he not want to?

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Kenny’s increasingly volatile relationship with Jono amplifies his fears that he will lose the people he loves. He reads Jono’s surly adolescence as a sign that his son doesn’t need him anymore.

- He stares at me with his big dark eyes. Those eyes that show every scrap of hurt and pain, and make me worry so much that some nights I can't sleep. (32)
- But that attitude. That language. The dragon's breath is hot in my ear. (59)
- All I can do is try to protect him from ever getting that way again. Shield him from potential harm, as best I can. (62)
- The headphones are keeping music in, not shutting me out ... right? (71)
- Maybe I should've talked to him more about how it was for me growing up. Is it too late to tell him now? Will he understand? (74)
- I don't want Jonathan to think any worse of me than he already does. (83)
- The space between us feels cavernous. I need to reach him. Protect him. Protect myself. I can't let him get any more entangled in this than he already is. (226–227)

Kenny is fixated on protecting Jono from harm. In what way does he try to protect him? Is this effective?

**How do Kenny's efforts to protect Jono contribute to the tension in their relationship?**

Jono tells us that Kenny has used 'the only real power he has' (5) in demanding that he hand over his phone. Does Kenny want power? What does he want more than power? Why can't he achieve this?

## **A PLACE TO CALL HOME**

**What does the word 'home' bring to mind when you think of it?**

A great deal of the tension in *Between Us* arises from a desperate desire to control borders, both literal and figurative. Although it manifests in different ways, each of the three characters – Ana, Jono and Kenny – want to protect the things that make them feel safe, and to find a place where they feel that they can belong.

**How much is a sense of belonging reliant on feeling that you can call somewhere home? What does 'home' mean to you?**

## WRITE

Make a list of words that sound like home to you – think of how home smells, how it looks, what places are unique to your home, the kind of language you use to describe it. Make a list of all of the descriptive elements you've come up with.

Write a short piece that explores a day in your life at home. Think about how Atkins uses Jono's interaction with place to give him a sense of freedom, the kind of language she uses to describe it, and the types of things he is free to do in his home. Who else is in your home? How do you interact with them? Try to include as much detail as possible in your piece to bring it to life for another reader.

Now give your original list of descriptive elements to someone else (ideally someone who hasn't been to your home). Repeat the exercise, but this time use the list you've been given by someone else. In light of this, reflect on the difficulty of making something your own when you don't have a sense of ownership over it. How do you think Atkins approached writing about Ana's life in the detention centre?

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Ana's world is made up of two places, the detention centre and the school. Beyond these places are traumatic memories of her journey to Australia, and the life before that led her there. When she first leaves the detention centre, she describes the section of blackened scrub along its borders as 'burnt trunks standing like charred sentinels guarding the way to the city.' (2) In the pages that follow, Ana sees Australia beyond the detention centre for the first time.

- 'A cluster of red roofs, hiding amongst lush green trees. Powerlines so big they're like wire skipping ropes held up in the air by metal giants.' (6)
- 'Beyond that, fences block our view of sprawling backyards.' (6)
- 'Palmerston flickers past us like a suburban mirage.' (6)

**How does she describe it? What does her language in these examples suggest about the way she sees Australia?**

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Ana tries on several occasions to make the detention centre feel like home:

- ‘I’ll give you my orange rug ...’ It’s an old one the children’s room was throwing out. I rescued it, desperate for a splash of colour in the navy blue and white desert of our rooms. (107)
- I’m expecting a gasp of delight, but Arash sees the stars hovering in the dark and starts to whimper. (178)

**Why is Ana unable to make the detention centre feel like home?**

**What do you think home means to her?**

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Unlike Ana, Jono feels at home in a number of places – school, his actual house, Will’s house, the market. His ease of belonging is reflected in the way he describes these places, in the way he and his friends have a place that is theirs even at school: ‘We call it the outer. You know, like, “meet you on the outer”.’ (49)

**How does ‘the outer’ imply that Jono feels at home in his surroundings?**

**What is missing from Ana’s descriptions of her surroundings that make us aware of her discomfort?**

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Of the three of them, Kenny crosses between the two worlds the most, but is unable to ever truly understand either. Why do you think this is?

