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Leisel Jones

with Felicity McLean

BODY LENGTHS



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TEACHING NOTES BY LAURA GORDON

Praise for *Body Lengths*

'There were times when it wasn't easy for Leisel, but she came through as one of the greatest swimmers of all time.'

— RAY WARREN

'Lethal Leisel was an incredible role model and an inspiration for my generation. She epitomises the Olympic dream!'

— SALLY FITZGIBBONS

'A compelling and thought-provoking story, Leisel's honesty is remarkably heroic and poignant.'

— LAYNE BEACHLEY AO

~

Body Lengths is the biography of Olympic champion Leisel Jones. Written in Leisel's voice, it is an entertaining and often moving portrait of a country girl who grew up in the glare of the media spotlight. Leisel grew up in Lycra in the public eye, and *Body Lengths* deals with issues relating to body image and bullying. It is a fantastic book for young women.

Body Lengths

By Leisel Jones, with Felicity McLean

Title and cover

Leisel Jones retired from swimming in 2012, so some readers may be more familiar with her from her most recent public appearance (on the reality television program *I'm a Celebrity . . . Get Me out of Here!* in 2015) than from her achievements as a champion swimmer. Investigate what students know about Leisel already, and what impression they think she is trying to make with this cover photo.

KWL Chart

Students create a three-column chart with the headings 'What I **Know**', 'What I **Want** to Know' and 'What I Have **Learnt**'. With a partner, they fill in the columns. In the first column, they list facts they already know about Leisel; in the second, they write a list of questions they would like to ask Leisel or have answered by the text. They will complete the third column during the reading, as they find answers to these questions.

Prologue

The opening few pages of this text are confronting and raise the issues of mental illness and suicide. The prologue doesn't give away the story, so readers don't yet know how Leisel ended up in this dark place. The events of the prologue should also be discussed in context, once readers have read further, but begin by discussing its effect as a starting point for Leisel's story.

1. Why do you think the authors choose to include this prologue? Why have they chosen to start the book with this event?
2. What does this prologue reveal about Leisel's motivations to tell her story?
3. Do you think this prologue is designed simply to shock? Or do you think it is the most important event in the text, through which the rest of Leisel's life must be considered?
4. If you turned this short piece of writing into an image, what would you draw? Alternatively, if it inspired you to write song lyrics, what would you write?

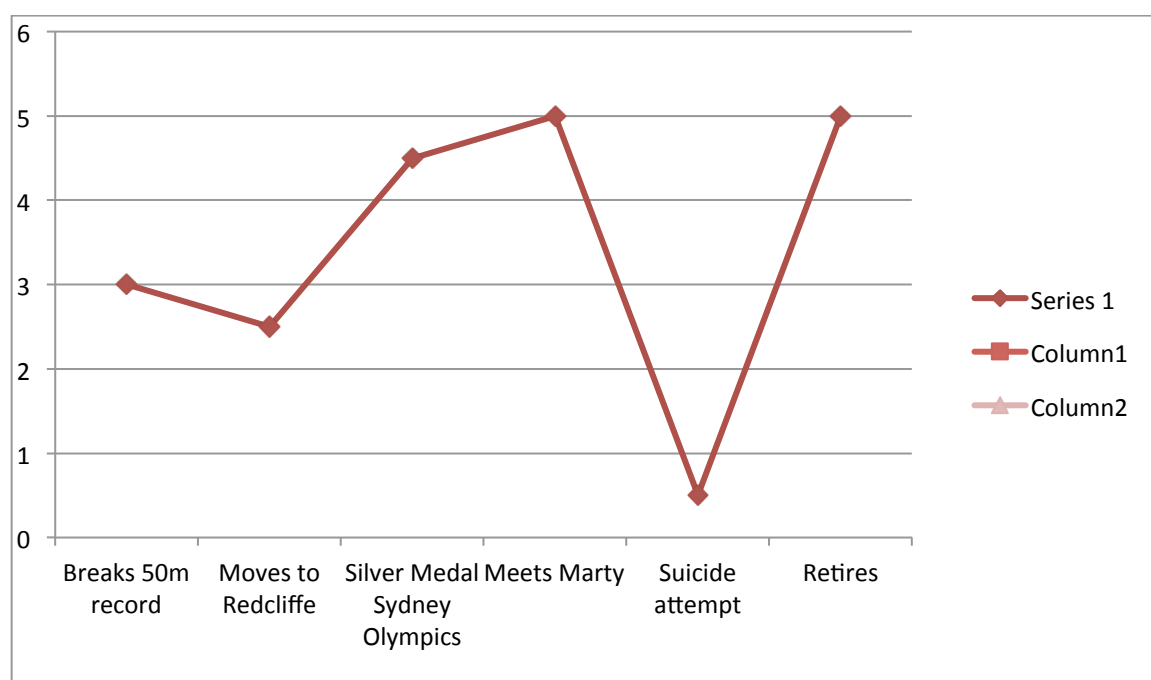
Key Events

Reading Journal

Body Lengths is a lengthy book and given its form as a biography it details a lot of dates, places and names. It would be helpful for students to jot down notes at the completion of each chapter, particularly to map out the highs and lows of Leisel's swimming career. The activities listed below will help students follow the journey Leisel takes her readers on – in both her swimming accomplishments and her internal struggles – to find the success and fulfilment she seeks.

Hot Spots

Students work in pairs to create a list of the twenty most important events in the text. From their list, they then choose ten events that represent the most important highlights and lowlights of Leisel's life to this point. In pairs, they should justify their decisions about which events are the most important. (They could write each event on a strip of paper and decide which to discard. This engages the kinaesthetic learners among them more than working on computer.) Have students order the events chronologically and then turn them into a graph that represents the highs and lows. Students then choose one of the 'highs' and one of the 'lows' and draw a symbol that best represents each of these experiences.



