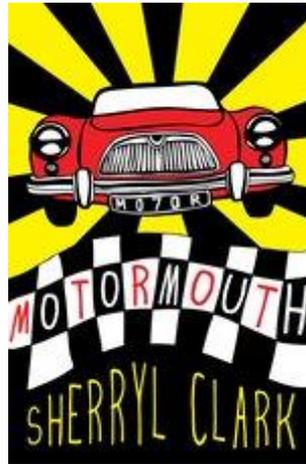


TEACHER'S NOTES

MOTORMOUTH

Sherryl Clark

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What this book is about

Chris is mad about cars and car racing – his dream is to become a mechanic in a car racing team. When the story begins, Chris is grieving for his friend, Dave, who died in a car accident. His mum and dad try to help, and so does his teacher at school, even giving him a lesser punishment for hitting someone. He spends time in the model shop, wishing he could buy some of his favourite model cars, and happens to see a boy his own age steal one. Or did he imagine it?

Then the boy, Josh, turns up at his school as a new pupil, and reveals his father is a racing driver in Europe. This makes him very popular with everyone but, for some reason, Josh decides he wants to be friends with Chris. Finally, Chris lets Josh in, and their new friendship starts to heal Chris's grief. Josh's mum is always working and Josh loves spending time at Chris's house with his family.

But Josh gets up to all sorts of things that worry Chris. He wanders around on his own, and persuades Chris to go into the city with him. He also persuades Chris to have a go at shoplifting a model car, but Chris backs out – it just isn't him. Still, Josh is angry. When Chris's mum finds out he's been in the city without permission, she is angry, too, and grounds him.

At school the next day, Josh ignores Chris and he starts to realise how fake Josh sounds. Chris does some detailed research on the internet and discovers that Alex Carter is not Josh's dad – Josh has made it all up. Chris goes to confront Josh, who reveals he doesn't have a father, and he is desperate to belong to someone, somewhere. He is envious of Chris's family, even his daggy dad, and Chris realises how much he has compared to Josh. He convinces Josh to 'fess up to everyone and they stay friends.

Why I wrote this book (from the author)

When I was in Grade 6, a friend of mine let me down and made me very unhappy. I have since found that many people have had a similar experience, either in Grade 5 or 6. There is something about how our friendships shift in that period of our lives that fascinates me. What does friendship mean? What does loyalty mean? Perhaps most importantly, what does forgiveness of a friend mean? I wanted to explore those ideas and questions.

I also feel that children's grief is often not taken seriously, perhaps because children find it so hard to express how they feel about something so huge. When adults around you seem to just carry on, what are you meant to do, other than the same? How do you make sense of what has happened? My mother died when I was fourteen, so I think some of this has become part of *Motormouth*.

After I wrote *Motormouth* and asked a poet friend to read it for me and give me some feedback, she revealed to me that a friend of hers had done a similar thing – made up a whole fake story about herself – although in my friend's case, she never did find out why. Even now, with the internet, it's possible to do this. In fact, a person can use the internet to make the story seem more real. We live in the era of fake news now, although there was no such thing when I wrote the book. Some of this is explored through the discussion points of this resource.

I have to also say that my husband is a very keen motor racing fan, both of cars and motorbikes. Over the years I have watched many races, both live and on TV, and some of it has seeped into me. My favourite cars and races are the British Supertourers and, although they have more rules now, they are great to watch because there is no holding back – it's full speed and get out of my way!

Verse novels – what is a verse novel?

A verse novel is simply a story told in poems, usually free verse rather than rhyming. It is very difficult to write a good rhyming poem, let alone a whole book-full, and tell a story at the same time. You could talk about a verse novel as having a lot of tiny chapters. They may look small, but each poem should have a reason for being there, and it should both be a poem (not just some chopped up prose) and contribute to the storytelling.

A poem is complete in itself – it will often have a strong last line, leaving the reader with something to think about before going on. It may have a surprise in it. It may show an aspect of the characters, or be a piece of action. It will have tight language, it will have the voice of the storyteller, and it will likely have imagery and metaphors (more on those later).

Often the titles of poems play an important role, too. They can label the poem, introduce what it's about or add something more to the poem.

Themes

There are several themes running through *Motormouth* – on the surface it is an easy story to read, but the themes of friendship and what it means are important to children of this age. One

theme, that of deep grief experienced by a child, could be confronting for some adults to discuss with children, but the story hopefully opens this topic up. Children may find it allows them to talk about losing a loved pet, for example. The theme of truth may also facilitate discussion of dishonesty, lies and perhaps even fake news.

Friendship – what being a friend means, including loyalty, honesty and support.

Honesty.

The importance of family.

Loss and grief.

Aspects of the story to investigate, talk about, think about (themes)

1. What does having a friend mean to Chris? Does it mean shared experiences, likes and dislikes, common interests? What does friendship mean to you?
2. Does Chris's idea of friendship change during the story? How does it change? Why?
3. Why can't Chris talk about losing Dave? Do you think this is a common experience?
4. Josh tries to convince Chris to steal – why do you think he does this?
5. Josh spends a lot of time and energy making up a 'fake dad'. Why do you think it is so important to him?
6. Did you think Chris would stop being Josh's friend when he found out about the lies? Why do you think he forgave Josh?