**Does Kenny feel that he belongs somewhere more or less than Ana? Than Jono?**

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Ana’s and Jono’s freedoms are reflected in the ways they are each able to engage with place. For the majority of the book they are in the shared space of the school, but in the climactic scene of the book, where Jono interrogates Ana about her motivations and she walks out on him (233–239), they interact for the first time away from the school, and at the detention centre.

**How does the change of location amplify the tensions between the two of them? What are these tensions?**

## 'DON'T COME BACK'

In the climax of the novel, Ana asks Jono for help, and he reads her desperation as manipulation, his views coloured by his lack of understanding towards her situation. This scene lays bare the tensions and stereotypes between the two, creating a rift that they will be unable to mend.

### **How does this scene refer back to the title of the novel? What has come between Ana and Jono?**

This outburst doesn't occur in a vacuum, and the way Jono and Ana react to each other in the claustrophobic space created by the walls of the detention centre and the other people (Ana's maman, Jono's aunt, the guards) watching them is very much a product of the words, experiences and emotions that have been woven into their skin prior to this meeting. Their meeting is also in the wake of the riot at the detention centre. Kenny plays a vital role in linking these events, as Ana and Jono become the products of his own fears and paranoias. Atkins skilfully brings her characters towards their breaking points, signalling to the reader ahead of time that things are coming to a head.

## READ

In the following chapters, Kenny's fears about losing Jono become inextricably linked with his paranoia that Ana is manipulating them.

- I should've asked him about it straight away, as soon as I found it. I shouldn't have let it slip, won over by his rare friendly smiles. But it's too late now. He got the watch from God knows where, and now he's given it to this girl. *They'll manipulate you ... manipulate him ...* A protective fire ignites in my belly as I imagine her using his weakness for her gain. The dragon rears up. (203)
- I don't see the girl again. As I sit, killing time on the computers at work that night, I feel wired and wild and wide-eyed. (204)
- I want to shake some sense into him. Or beat him with a chopstick until he understands how serious this is; how it could destroy his future. (207)
- I step out into the compound, feeling as though I'm moving in fast-motion, or have downed too many Vietnamese coffees. I scan the area, feeling paranoid, as I walk. The atmosphere seems fraught, electric, on edge. But maybe that's just me. And yet ... I could swear people are whispering. Conspiring. I see Milly escort two women and a baby down the walkway. The air rumbles with discontent. (210)

- Anger and fear and desperation pump through my veins. I can feel the girl's body shaking as I hold her down. My knee is in the small of her back, one hand on her wrist, the other hard on her bare neck. I wonder if I'm breaking some kind of Muslim law by touching her hair. I'm so close I can see bald patches and scabs amongst the waves of dark brown. (214)

Discuss the way these scenes tie Kenny, Ana and Jono together in the events that follow. Is it possible to define a single moment that pushes Kenny past breaking point?

**Is there a time in any of the above scenes where something could have prevented things turning bad? What might that something have been?**

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Reread the final scene between Ana and Jono (233–239) in light of the quoted sections above. How is this scene the result of those moments? How aware are Ana and Jono of the external influences acting upon them? What are these influences?

**Why does Ana tell Jono, 'Go. Please. Do not come again.' (238)? How do you feel when you read these words?**

## RESEARCH

Look through your preferred news sources (either online or in print) and find examples of any current political protests. Who is protesting and what are they protesting for or against? What do the people on each side stand to lose or gain from the protest? Can you find any examples of it escalating similarly to the scenes above? How do you think these protests impact on personal relationships in light of what you've read?

## WRITE

Using the protest you've researched, come up with three characters who have differing perspectives, roles and identities. Write them into a story using *Between Us* as inspiration. Write a minimum of three scenes that demonstrate the escalating tensions between the characters, and that suggest to the reader what the climactic event will be, without writing that final scene.

Discuss your work in class, as part of a wider conversation around the power of creative work to comment on and reflect real-life situations.