Human Timeline

Divide the class in half. Create a list of events, ensuring that there is one event per student for half the class (i.e. if there are twenty-two students, choose eleven events). Write each event on an A4 sheet. Distribute the sheets to half the class and have each student with a sheet find a relevant quote for that time in the narrative. The other half of the class needs to arrange the students in order as they hold their cards up, quote side showing. When they have agreed on the order, students flip over the cards and reveal the event they are representing. Students then make changes as they need to. You could repeat this task with a different list of events and reversing the groups.

KEY EVENTS

- **1985 – born in Katherine.**
- **Six months later, moves with her family back to Sydney and then north to a small town 11 kilometres west of Caboolture.**
- **1997 – father's business has gone bankrupt, they lose the house and her father leaves.**

- **1997** – at twelve, breaks the 50-metre breaststroke record at the **School Sport Australia Swimming Championships**.
- **1999** – begins training at Redcliffe with **Ken Wood**.
- **2000** – qualifies fastest for the 100-metre breaststroke, gaining a spot in the **Olympic Games** – at fourteen.
- **Sydney Olympics 2000** –wins two silver medals.
- **End of 2001** – finishes Year 10 and leaves school.
- **2002 Manchester Commonwealth Games** – wins gold in the 100-metre and 200-metre breaststroke events.
- **2003 Barcelona World Championships** – **Stilnox** use is widespread in the Australian team.
- **2004 Athens Olympics** – comes third in the 100-m and is devastated. **Dawn Fraser** describes her in the press as a ‘spoiled brat’.
- **Leisel changes coaches. Stephan Widmer** is her new coach.
- **2005 World Aquatics Championships in Montreal** – first individual gold medal at the world level.
- **2006 Commonwealth Games Melbourne** – three individual gold, 100-metre world record, medley gold medal and world record.
- **December 2006** Leisel is awarded the **People’s Choice Award** for swimming by the Australian public and it is the achievement she is the most proud of that year.
- **Dad** contacts the paper wanting to be part of her life.
- **Leisel meets Marty Pask** and falls in love.
- **April 2007:** Starts working with **Rohan Taylor** and his squad in Melbourne.
- **Spring 2007:** **Marty** proposes and **Leisel** accepts.
- **Begins a highly restrictive diet** on the advice of her gym coach.
- **2008 Beijing Olympics:** **Marty** accuses her of cheating on him; she wins gold for the 100-metre breaststroke; gold in the women’s medley relay.
- **After Beijing Olympics,** breaks up with **Marty**.
- **2010 Delhi Commonwealth Games** – **Leisel** wins three gold and a silver medal.
- **2011 Sierra Nevada** – high altitude training. **Plans suicide**.
- **Quits Rohan’s team** and moves back to **Queensland**. **Begs Michael Bohle** to coach her and he reluctantly agrees.
- **March 2012** – despite being unwell, qualifies for the **London Olympics**.
- **The toxic culture of the Australian swim team** becomes apparent.
- **The Herald Sun** run front-page story about her weight.
- **Swims the 100-metre breaststroke** for the last time and comes fifth. **The women’s medley team** get a silver medal.
- **16 November 2012** – announces her retirement.

- **Channel Ten invite her to take part in the reality television show *I'm A Celebrity . . . Get Me out of Here!*. She is the first person voted off the show but loved the opportunity to show a truer side of herself.**

Characters

LEISEL JONES

"With one single swim, I have forged my identity. I am Leisel Jones, the swimmer."
(p.44)

"This is my job. I know what to do." (p.116–17)

"It was lucky it was me who was singled out." (p.271)

"I have never been as thankful for the support of the public as I am this week. And never as thankful as I am in this moment. I grin, wave and soak it up. I love these people. I love this sport." (p.272)

Body Lengths is a biography, but it is told through the voice of Leisel. She is the narrator of her own story and everything is shown from her perspective. The narrative follows her journey from being a kid growing up in country Queensland, to a teenage girl competing with the world's best, and finally to the only Australian athlete to have competed in four Olympic Games. She is a force to be reckoned with both in and out of the pool, but her biggest struggle seems to be the one she fights within herself.

Leisel is defined by her swimming accomplishments. Swimming is the central focus of her life from when she first begins competing at a local club. Her competitive spirit and desire to be the best she can be then propel her into a professional swimming career.

Leisel seems to have an innate drive to swim, to compete and to win. Her coaches and her mum are happy to support her and can see the talent within her, but ultimately it is her own drive and absolute desire to win that enables her to achieve remarkable goals in her swimming career. This drive enables her to spend hundreds of early mornings swimming laps. Her mother gives her unwavering support, but never pushes her to swim: it is Leisel's choice.

Perhaps what makes Leisel's achievements even more significant is her private struggles. Her father leaves the family when Leisel is only twelve. Leisel and her mother are left bankrupt, and her father's absence scars Leisel emotionally.

Leisel learns to make difficult decisions from a young age, and she doesn't shy away from them. Leisel moves to Redcliffe Swimming Club, despite how intimidated she felt, and later quits Ken Wood's team when she feels she needs a change, despite the success she has achieved under him. She helps pay the bills from a very young age. And later she moves to Melbourne to be closer to her boyfriend Marty Pask, despite the upheaval it throws her training in to.

Leisel is incredibly hard-working and disciplined, but her desperation to win has horrifying consequences for her mental health. She feels pressure from the Australian media, and comments made by swimming legend Dawn Fraser fuel public criticism of Leisel. Coaches

insinuate she needs to lose weight to swim faster and her boyfriend accuses her of cheating on him on the eve of an Olympic final. Yet every time Leisel is challenged, pressured or criticised, she seems to find the strength within herself to face the critics and prove them wrong.

But eventually it takes its toll and in Sierra Nevada, in the midst of intense altitude training, Leisel plans to kill herself. She wants it all to be over: the pain of her dad leaving, the pressure of expectation, the heartbreak of losing her boyfriend, and the confusion of not knowing what else to do other than swim. It has all become too much and Leisel is ready to give up. Her coach at the time, Rohan, happens to walk in just in time and she is sent home immediately.