Other possible topics to discuss and investigate

- What are the favourite things that people like to collect? (see <https://hobbylark.com/collecting/things-to-collect> - a huge list, or perhaps <https://listaka.com/top-15-weird-things-that-people-like-collecting/>)
- What is touring car racing? Where does it take place? What cars are able to compete?
- How would you become a racing car mechanic? What special skills do you need? (see <http://www.redbullholdenracing.com/rbra-careers-how-to-become-a-mechanic/>)
- What dream career might you have? What skills and training would you need?

More advanced topics

What is fake news? How does it spread? Why?

What is identity theft? How might we prevent it? (see <https://www.afp.gov.au/what-we-do/crime-types/fraud/identity-crime>)

Comprehension – reading poetry

The text is compiled of 62 short poems. While all of the story information is contained in the poems, readers may find that there are small gaps, which is intentional on the part of the author. The reader is encouraged to “fill in the gaps” by thinking more about what is happening, and what is suggested or implied by the poems.

For example, in the poem “The first time I saw Josh” on page 6, the poem ends with *then he was gone/ and so was/the red MG*. Before going on to the next poem, the reader can speculate about what might have happened. In the poem “Josh’s mum” on page 34, the poem ends with *Josh looks at her/like he’s waiting/for something/that never comes*. The reader is invited to think about what this might be.

Verses and titles

Most poems are short and in small stanzas or verses. Students can be asked to examine the titles of a range of poems and discuss what they add to the poem. For example, on page 35, the poem title is “Giving in”. It is not stated in the poem what Chris has given in to, but we know from the story that it means he has decided to let Josh be his friend.

Imagery, including similes and metaphors

Imagery is important in poetry, and helps to create pictures in the reader’s mind. Examples are on page 7 (comparing Josh stealing the car to a frog nabbing a fly), on page 12 Chris feels his grief is contagious (as if he has something “catching”), page 33 Josh talks about his racing car dad as if he is a “proud encyclopedia”, page 41 Josh’s eyes pin Chris “like a bug”.

Definitions

Imagery – the words used in a poem that spark off the senses, not just sight but sound, taste, smell and touch. They create a picture in the reader’s mind.

Simile – it makes a comparison between two things, using like or as, e.g. as green as grass, as blue as a winner’s ribbon, as tiny as a flea.

Metaphor – it is like a simile, because it uses a comparison but without the like or as – it directly says one thing is another, e.g. Juliet is a sunflower, George’s hair is a lion’s mane, the sky is a blaze of fire.

Poem writing

Writing poetry is a wonderful way to get your students using language in a simple way, which can then be developed and more complex ideas introduced. With poetry, Sherryl has found the benefit is that even the most challenged children in the class can complete a whole poem or two in a session (unlike story writing). Ideas of language involving simile and metaphor can be introduced, as can building word banks of great words to use. Sherryl also encourages the use of the dictionary to increase word banks, to build confidence and vocabularies.

There are many poetry writing exercises on Sherryl’s website, www.poetry4kids.net, under Teacher’s Resources. If your class has not written poetry before, start with a class poem where everyone writes one line each and the teacher puts them all together. There are suggestions for these (with starting lines) as well as simple poetry writing exercises to get everyone started. Then more exercises are offered that will lead the poetry writing to the next level.

If you want to write poetry based on the poems in *Motormouth*, here are some suggestions.

“Dreaming of cars” page 26 – write a poem in which you are trying to decide between two things, or make a difficult choice. Put the two parts of the poem on opposite sides of the page, as

in this poem. Some suggestions are: taking up the challenge of a dare, deciding whether to eat something strange, deciding whether to try something new.

Similarly, “Talk talk” on page 61 – this is two distinct voices/two characters. The two can be arguing or debating a decision, putting each side. Who wins? Some suggestions are: “You told me a lie”, “Shall we go to ...” or “Why did you ...”

“Bad dream” on page 45 – write a poem about a nightmare, focusing on using imagery to describe it vividly and make it feel real. How can you create emotion in the poem without saying *I feel*? How will it end? (Not with and then I woke up because we already know it’s a dream.)

“Dad” on page 11 – write a poem that describes your dad or mum. What are all the things that are special about them? What makes them different from other mums or dads?

About the author – Sherryl Clark

Sherryl has been writing poetry for more than 30 years. Her first verse novel was *Farm Kid*, published in 2004. Her other verse novels are *Sixth Grade Style Queen (Not!)*, which was a CBCA Honour Book, *Motormouth* and *Runaways*. She also writes lots of other children’s books, from picture books to novels. She teaches creative writing to both adults and children, and does school visits and workshops in her spare time.

She started writing children’s books with a story based on herself as a ballet dancer at ten years old, who was too fat to fit her tutu. *The Too-Tight Tutu* was one of the first Aussie Bites books and was in print for more than 20 years. She wrote lots of Bites and Nibbles, including five Littlest Pirate stories, and three of these were also made into picture books.

She loves history and writing historical novels, doing lots of research and finding out about how people used to live. She spent many years researching pirates, and wrote a middle grade novel called *Pirate X*. Her Our Australian Girl series was about Rose who lived in Melbourne during Federation (1900-1901). She also wrote *Jimmy’s War*, set in Yarraville during World War I, and named her two characters – brothers Jimmy and Arthur – after her grandfather and great-uncle.

Other books by Sherryl Clark (a selection)

The Too-Tight Tutu

The Littlest Pirate and the Stinky Ship (latest Nibble)

Tracey Binns is Trouble

One Perfect Pirouette

Farm Kid

Sixth Grade Style Queen (Not!)

Runaways

The Rose stories – Our Australian Girl

Jimmy’s War

Pirate X

Visit Sherryl’s website at www.sherrylclark.com