# **NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE**

The narrative is in randomly alternating chapters, told by each of the three main characters, in first person point of view.

**What insight does this three-way narrative offer into the events of the book?**

**How does the author use the different perspectives to give you a wider understanding of how events might be interpreted differently?**

**Why do you think Kenny has been included as one of the narrators? Does his inclusion add something to your reading of the text?**

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Verse is used in the novel at the beginning and the end to symbolise the lack of access Jono and Ana have to what they want, and their lack of hope.

Ana begins the book with hope, which swells as she meets Jono and starts to believe that things could be better. At the end of the book, when she has been betrayed by him and by the system that she put her faith in, when she is removed to even worse detention, her loss of hope and feeling of disconnect is emphasised by the sparse, verse language used in her final chapters. Even when she delivers her final chapter, where there is arguably hope for her future, it is clear that her experiences have taken their toll on her willingness to hope for anything.

Our designated house  
is made of crumbling cement.  
It isn't much,  
but we're together  
and it's ours ...  
for now.  
We're still not free. (267)

**How do Ana's verse chapters signify her deep sense of loss?**

**What do you notice about the way she talks about her new life?**

**What do you think she is unable to say?**

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Ana's final line echoes her first: 'I start again.' (1 & 268)

**What does this mean?**

Jono, on the other hand, begins the book with very little hope. His sparse language echoes the world he traps himself in, of ‘beautiful ugly’ music, and reflects his unwillingness to communicate with those he feels have betrayed him – his dad, his mum, his ex. His reluctance to communicate with the outside world changes when he meets Ana and, as he tries to forge a relationship with her, his language blossoms.

**Why do you think Jono doesn’t revert back to verse after his final encounter with Ana? Do you think this signifies loss or hope?**

**How does the verse structure of the novel reflect Jono’s love of music?**

**How do verse novels, poetry and music allow us to communicate deeper emotions? How do these forms of writing allow us to connect with people on a level deeper than traditional communication?**

## WRITE

Think of a time that has affected you deeply (it could be something positive, or something negative). Using the verse chapters in *Between Us* as inspiration, write a short piece of verse trying to evoke the emotions of this moment. Rather than concentrating on the details of what happened in the moment, focus on how it felt, what you could smell, what you could see, what you could hear, what you could taste. Look at the details Atkins has used in her verse chapters and think about why she has chosen to use these specific details.

**How do these chapters make you feel?**

## CULTURAL CONTEXT: ‘US’ & ‘THEM’

‘I mean, who’s out there? And what’s it like?’ (30) – Jono

In the acknowledgements to *Between Us*, Clare Atkins talks about the cultural and political context in which she wrote the book:

‘*Between Us* has been researched and written at a time when the *Border Force Act* has been in place. This law prevents people working with asylum seekers – including public servants, doctors, teachers and security workers – from speaking out about the conditions they witness in immigration detention centres.’ (274)

One of the many negative implications of the *Border Force Act* is that the public does not have a truthful picture about what life is like for refugees in detention centres, or even of who these refugees are. These gaps in knowledge are filled instead with misinformation, rumour and stereotypes that are often rooted, like Kenny's, in a fear of the unknown and of losing the things that matter.

- The justifications they gave us in our officer training come readily to my lips. *Defending our borders. National security. Protecting our quality of life.* (31)
- I have a horrible feeling that maybe Cara was right. Maybe by telling her about my son I've crossed an invisible line. The line that says: us here; detainees there. The line that keeps the 'us' safe. (79)

**What does Kenny see as the difference between 'us' and 'them'?**

**Why would 'they' be a threat?**

**Who decides who is 'us' and who is 'them'? Why might they want to promote a narrative that is about 'national security and protecting our quality of life' rather than the truth?**

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Sadly, Kenny is not alone in his perception of refugees:

- I thought Ibrahim might say something supportive, but he was silent. Maybe he doesn't like people who come by boat. In English class one day he said he waited years in a refugee camp in Kenya. (55) – Ana
- We might think these people appear nice. They might seem friendly. But they are illegal. Sneaky. After September 11 we have to be careful. (84) – Kenny
- I bet she's never even held a boy's hand, let alone kissed or done anything more than that. Mel reckons Muslim girls are really conservative and restrained. (102) – Jono
- 'Detainees found out she was a soft touch, of course. They were probably just bunging it on, asking for extras to sell on the black market.' (132) – Rick
- 'Started going on about terrorism and how people always expect him to apologise for all the bloody insane Muslims in the world.' (264–265) – Mel's dad

**Can you think of examples where you've heard refugees spoken about in similar terms?**

**Have you ever been misjudged or misrepresented by someone who doesn't know you well? How did that make you feel?**

**How do comments like these influence people who may not know the full story? What is the result of this?**

**What does it do to our understanding of people when we hear stories *about* them rather than *from* them?**

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Ana is aware of the scrutiny that she and her family are constantly under; she knows that everything they do can be twisted in such a way that they won't be allowed into Australia:

- Maman has always been more protective, anxious, on edge. And she's already so fearful of doing anything that might damage our chances of living in Australia. (90)
- 'They write it down as a character concern on your visa application. I'm not joking – if you're underage it goes on your file. It happened to a boy just before you came and next think you know his application for refugee status was denied.' (54)
- In the bus Zahra puts an arm around my shoulder, but there's nothing she can say. We both know the terrible repercussions a record of bad behaviour on your file can have. (199)

**Do you think the Ana we see in the story is the 'real' Ana? How does her life in detention put limitations on how freely she can express herself?**

**How do you think the writer dealt with these limitations as she wrote Ana's story?**

Atkins allows us a glimpse at what Ana is like outside of detention in the flashback scenes, where Ana remembers her life before becoming a refugee, in scenes with her best friend and with her boyfriend, moments where she feels 'completely alive' (117). But Ana's memories also offer insight into the trauma she has experienced, and a first-hand account of the attitude that many of the refugees are met with when they arrive in Australia.

## READ

Read the following two scenes, where Ana and Kenny each describe their journeys into Australia.

## **Ana**

... the Nauruan immigration officials asking us question after question.

It goes for hours, until we're so tired that we can barely see.

Maman tells them we've already been through this twice on Christmas Island, but they insist on hearing everything again. She tells them about the whipping, and they request to see my back. I lift my T-shirt to show them the scars.

The Farsi interpreter seems to struggle to translate, as Maman explains about the morality police and the government and our constant fear ever since Baba was killed and left by the side of the road.

They ask how long Maman has been with Abdul.

Abdul says, 'Many years. Our son is already three.'

But the officials aren't convinced. Maman and Abdul aren't married, and Arash's birth certificate was thrown overboard on the way here. They tell us 'some people' pretend to be together because they think it will help them get a visa.

Abdul argues and justifies and rants, until he loses his temper and slams his fist into the wall. The impact of it is so strong that it leaves a hole in the plaster. Abdul backs away, saying, 'Sorry ... sorry ...' But it's as if no-one hears. (198–199)

## **Kenny**

'I have no idea. All I know is people who come here like that – by boat – they come praying for a better life. And I understand that. I really do. I had to wait three years before my visa was approved. Three years of Minh trying to sponsor me and me chasing documents and waiting in Vietnam. My life could've been different if I'd been able to come when I was eighteen, not twenty-one. But I waited. And I got here legally. These people don't do that. They don't wait. They pay money and they come. Many of them aren't even real refugees, but they do and say whatever they need to in order to be allowed to stay.' (227–228)

**How is Kenny's story similar to Ana's? How is it different?**

**Why couldn't Ana's family wait to come to Australia legally?**

**What did they give up to leave for a better life?**

## WRITE

Read some of the first-hand accounts from refugees on Behind the Wire (<http://behindthewire.org.au/>) and/or listen to the podcast ‘The Messenger’.

**How do these stories fit in with the stories of the refugees and immigrants in *Between Us*?**

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On her website (<http://clareatkins.com.au/finally/>) Clare Atkins talks about doing a ‘hell of a lot of research’ in writing this novel.