Leisel doesn't tell her mum how close she came to taking her own life, and somehow she manages to find a way to keep going. But much of her time is spent in the depths of despair, fighting the blackness of depression that threatens to envelop her again, once and for all. Despite this, she moves back to Queensland and continues to swim. There, she qualifies for her fourth Olympic games, becoming the first Australian swimmer to compete at four Olympics.

Unfortunately, London does not prove to be an enjoyable experience for Leisel. She discovers a negative attitude in the Australian swimming team, and sees instances of fellow swimmers bullying junior team members. Furthermore, an article is released showing an unflattering photo of Leisel, and implying she is too fat to be competing. Again, despite it all, Leisel swims well.

Leisel ends her career on a high and is finally able to see a life for herself beyond the pool. She takes up a position on the commentary team with Channel Ten and later appears on a reality TV show. Leisel still wants the public to see the 'real' Leisel. Perhaps, with this book, they finally will.

1. What is surprising about Leisel as a child? How does this define her personality later in life?
2. The language of this text seems to present an authentic version of Leisel. Give some examples of Leisel being honest to herself and down to earth in the language she uses.
3. What moment do you think Leisel might be proudest of in her swimming career? Why?
4. Why do you think Leisel's father chose to go to the media to try to reconcile with Leisel? Is her response to this approach fair?
5. Do you think in hindsight Leisel sees how damaging Marty was to her sense of self?
6. What response do you think Dawn Fraser, Paul Kent, Stephanie Rice or Matt Targett might have to this text being published?
7. Why do you think Leisel has decided to share her story now?
8. How might Leisel describe herself now, at this point in her life?
9. Does it surprise you that she no longer swims?

WRITING TASK

- Write an epilogue to *Body Lengths*, in Leisel's voice. What moment might she choose to focus on? Would it link in some way to the prologue? What would her final words be?

MUM

“There are not many things in life that Mum will stick to her guns about. Not softly spoken, passive Mum. But learning to swim is one of them ... It's important to her that I'm safe in the water. So much so, she becomes a swimming teacher in exchange for my swimming lessons, which she can't afford any other way.” (p.14)

“Her attitude towards swimming is always, ‘If you enjoy it, then go. But if you don't, then don't.’ ... Supporting is different to pushing: Mum is never a pushy sports parent.” (p.21)

At the tender age of fifteen, Leisel Jones competes at the Sydney Olympic Games. She is in the throes of puberty, standing on the world stage, competing her heart out for her country. She has got there through sheer will and determination, but also with the help and support of her mum. Leisel's father walked out on his family when Leisel was twelve. He left them bankrupt, and Leisel feels betrayed by him. Leisel and her mum struggle to pay the bills and make a life for themselves with just the two of them.

Leisel's mum supports her in every way she can. She is the first person to take Leisel to swimming lessons, even becoming a swimming teacher herself to support her daughter. As Leisel grows up, she spends countless hours ferrying her daughter to swimming training, often before dawn. She becomes her taxi driver, sounding board and main companion. Leisel says her mum never forced her to swim, nor was she a pushy parent, but she did teach her that if she wanted to compete, and wanted to win, she needed to work hard. Her mum was the calm, constant voice in Leisel's life, the person who reassured her, challenged her to keep going by helping her realise what it was she really wanted, and would have allowed her to stop whenever she wanted.

In 2000, Leisel's mum could see that while Leisel might be feeling lonely, she would regret it if she came home too early. And later, she could see that Marty Pask was not the best match for her daughter. But knowing Leisel better than she knew herself, her mum knew when to stay silent and just be present.

Leisel's mum seems to put her own life on hold to ensure Leisel has the best chance of succeeding. Leisel is acutely aware of the sacrifices her mother makes for her swimming. Might this be why Leisel doesn't tell her mother about planning to kill herself? No doubt, Leisel's mother would have offered some careful advice if she had spoken to her.

1. Describe the relationship between these two women, using adjectives from the text. Choose two defining moments that symbolise the bond they share.
2. If you could ask Leisel's mother what has made her proudest of her daughter, what might she answer?

3. What was the motto or mantra that Leisel's mother gave her? How was this helpful for her?
4. Describe what Leisel's mother might have been thinking when Marty asked her permission to marry Leisel.

WRITING TASK

- Imagine Leisel's mum is giving a speech at her twenty-first birthday. What stories would she share with the guests? How would she describe Leisel? What would she like to say to Leisel about what she has achieved until this point in her life?

COLIN CLIFFORD – 'Col' – Burpengary Swimming Club

"This is my challenge: I have to tread water for five minutes, with no breaks, while holding a besser brick above my head. If I can do this, I will earn myself a Mars Bar."
(p.17)

Col is Leisel's first swim coach. He runs the local squad with kids who are keen swimmers and show some promise. Although they work hard during training and compete in the State Titles, Col's club is literally a backyard business. But he can see something in Leisel that hints at what she will go on to achieve: her competitiveness and desire to win. He challenges her to hold a besser brick above her head for five minutes to win a Mars Bar. The first time she attempts it, she nails it. This shows the exceptional determination young Leisel has, and it only intensifies as she gets older. Col can already see that this is a young athlete who will always do her best, no matter what the cost, to succeed. She is driven to win. Col gives Leisel a taste of success. The competitive seed is already planted in Leisel, but Col and his squad allow it to grow until eventually she is too big for this local backyard club. But she will always remember Col fondly and the love she had for swimming when she worked with him in Burpengary.

1. What does the besser brick symbolise?
2. What is the most valuable lesson Col teaches Leisel?
3. Why doesn't Leisel stay at the Burpengary Swimming Club?
4. How would you describe Col's coaching technique or style? Use an animal as a comparison.

WRITING TASK

When Leisel goes to her first Olympic Games at the age of fifteen, imagine Col writes her a letter of support and encouragement. What would this letter say? What stories would he recall about the girl he taught and the champion she has become?

