

# TEACHERS' RESOURCE KIT

## Longacre Press Young Adult Fiction

# Losing it

Sandy McKay

*"I'll go bonkers in here, Issy. It's like prison except at least in prison you have some freedoms."*

Fifteen-year-old Johanna Morrison is in hospital, writing letters to her best friend, Issy. As part of her therapy Jo is not allowed to leave her room, use the phone, have visitors or even wash her hair. Not unless she agrees to eat. But Jo doesn't want to eat because to her that would mean giving in and losing what little control she has over her life.

Jo suffers from anorexia and her condition has reached crisis point. For now, contact with Issy is the only thing keeping her sane.

*"You are not losing it, Jo. You are going to be fine."*

Jo's letters and diary give us a wry and insightful look at a teenage girl in desperate trouble. Her friend Issy, on the other hand, writes cheerfully of family dramas and hassles at school: a life that Jo has left behind ... at least for now.

What is it in Johanna's past that has brought her to this point? Why does she fear losing control? And will she be brave enough to look at herself as honestly and forgivingly as her best friend does?

**SANDY MCKAY writes a profound and heartfelt story: a landmark novel about the power of friendship and one girl's journey towards independence.**



### SPECIFICATIONS:

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### RESOURCE KIT CONTAINS:

- Author Statement
- Comprehension Questions
- Discussion Topics

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Reg Graham

## Author Statement

Writers have minds like compost heaps. Everything goes in but you never quite know what's going to come out the other end. Or why, or when...

The stories I write usually 'grow' from a mixture of people I know and experiences I've had. Preoccupations, obsessions and random recollections all slosh about together and sometimes it's the oddest thing that sets a story in motion. *Losing It* is no exception.

I was waiting at the traffic lights one day when a sign in the chemist shop window caught my eye. 'Lose Weight. Gain Control. Lose Weight. Gain Control.' An advertisement for a well-known weight reduction product, it read like a mantra and it started me thinking about how obsessed we've become with eating and weight control. I thought back to some conversations I'd had with women suffering from anorexia and bulimia while I was researching for an article. The women I spoke to didn't gain control by losing weight. In fact, they did the opposite. They lost it.

That advertisement started me thinking. Then the character of Jo came to mind and I tried to imagine what it would feel like to be fifteen and hospitalised with an eating disorder. I wondered about what kind of things might have led her there and how she was going to get through. I had stumbled upon something I needed to write about and eighteen months later I'd written *Losing It*.

Writing a book is a journey – an exploration of an idea or character. And the process of writing is a mixture of hard graft and the odd bit of magic. For the magic to happen you need plenty of 'bum glue' and a stubborn confidence in your project. That's the hard part – keeping up the self-belief.

Before *Losing It* I had no plans to write for teenagers (all my other novels have been for younger readers) but the idea took hold and wouldn't let go. I started writing *Losing It* using Jo's voice and for a while the story felt gloomy and dark. Luckily Issy came along to provide a counterpoint of sanity and ordinariness to the story. Then I struck on the idea of using letters and diary entries and slowly the book found its shape.

In writing this story I drew on my experience as a freelance journalist. Several years ago, while writing an article on anorexia I put an ad in the paper asking for people who might be willing to share their experience of the disorder. Six women replied. Their stories were all unique and incredibly sad but I was impressed by the courage they showed as they struggled to get well. I couldn't have written this story without the willingness of those people to share their personal stories.

One woman told me that having anorexia was like being caught in a web, which gave me the idea about the spider. Like I said, writers have minds like compost heaps.

*Sandy McKay*

# Comprehension

pp 7–9

What is Jo's first impression of the hospital as she reveals it to Issy? What does this reveal about the circumstances of her being there?

What does Jo reveal (consciously or not) about her underlying feelings?

p 11

How has Issy's mother reacted to Jo going into hospital?

p 12

What is the unlikely use of a protractor Issy points out? Who is the person they are talking about and what is their current role?

p 14

Why isn't Jo allowed outside?

p 17

What do we find out about Jo's mum?

p 19

What does Jo believe about herself?

What is odd about Caroline's behaviour?

p 21

How does Issy deflect the truth about Jo's hospitalisation?

p 23

Why didn't Jo and her mother read to the end of *Charlotte's Web*? What does this suggest about them?

p 24

What is the dictionary definition of anorexia? How does the doctor's attitude seem to imply a more dramatic meaning?

p 25

Why would all the things Jo lists (exercise, going to the shop, visitors, peeing in private) have been banned?

p 27

What does Jo say here that reveals her preoccupation?

p 28

What disorder does Kara have? How does it manifest itself?

p 33

What does Jo think the purpose of the exercise with the picture of the girl in *Dolly* magazine?

p 36

What is odd about the description Jo gives of her mother in her letter to the Missing Persons Department? What does this suggest about the situation?

p 37

What tactic does Jo employ in the end, when writing to her mother?

p 41

What little admissions reveal the underlying feelings in this letter?

p 42

What tactics are applied to people weighing under 43kg? What do you think the purpose of this is?

pp 45–46

How is Issy's attitude obviously more healthy?

pp 47–48

Why is Jo so interested in Charlotte?

p 51

What echoes Jo's situation in her dad's letter?

p 53

Why does Issy feel guilty?

pp 64–66

Why is Jo sad about the other patients? How does her mood sound from this letter?

p 69

What are the medical implications of Jo's behaviour? Does she seem to take this seriously?

pp 71–72

What is different about Francine, other than her appearance?

pp 76–78

What is revealing about the jokes that Jo says are her favourites?