**Can you see evidence of her research in the book? Why do you think it’s important to read and listen to first-hand accounts when writing a book like this? What do you think the ethics are of telling a story like this?**

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Use one of the stories you find on Behind the Wire as inspiration for a short story of your own. Consider the way Atkins has handled the story of Ana and her family, and how she is careful about the way she presents them. Think about what point of view you use, and decide whether you feel familiar enough with the story to tell it from the first person.

**What is the impact of telling these stories in the first person?**

## FAMILY & FREEDOM

Ana’s view of freedom is shaped by her situation – both by the limitations placed on her because of her refugee status and also the cultural expectations of her assisting her mother:

- I look to Maman, but – somehow, miraculously – she is still asleep. I don’t want to wake her, so I push the urine-drenched blanket to one side and stand, lifting Arash up and out of the wet sheets. He latches his small arms around my neck, as another rumble of thunder crashes through our room. I hold him close, feeling the sticky warmth of his little body. ‘It’s okay, Arash. It’s okay. I’ll clean you up.’ (60)
- It occurs to me that I could write anything; I could write: *Fatemeh Shirdel requests to go on The Voice* – and she wouldn’t know. (34)

- I know the ‘buts’; I’m all too aware her situation could soon be mine. (119)

**What does freedom mean to you? What does freedom mean for Ana? Back up your assertions using examples from the text.**

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Consider Ana’s feeling of responsibility towards her family alongside Jono’s relationship with his dad. Jono helps his dad in the garden, but it is to earn money rather than because of a sense of duty. When Will texts him, Jono tells his dad, ‘Keep your ten bucks. I’m going for a run.’ (109)

**How do Jono and Ana relate to their families differently? What does this tell you about their freedom?**

**Which version do you relate to more closely?**

## **NORMAL**

Ana and Zahra both deeply want to fit in, to feel normal. But each time they try, they find that ‘normal’ is just out of reach.

- ‘I didn’t go. The only clothes I had were the ones they give us in here. I couldn’t show up like that. I wanted to feel like a normal teenager ... even if just for one night.’ Her words feel like an echo of my heart. (116)
- Ana tells Zahra that Jono ‘... treats me like ... a normal person. An Australian.’ (115)

**What does Jono offer Ana? How does he make her feel as though she belongs? Does she? What does she mean by ‘normal’? How does Zahra respond?**

**What does normal look like to Zahra and Ana? Is it something they can achieve? Why or why not?**

**What would achieving normality offer Zahra and Ana that they don’t currently have?**

**If being ‘normal’ and feeling as though they belong is Zahra’s and Ana’s goal, what do you think their mothers’ goals might be? Why might their goals be different? Is this generational? How does it reflect the relationship between Kenny and Jono?**

## **RELATED READING**

There are many texts that would work well for comparison with *Between Us*. The texts in this list can be used for thematic comparisons (refugees, immigration) as well as stylistic, as they range from fiction to nonfiction, verse novel to comic. Students will be able to examine the different ways the stories of refugees have been told, within different contexts and by different voices.

**Abdel-Fattah, Randa – *When Michael Met Mina*** When Michael meets Mina, they are at a rally for refugees – standing on opposite sides. Mina fled Afghanistan with her mother via a refugee camp, a leaky boat and a detention centre. Michael’s parents have founded a new political party called Aussie Values. They want to stop the boats. Mina wants to stop the hate. When Mina wins a scholarship to Michael’s private school, their lives crash together blindingly.

**Crossan, Sarah – *The Weight of Water*** Armed with a suitcase and an old laundry bag filled with clothes, Kasienska and her mother head for England. Life is lonely for Kasienska. At home her mother’s heart is breaking and at school friends are scarce. But when someone special swims into her life, Kasienska learns that there might be more than one way for her to stay afloat.