KEN WOOD – Redcliffe Leagues Swimming Coach

“The other thing that doesn’t change – will never change – is Ken. It’s like he prides himself on it. He is consistently tough, consistently consistent. This man will be poolside for the rest of his life.” (p.71)

“To be fair, Ken is more of a father than my real father ever was.” (p.74)

Training with Ken Wood is the next step up from training with Col. He has noticed Leisel and seen talent in her and invited her to come and join his squad. He means business and knows how to train Olympians. He is the head coach at Redcliffe Leagues Swimming Club and he trains some of the best swimmers in the state. The squad wear t-shirts that have a bulldog sitting on the front porch ‘glaring menacingly at passers-by’ with a caption: ‘if you can’t run with the big dawgs, stay under the porch’. And the atmosphere is as threatening as the motto.

Leisel increases her training to every morning before school, and the training is intense. Ken is described as ‘consistently tough and consistently consistent’. There is never an easy session, and it shows. Leisel’s swimming improves rapidly. She is soon not only keeping up with the ‘big dawgs’, but actually beating them. While this improvement is something she has been striving for, it does nothing to help her form friendships among the group. Leisel is a threat, a big one, and with the Sydney Olympics approaching, her fellow swimmers are her rivals.

Ken plays on this fact and builds a competitive spirit between his swimmers. But he also knows just how good Leisel is, and becomes fiercely protective of her in a fatherly way. But to this kid who lacks a father, it feels suffocating. Ken is traditional and controlling. Leisel swims exceptionally well under his guidance, but eventually the relationship reaches a natural end. Leisel doesn’t want to compare herself to other swimmers, and she didn’t have a sports psychologist (Ken doesn’t approve of them) to help her through the disappointment of Athens.

After five years and two Olympics with Ken, Leisel moves on. It is time for a change.

1. What swimming results and accolades does Leisel achieve with Ken as her coach? List as many as you can find.
2. What are some of the strategies Ken uses that are highly effective for Leisel? What are the ones that don’t work so well for her?
3. Leisel describes Ken’s style as “smother-love parenting” (p.116). Give some examples of this.
4. What do you think Ken would say Leisel’s greatest strength as a swimmer was?

WRITING TASK

- Consider all the competitions Ken takes his squad to. Perhaps he makes a speech at the beginning of an event to motivate and inspire his team and keep them focused on their intention. Choose one of the events Leisel competes at while training with Ken and write the speech Ken gives his team as they prepare to swim.

STEPHAN WIDMER

“He even gives me my very own mantra: ‘This is my job. I know what to do.’ ... Stephan teaches me to approach swimming calmly and rationally. ‘You have a job to do, that’s all,’ he tells me.” (pp.116–17)

Stephan, Leisel’s next coach, is indicative of a shift in her life. She has just had a very disappointing meet in Athens, at the Olympics, which she describes as her ‘apocalypse at the Acropolis’, and she decides she needs a change. Ken has trained her for five years and taken her to two Olympics, but Leisel is older now and more experienced and the appeal of swimming has started to lose its shine.

Stephan has a completely different approach to Ken. Leisel attributes some of his meticulous and calm strategising to his Swiss nationality. He teaches Leisel that swimming is her job; she needs to approach each race with a clear plan and feel comfortable that she can do this. He gives her a mantra: ‘This is my office. I know what to do.’ It provides focus. He also explores her mental attitude and whether she enjoys her training. This is a revelation to Leisel: no-one has asked her this before. She has just done it because she can and she is good at it. Stephan’s rational, calm, methodical approach is highly effective for Leisel. Suddenly the gym work is structured and safe; it has a purpose.

Stephan helps Leisel outside the pool as well. He encourages her to forge a life for herself, an identity that is more than just the champion swimmer. With his encouragement and the support of her mum, Leisel enrolls in a diploma of beauty therapy. It changes the way she sees her body, it changes the way she sees herself. She makes friends outside of swimming and she begins to discover a new aspect to herself. It gives her some solace that even without swimming, she has something to offer.

Stephan is pivotal in Leisel’s swimming career, but also in her personal journey, but unfortunately they part on bad terms. She ‘breaks up’ with him over the phone, at her boyfriend Marty’s suggestion and against her better judgement. Leisel ends this professional relationship without any warning and via a telephone conversation. It is one of several rash decisions Leisel makes at Marty’s encouragement.

1. What makes Leisel choose Stephan as a coach? What is appealing about him?
2. Draw a Venn diagram of Ken and Stephan and compare their coaching styles.
3. Choose five of the golden rules Stephan follows as a coach.
4. What is his greatest legacy in Leisel’s career?
5. How would he have responded to the phone call Leisel makes to sack him?

WRITING TASK

- Stephan encourages Leisel to have an interest outside of swimming. At the advice of Stephan and her mother, Leisel enrolls in a beauty therapy course. Write the reference Stephan could have written for her to submit with her application to enrol in the course. What aspects of her personality would help her study and then pursue a career in this field?

MARTY PASK

“I re-read Marty’s text message and feel awkward again. I can’t shake the sense this is all about him. Like he’s tied me down. He’s got bragging rights now. To what, I’m not sure. But already I feel like this engagement is nothing to do with me.” (p.189)

Marty is perhaps one of the most influential people in Leisel’s life, but not necessarily always for the best. He is an AFL footballer playing at the Brisbane Lions when the two are first introduced. She meets him at a time when she should be focusing on her preparation for the World Championships in Melbourne. After her disappointing Athens Olympics experience, she is desperate to do well in this meet. Her friend Louise is interested in Marty after meeting him, but instead of pursuing him herself, she sets Leisel and Marty up together. Leisel turns her life upside down for Marty. She breaks up with the boyfriend she is seeing at the time, moves to Melbourne, sacks her coach and has to find a new team and coach to prepare with for the upcoming Olympics. At first she is happy. She loves her life in Melbourne, the new friends she makes outside of swimming, spending time with Marty and sharing an understanding of the life of an elite athlete. She was struggling with her swimming prior to meeting Marty, and both her physical and mental health were feeling the strain. The move to Melbourne helps, until a few things happen to change all this.