Why does Jo find Dot helpful/easy to talk to?

**p 81**

What is Issy's belief regarding build and weight?

**pp 85–87**

Does Jo believe she has anorexia? What is her explanation and what does this suggest about her thinking?

What does Jo reveal about her mum?

**p 91**

What does Leon mean when he says 'this is the only thing we have left...?'

**p 97**

What is contradictory about what Jo lists and 'can't do without' and the things she lists as fears?

**pp 100–101**

What does Jo reveal about her mother? What emotions is Jo feeling? What is her explanation for her bingeing reaction?

**pp 102–107**

What appears to be wrong with Jo's mother? What treatment did she have?

**p 119**

What triggers this second bout of bingeing?

**p 126**

What causes the excessive hair growth?

**pp 129–130**

Why did Jo's mother always park the car far away?

**pp 131–132**

How does Jo feel about her mother's reaction when Matt is found?

What happened that changed Jo? How has this led to her current situation?

**pp 133–135**

What does Jo think is a direct consequence of her words?

**p 136**

What made Jo realise how serious her mother's disappearance was?

**pp 146–147**

How does Jo see her own throwing up?

**pp 151–152**

What is happening to Jo?

**p 163**

Why did Jo cut her hair? What does she seem to be doing?

**pp 171–173**

What does Jo think Veronica has directed at her?

**p 182**

What is the revelation of sorts that Jo has?

**pp 183–184**

Who can help, in the end?

**pp 186–187**

What does a feeling of insignificance give Jo?

**pp 194–195**

What is unexpected about Jo's father's reaction?

**pp 196–197**

Why can't Jo accept the fact her mother might be dead?

**p 200**

What is Jo's explanation for why she doesn't want to gain weight?

**p 201**

Why does Jo think she is different to the other people in hospital?

**p 202**

How has Jo's experience of hospital changed?

**p 213**

Who does Jo compare to Charlotte in *Charlotte's Web*?

## Discussion/Essay Topics

- There is an advert from a chemist shop window in *Losing It* that reads: Lose weight. Gain control. Lose weight. Gain control. Lose weight. Gain control. Lose weight. Gain control. Do you think this reflects the general social attitude regarding weight and the surrounding issues? How does this kind of thinking/marketing feed the development of eating disorders?
- What sayings and common phrases can you think of that use weight issues or language relating to weight and appearance? Is our language full of a constant awareness of physicality and weight? Is this a problem? Is it unavoidable?
- Our society seems to have had an increase in weight related illnesses over the recent years, both in illnesses like anorexia and bulimia, and in the increase of obesity. What do you think could have caused this increase? And why are both ends of the scale affected? Websites like [www.mentalhealth.org.nz](http://www.mentalhealth.org.nz) have some interesting (and frightening) statistics on anorexia, and may be a useful research tool.
- ‘All I need is the air that I breathe...’ *The Hollies*. This quote from a song is given in *Losing It*. Do you think this kind of analogy works for explaining the mentality of anorexia sufferers? Are there other things in popular culture that glamorise or encourage anorexic or bulimic behaviours?
- Leon talks about not eating as a way of taking control of his situation: ‘It was me in charge for once.’ When Jo asks him if he is ‘still in charge’, he shrugs. Is this a typical progression, do you think, of eating disorders? What starts as a way of taking control ends up controlling the person? Is there anything else you can think of that works in a similar way?
- Other illnesses such as post-natal depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder are discussed in *Losing It*. How are these similar to or different from anorexia?
- Jo talks about ‘labels’ that get applied to people – she means illnesses and disorders like post-natal depression, anorexia, obsessive-compulsive disorder etc. Why does she consider them labels? Are these illnesses grouped legitimately or are they more complex and varied than the ‘labels’ would suggest?
- Self-blame and feelings of guilt seem to often lie behind disorders such as anorexia. What appears to the sufferer to be the taking back of control is also a way of punishing themselves. Is this a fair statement? Discuss.
- Discuss the differences between Issy’s and Jo’s families, and also the contrast in the girls’ personalities. Do you think their differing family backgrounds are the main cause of their differing abilities to cope with stress?
- What does the novel have to say about the role of friendship in helping us to gain a sense of identity and perspective? Does Jo offer Issy anything that Issy needs, or is their friendship very unbalanced? What do Leon and Jo offer each other as friends?
- Choose a novel that was important to you when you were a child. Write an essay about how it affected you, who you shared it with, and why it became a book you’ve always remembered.
- If you suspected your friend was developing an eating disorder what would you do?
- What do the poems say about Francine? How was she different to the other patients? In what ways was she similar?
- Why do you think the author has used the motif of the spider and the web?