**Ellis, Deborah – *Children of War*** In this book, Deborah Ellis turns her attention to the most tragic victims of the Iraq War – Iraqi children. She interviews young people, mostly refugees living in Jordan, but also a few who are trying to build new lives in North America. Some families have left Iraq with money; others are penniless and ill or disabled. Most of the children have parents who are working illegally or not at all, and the fear of deportation is a constant threat.

**Fraillon, Zana – *The Bone Sparrow*** Subhi’s imagination is as big as the ocean and wide as the sky, but his world is much smaller: he’s spent his whole life in an immigration detention centre. *The Bone Sparrow* is a powerful, heartfelt, sometimes funny and ultimately uplifting hymn to freedom and love.

**Mazari, Najaf – *The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif*** *The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif* traces an Afghani refugee’s extraordinary journey – from his early life as a shepherd boy in the mountains of northern Afghanistan, to his forced exile after being captured and tortured by the Taliban, to incarceration in an Australian detention centre ... and finally, to freedom.

**Pung, Alice – *Unpolished Gem*** In a wonderland called Footscray, a girl named Alice and her Chinese-Cambodian family pursue the Australian Dream – Asian style. Armed with an ocker accent, Alice dives head-first

into schooling, romance and the getting of wisdom. Her mother becomes an Aussie battler – an outworker, that is. Her father embraces the miracle of franchising and opens an electrical-appliance store. And every day her grandmother blesses Father Government for giving old people money.

**Sacco, Joe – *Palestine*** A landmark of journalism and the art form of comics. Based on several months of research and an extended visit to the West Bank and Gaza Strip in the early 1990s, this is a major work of political and historical nonfiction.

**Satrapi, Marjane – *Persepolis*** In powerful black-and-white comic strip images, Satrapi tells the story of her life in Tehran from ages six to fourteen, years that saw the overthrow of the Shah's regime, the triumph of the Islamic Revolution, and the devastating effects of war with Iraq. The intelligent and outspoken only child of committed Marxists and the great-granddaughter of one of Iran's last emperors, Marjane bears witness to a childhood uniquely entwined with the history of her country.

**Tan, Shaun – *The Arrival*** *The Arrival* is a migrant story told as a series of wordless images that might seem to come from a long forgotten time. A man leaves his wife and child in an impoverished town, seeking better prospects in an unknown country on the other side of a vast ocean. He eventually finds himself in a bewildering city of foreign customs, peculiar animals, curious floating objects and indecipherable languages. With nothing more than a suitcase and a handful of currency, the immigrant must find a place to live, food to eat and some kind of gainful employment. He is helped along the way by sympathetic strangers, each carrying their own unspoken history: stories of struggle and survival in a world of incomprehensible violence, upheaval and hope.

## **FURTHER RESOURCES ON REFUGEES IN AUSTRALIA**

These are just some of the resources available to contextualise and understand the treatment of Australia's refugees. Of course there are many more, and a simple Google search will turn these up.

- 'The truth about Manus, told by a journalist and a refugee trapped in limbo'  
<http://rightnow.org.au/interview-3/truth-manus-told-journalist-refugee-trapped-limbo/>
- Right Now: Refugees & Asylum seekers  
<http://rightnow.org.au/topics/asylum-seekers/>
- 'Friday essay: worth a thousand words – how photos shape attitudes to refugees'  
<https://theconversation.com/friday-essay-worth-a-thousand-words-how-photos-shape-attitudes-to-refugees-62705>
- 'Australia, exceptional in its brutality'  
<https://overland.org.au/2016/04/australia-exceptional-in-its-brutality/>

## BEC KAVANAGH

Bec Kavanagh is a Melbourne-based writer, reviewer and YA fiction specialist. Bec has appeared at the Melbourne Writers Festival, Sydney Writers Festival, and on Radio National's *Books and Arts Daily*. She has judged a number of literary prizes, including the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards. Her nonfiction work has been published by *Bookseller and Publisher*, *Australian Book Review*, *Killings*, *Westerly* and a number of education publications. She has had fiction published by *Seizure* and the *Review of Australian Fiction*. Bec is currently the manager of the Stella Schools Program and completing a Masters of Creative Writing at the University of Melbourne.

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