First, Louise calls Leisel to tell her of rumours that Marty is cheating on her. Leisel is furious, but not with Marty. Then they head off on a romantic weekend and Marty proposes. Leisel accepts but is disappointed that he chose to ignore her preferred choice of ring. He then sends a message from her phone that sounds nothing like how she would announce her engagement. She is overwhelmed by a sense of panic and fear that this decision is not a good one. But it isn’t until Marty loses his place at the Western Bulldogs and is forced into an early retirement that their relationship really shifts. At the Beijing Olympics, Marty is demanding – his behaviour is especially selfish given that, as an athlete himself, he should understand the demands of competing at this level. The night before an important race, Marty calls and keeps Leisel on the phone, accusing her of cheating and disrupting her preparation. She is completely exhausted, and the next day fails to get the gold medal. Early in the relationship, Marty seemingly has her best interests at heart. Leisel is adamant that moving to Melbourne was necessary and essential to her success at Beijing. However, in Beijing we see a more selfish side to Marty and the relationship doesn’t recover. Leisel acknowledges many good things about Marty: she could have presented a much bleaker picture of a man who was defined by his status as a footballer and driven by his own ego. He was unable to step back and let her achieve the success she had worked so hard for in Beijing. Having said that, there are always two sides to the story, and it would be fascinating to hear what Marty might have to say about Leisel’s version of events.

1. What is your first impression of Marty?
2. What is the irony in Leisel’s reaction to Louise being interested in Marty? Strangely, she never revisits her own advice about staying away from AFL footballers despite his behaviour. Why might this be?

3. How do you feel when you read Leisel's account of their engagement? How much of this perspective is coloured by hindsight?
4. Why do you think Marty behaves the way he does in Beijing?

WRITING TASK

- *New Idea*, or a similar magazine, have asked for an interview with Marty Pask after his break up with Leisel. Write the version of events he shares with the public.

ROHAN TAYLOR (Melbourne Coach)

“It’s unlike any relationship I’ve had with a coach before. Rohan is very professional but also very welcoming too. I feel like I can say anything to him, tell him anything about how I’m feeling or what’s going on in my life.” (p.179)

Rohan represents a new start for Leisel, and with this comes a new approach to swimming. Rohan has a personal impact on Leisel as well as a professional one: he gives her a sense of belonging. Leisel has swum for thousands of hours in other squads, with different coaches, for as long as she can remember. But the way she describes Rohan and his team indicates that this was an environment Leisel genuinely enjoyed. She felt like an integral member in a high-functioning family. Her fellow swimmers in Melbourne were not considered rivals, but teammates, and training was punctuated with calls of support and encouragement to each other. This is a stark contrast to the competitive atmosphere Ken Wood fostered in his squad. Leisel speaks fondly of Rohan, his wife and daughters, and likens them to a second family away. Having a sense of community must have been significant to Leisel, as she had left everything at home behind except her boyfriend.

Rohan has an American style of training and adds dry-land training to Leisel's regime. She spends time at the velodrome and in the weights room with Jeremy Oliver, the gym coach. A remark from Jeremy ignites her obsession with weight loss. He suggests that if she was lighter, she would swim faster. So in typical Leisel style, she throws herself into limiting her calorie intake. This is the start of a very damaging phase of Leisel's life, and eventually gets out of control. Her mental health is declining, her competitive drive has her by the throat and then her boyfriend accuses her of cheating on him on the eve of her 100-metre race at the Olympics. Rohan witnesses all of this. But the worst is yet to come.

Leisel feels Rohan gives her a lot of support: he says the right things, and shares her focus and her fears. And it is Rohan who stumbles across her in Sierra Nevada when she has hit absolute rock bottom, considering taking her own life.

Rohan is remarkable for Leisel in many ways during their time together. Not only does she finally win her individual gold medal under his guidance, and survive an broken engagement and a deep depression that led her to consider killing herself, but she also keeps competing despite all this. Rohan and Lisa are the only people who know that Leisel was extremely close to going through with her plan to take her own life.

Rohan is a stable, solid support for Leisel, but for some reason he refuses to allow her to change gym coaches. Leisel doesn't blame Jeremy for contributing to her eating disorder, desire to self-harm or worsening depression, but she feels she can no longer work with this

man because she feels miserable training with him. Rohan refuses her request. Their relationship ends. Perhaps it has run its course or perhaps there is more to this story. Leisel still speaks fondly of Rohan, but their partnership comes to an end.

1. Training with Rohan and his squad is vastly different to any of Leisel's other training experiences. List the differences and similarities.
2. There are a number of key events that affect this coaching partnership. Choose five and rank them from the most significant to the least significant.
3. Describe the relationship Leisel and Rohan have. How does Leisel change while working with him?
4. Why do you think he agrees to keep her suicide attempt strictly confidential? Do you think it is in Leisel's best interests?
5. What makes Rohan refuse to allow her to change gym coaches? How much do you think he knows about Jeremy and the impact he has on Leisel?

LISA STEVENS (Sports Psychologist)

“When she tells me about the pressure, about her perfectionism, about always striving to be better and better, I think: Oh- that! Yes, that. You felt that too? It wasn't just me! I want to cry when I hear that I'm not alone.” (p.227)

One of the glaring absences in Leisel's biography is any reference to close friendships. She mentions in passing lots of girls she swam with and spent time with, but she doesn't seem to consider many of them close friends. Lisa Stevens is one of the few women in the text that she seems to find an affinity with and be honest with. Lisa is not a rival, nor a fellow competitor: she is a sports psychologist. Although she was not a swimmer, Lisa has experience competing at an international level as an equestrian, and Leisel feels an affinity with her. She can identify so profoundly, with the perfectionism and pressure Lisa describes that Leisel feels she might cry with relief.

Lisa is another professional in Leisel's life. They meet because of swimming and swimming is their focus, but Leisel describes her support as one would describe that of a dear friend. From Lisa, there is no judgement or expectation, just acceptance and understanding, and sadly this seems to be something that is very rare in the life of an elite athlete.

Lisa and Leisel start working together after the Commonwealth Games in Delhi. Her depression has been around for some time, but Ken would never let her work with a sports psychologist as he thought this signified weakness. By this stage in her life, Leisel has competed at three Olympic Games and countless other international meets. She has been engaged, moved states, and endured the humiliation and pressure of the media and the criticism of sporting greats including Dawn Fraser. Lisa comments to Leisel that she has been sweeping a lot of things under the rug: “A lot of dust. One or two crumbs. Maybe even a mouse.” But it is Leisel's response that is really telling, as she retorts; “Lisa, there's a whole moose under the rug” (p.228). As she strives to maintain an upbeat facade in the swimming community, what is being hidden proves to be doing some serious personal damage. And Lisa is one of the few people who know the truth.

1. What is it about Lisa that Leisel identifies with so strongly? Do you think the success of their relationship has anything to do with the fact that Lisa is one of the few professional women Leisel refers to?
2. What is the significance of the moose metaphor?
3. Do you think the relationship between Leisel and Marty might have been any different if Lisa had been working with Leisel during this time?
4. Do you think Lisa would have recommended that Leisel tell her mother about the suicide attempt? Is it the right decision?

WRITING TASK

- As a psychologist, Lisa would have reported on each of the meetings she had with Leisel. Write the very first report she would have written after their first appointment. Now choose another moment much later in Leisel's swimming career and write a report after she has met with Leisel. What might have changed in their relationship, in Leisel's feelings towards swimming and her own perception of herself?

PAUL KENT

“Imagine if a middle-aged male journo plastered a fourteen-year-old girl in her togs across the papers and implied she was ‘fat’! I would be livid. You can really damage people with implications like that, and the thought that it might happen to someone else – someone more vulnerable – makes me so angry. I’ve been around the traps: I could handle it. It was lucky it was me who was singled out.” (p.271)

“I am here and I’m alive: that’s enough for me. And if Paul Kent had any idea what an achievement that is, he would never have written that article.” (p.271)

We don't 'see' Paul Kent himself in the text, other than in a fleeting encounter with a furious Leisel Jones. But his impact on her is profound. Paul Kent is the face, or name, behind the mounting media pressure and criticism Leisel endures at the London Olympics. His article questioning her fitness and body shape is deliberately inflammatory and controversial: he doesn't even seek out the subject herself for comment. It causes Leisel enormous anguish. This is a woman who has represented her country at four Olympic Games. No other Australian swimmer has done that. Yet Paul Kent chose to publish an obviously unflattering photo of her. Why did he do so? Was his intention to get under her skin and fire her up? Was it to criticise the preparation of athletes for the London Games? Or was it to make a name for himself? At the very least, it was thoughtless and undermined the confidence of someone who had the potential to win Australia a rare gold medal at these disappointing games.

Leisel's response reveals the maturity and inner strength she has had to develop as a form of self-preservation. Her roommate discovers the article online, and team management don't come to speak to her about it – she goes to them. When she was younger, she was attacked by Dawn Fraser for her attitude, and now a journalist who she is not familiar with is criticising her appearance. And she weathers it all. Better than that, she uses the criticism

as fuel, and then gets some sweet revenge. Eventually she even feels grateful that this attack was pitched at her rather than a teenager on the verge of their swimming career. She takes one for the team. When she finally meets Paul Kent, it gives her great pleasure to tell him just what she thinks of him. Perhaps if he had met her in the first place, that article would never have been written.

1. Describe your response when you first hear about the article.
2. Why do you think Paul Kent wrote it? What was he hoping to achieve? Did he succeed?
3. Do you think the article would have been different if Paul Kent had spoken to Leisel? How so?
4. What is significant about Leisel's reaction to this article?

WRITING TASK

Write a letter to the editor in response to Paul Kent's article. Choose a specific persona, have a clear argument, use persuasive language and keep it brief.

STEPHANIE RICE

“Not everyone is going to like me and I'm fine with that. But the sort of bitchy behaviour Steph Rice dishes out is unnecessary and hurtful. I'd much rather have it out with her if she has an issue with me.” (p.254)

Leisel is adamant that moving to Melbourne just months before the Beijing Olympics “was one of the best decisions of my life”. She truly believes the unhappiness she was feeling about swimming improved because of the relocation and change in coach. But when things end with Rohan and she returns to Queensland to train for her fourth and final Olympics campaign, Leisel feels a sense of closure that she is returning to her roots, going back to where it all began.

In 2011, Leisel joins Michael Bohl's squad in Brisbane. There are already three Olympic gold medallists in this squad and Leisel describes it as “big, slick and intimidating”. By now, she has a few squads to compare it to and she is a veteran of the pool: an accomplished veteran, at that. This squad is completely different to the supportive family she felt part of in Melbourne with Rohan. These swimmers are highly competitive and view each other as rivals rather than fellow competitors.

It is here that Leisel meets Stephanie Rice. While they train together and Stephanie initially befriends her and includes her in social events, things change dramatically by the time they start competing. At this stage Leisel is not in a good headspace. She is living with her mum at home, is on anti-depressants and is trying to decide whether she can endure all that is required to get to the next Olympics. Bitchiness and bullying begin within the team, and it seems to be coming from Stephanie Rice. Leisel becomes the subject of rumours, gossiping, lies and exclusion and not just during training. Leisel has to find it within herself not only to compete at her fourth Olympics, but also to endure the unfriendly attitude of her teammates. Leisel reports that the situation is making her life at training ‘a misery’. But

rather than retaliate behind Stephanie's back, she decides to confront her. Stephanie hears her out, denies it and leaves. But the bullying in this team continues and Rice is only one part of it.

1. What is your first impression of Stephanie Rice in this text? Does it change based on what you knew about her prior to reading *Body Lengths*?
2. Why does Leisel include the section on when they first met and trained together?
3. Have you ever been in a situation like Leisel's where you've heard that someone is spreading rumours about you or teasing you? What did you do? Do you agree with Leisel's approach? What else could she have done?

WRITING TASK:

- Imagine this book is made into a film. Choose a scene with Stephanie Rice that might be included in the film. Write the script for that scene, including the dialogue for the key characters.

Matt Targett

“But what I won't say publicly – what I want to say, but don't – is that I feel the ones who've treated Poort and other junior members of the team worst are Matt Targett, Eamon Sullivan and James Magnussen.” (p.278)

Students reading this text may well remember the London Olympics. They may remember the expectation, the hype and the profound disappointment. The Australian swimming team did not deliver; they did not even come close. One of the biggest names at the games was James Magnussen and Leisel names him and her friend Matt Targett, as well as Eamon Sullivan as being among those who behaved badly at London.

Leisel reports that she saw a culture of bullying and intimidation within the squad, with some swimmers perceiving themselves as individuals as more important than the team. She says this is very different from the team atmosphere at previous Olympics. As an experienced team member, Leisel takes no prisoners in terms of telling her fellow swimmers how she feels. She dresses down James Magnussen for not attending an important ceremony where athletes receive their team pockets, she confronts Stephanie Rice, and finally, on the trip home, she has it out with her friend Matt Targett about his own behaviour.

Leisel witnesses Matt and others on the bus on the way to the airport tease Jarrod Poort, a junior member of the team. It is the final straw for Leisel. She strips Matt down publicly, confronting him verbally about his role in the toxic team culture. She realises that confronting her friend means that their relationship will change – and it does. She reports that Matt later apologises but they are never as close as before.

Leisel's anger and disappointment with the team culture lead her to speak to the press about it after the Games, but without naming anyone. She now names Magnussen, Sullivan and Targett as the biggest contributors to the bullying of junior team members.

1. Why do you think Leisel included the argument with Matt at the airport? How do you feel after reading it?
2. Why does Leisel include the anecdote about James Magnussen missing the tradition of being given their pocket squares? How does this event affect readers' perception of him?
3. Does reading about Leisel's experiences at London and her view of the team attitudes change your perceptions of the Olympics? Is her view sympathetic?
4. How might James Magnussen, Matt Targett or Eamon Sullivan respond to being named as treating junior team members badly? Would they be expecting this?

WRITING TASK

- Have you ever had to confront a friend who was behaving in a way you didn't approve of? What led you to do so? Imagine a situation in which you see a friend behaving in a cruel way to someone else. What would you say to them? Write out the dialogue you might have.

LEARNING TASKS

HOT SEAT

Students form small groups. Allocate one character to each group of students. Students write three questions their character would like to ask each of the other characters. They then need to choose a representative from their group to be their character and create a list of hypothetical questions and answers that the other groups might prepare. Each character then takes the 'Hot Seat' and fields the questions from each other 'character', attempting to answer them as authentically as they can.

THIS IS YOUR LIFE

The learning activity is based on a television program of this name. A well-known person is invited onto the show and their achievements in their field are celebrated with testimonials from important people in their life. However, each guest is not introduced by name, but instead with a quote, or something that is symbolic of their relationship. It could be a song, an object or a video clip. The celebrity has to try and work out who this person is before they are reunited.

In small groups, have students decide which four people would appear on their version of 'This is Your Life' for Leisel Jones. Have members of each group play these four people, and have them appear and share an anecdote of a time they shared with Leisel. Each group presents their version to the class.

Themes and Issues

LEARNING TASK

Some of the key themes and issues raised in the text are listed below, along with pertinent quotes and a key passage that illustrates an example of that theme. Have students form small groups and allocate each group a theme. Each group should explore their theme and construct an activity for the rest of their class to participate in, relating to their theme.

Students should follow these steps:

- Read the selected passage and highlight key quotes or events that are revealed in this section.
- Consider the quotes as other examples of this theme.
- Identify three key events, five quotes and all the characters that explore this theme in the text.
- Create a learning activity that will develop their peers' understanding of the way this idea is explored in this text. Suggestions include: creative writing tasks, oral language tasks or dramatic presentations. Other suggestions are listed below.
- Each group presents their understanding to the rest of the class and engages their peers in the learning activity.

Possible activities

ONE-MINUTE DEBATE

Students are divided into two teams and allocated the positive or negative side of the argument. Each student has one minute to present their argument, citing an example from the text, and a rebuttal if required. For example: 'Marty Pask had the worst impact on Leisel of anyone she mentions in the text', or 'All of the pressure Leisel feels, she puts on herself'.

THE INVESTIGATION

Imagine that the Swimming Australia have decided to investigate claims of bullying and unsportsmanlike conduct within the London Olympic Swimming Team. Create a list of people to interview, questions to ask and some possible answers to these questions.

BODY IMAGE CAMPAIGN

Leisel has been invited to be the face and voice of a new body image campaign targeting teenage girls. Decide which company is running this campaign, what the slogan might be, the images that will support it and how it will be presented to the public.

Persistence/Competitiveness pages 13–23 Burpengary Swimming Club

"All I know is that I need to win, and swimming fulfils that need. I need to be a winner: swimming gives me that." (p.18)

"Ken's sets are gruelling. They're ridiculous. But because he is my coach, because the gauntlet has been thrown down, I plough on. I will make this happen. I will cry and quiver and burn until it is done." (p.73)

“At this single moment in time, no-one in history has ever been faster than me. That is the coolest thing in the world.” (p.95)

Identity pages 35–44 Olympic trials in Sydney

“I am a professional now – an Olympic representative. I will no longer be my dumb, daggy self.” (p.47)

“He makes me feel like a racehorse, not a teenage girl, like my body is a machine to be maintained, not to be enjoyed. I have no control, no independence.” (p.75)

Pressure pages 105–11 Athens Olympics and the negative press

“But the media wants a victor, not a dumb kid, and from the instant my palm touches the wall at 1:08.71, my life changes.” (p.44)

“But for the first time, I am the main breadwinner. And that’s a heavy responsibility for a fourteen-year-old.” (p.52)

“If I don’t have swimming, I don’t have anything... If I’m not good at this, what am I good at?” (p.83)

“Monkey? I turn to my coach and this time I smile for sure. ‘Rohan, that was no monkey. It was a silverback gorilla.’” (p.206)

Body Image pages 192–5 The soup diet

“For someone studying beauty, I am terribly uncomfortable in my own skin.” (p.121)

“I’ve got it into my head that I am too fat and if I can just lose more weight then I will win the 100-metre event for sure. Then this pain will all be worth it.” (p.103)

Mental Health pages 1–4, Prologue

“I have failed; I am a failure ... I want to crawl into bed and never leave it again. I have lost; I am a loser. I am alone and scared, and exposed on the world stage.” (p.110)

“And so begins my long battle with depression. A battle that nearly ends everything.” (p.81)

Inner Strength pages 263–7, Paul Kent article

“Whatever Ken throws at me, whatever drill he dreams up, I do it. Even if it nearly kills me.” (p.29)

“I will make moving to Melbourne the best decision of my life.” (p.172)

Bullying pages 276–9, London Olympics

“In the coming months, I will make statements to the media about the bullying within the team. About the terrible culture, the poor management and the bad behaviour of some of the team.” (p.278)

“Yeah, it’s small-scale, petty stuff, but it’s relentless. And it’s mean. It is not what being in a team is all about.” (p.260)

Symbols and Motifs

Leisel is a straight talker. She is a larger than life character and relies more on colloquial language than figurative language to describe her experiences. At times, symbols and motifs are used in the text to create atmosphere, often around Leisel's state of mind. Some of these symbols are listed below. Some are motifs, in that they are repeated throughout the narrative, whereas others are referred to in isolation – for instance, in a particular scene or context. Invite students to make their own list of the symbols in the text.

- the besser brick
- the Redcliffe Leagues Swimming Club's 'big dawgs' t-shirt and caption
- the peace sign (or 'V for Victory' sign)
- McDonald's cookies
- Ford XR6
- 'fish out of water'
- yellow-gold engagement ring
- moose

Draw It, Quote It, Name It

Organise students into pairs and have them pick a symbol out of a hat. They create a visual representation of their symbol, explore its meaning and find a quote from the text to show how it is used in context. Once completed, students share their visual and quote with the class and the others have to guess which symbol it corresponds with.

Haiku

Invite students to choose one of the symbols and write a haiku poem to explore its significance in the narrative and how it relates to Leisel's experience. Haiku poetry traditionally juxtaposes two images and uses limited words to express meaning. A simple structure to follow is the three-line form with the first line containing five syllables, the second line seven syllables, and the third line five syllables again.

Assessment

CREATIVE RESPONSES

Any of the writing tasks included under the description of each character could be used as an assessment piece. Alternatively, students could be given a table detailing all the possible writing pieces and have to submit a folio of three pieces that add up to a total of 6 points. A sample table is shown below.

ONE POINT	TWO POINTS	THREE POINTS
Report from Lisa Stevens about Leisel's mental health when she first meets her.	Leisel's Mum's speech at her twenty-first birthday.	Script for a scene that would feature in the film version of <i>Body Lengths</i> .
Haiku poem on one of the symbols of the text.	Interview with Marty Pask in a magazine.	Feature article on the toxic culture of the London Olympics.
Letter to the editor in response to Paul Kent's article.	Speech introducing Leisel when she is awarded the People's Choice Swimmer of the Year award.	Transcript of an interview between Leisel and an experienced journalist for a television special.
Own choice of writing piece.	Stephan's recommendation for Leisel's application to a beauty therapy course.	Short story focusing on a particular event described in the text.

ANALYTICAL RESPONSES

1. "I kept her [my real self] shoved under the rug with that moose. I really wish I was more myself. I really wish I had lifted the rug sooner."
Leisel's journey is as much a physical one as a psychological one. To what extent is this true?
2. "I am a fish out of water. Even in the pool."
Most of Leisel's struggle and self-doubt comes from the absence of any feeling of belonging. Do you agree?
3. **The men in Leisel's life are far more influential than the women. To what extent is this true?**
4. **Leisel's greatest swimming achievements are a result of luck and timing as much as hard work and dedication. Discuss.**
5. **Leisel's competitive spirit is more a curse than a blessing: she becomes her own worst enemy. Is this true?**
6. **What is Leisel searching for? Does she find it?**

About Laura Gordon

Laura Gordon is an experienced secondary English teacher. She currently teaches years 7-12 at St Joseph's College, Geelong, where she has taught for the past 10 years. She shares her passion for books and reading by creating engaging curriculum and learning activities for the classroom.



LEISEL JONES retired from swimming in 2012 as the winner of three Olympic gold medals, and many Commonwealth and world championship medals. She was a commentator for the 2014 Commonwealth Games, and recently appeared on the Australian *I'm a Celebrity ... Get Me out of Here!*



FELICITY McLEAN is a freelance writer of fiction and non-fiction. She has written for numerous publications including *The Big Issue*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Herald Sun*, *The Courier Mail*, *The Sunday Times* and *SA Weekend Magazine*, and has published several books.

From the moment I am born, I am like no-one else around me. I am a fish out of water. Even in the pool.

Leisel Jones is rightly regarded as one of the greatest breaststrokes ever. At just fifteen, she won two silver medals at the Sydney Olympic Games in 2000; she went on to win gold at Athens and Beijing, and at London 2012 became the first Australian swimmer to compete at four Olympics.

For the first time, Leisel candidly describes what it's like to be thrust into the limelight so young. She reveals the constant pressure she was under – from coaches, from the media and from herself – to be perfect. Despite the highs of her swimming stardom, she suffered depression, and at one time planned to take her own life. In London, criticised in the media for her weight, and appalled by the bullying and dysfunction in the Australian swim team, Leisel nevertheless handled herself with great composure. She has emerged with maturity and good humour, having finally learnt how to be herself and live with confidence.

Body Lengths is the inspiring story of an Australian sporting hero, told with humour, optimism and style.

Recommended for middle and upper secondary

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