

# Love & Other Excuses

by Jane Westaway

**L**ove. It seems to Zoe that people use that word to excuse the inexcusable. Like her mother. Like her friends. As if they have no choice, no control over themselves. Well, not her.

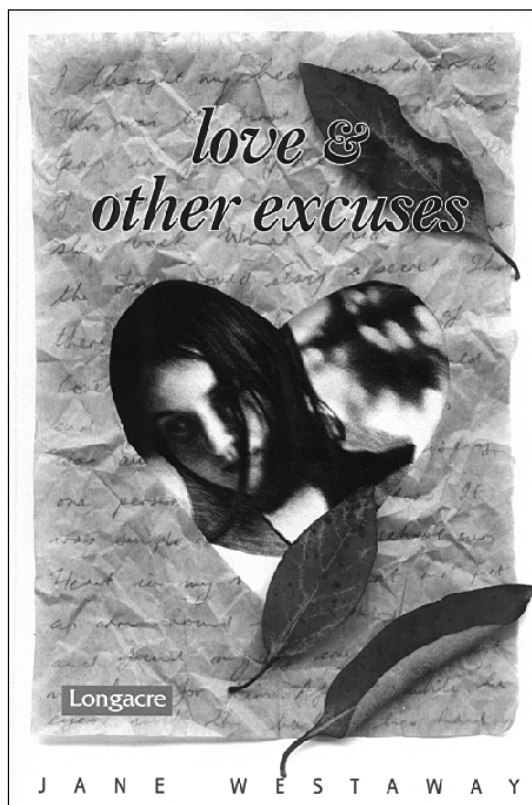
And then she meets Tom. Intense, exciting and scaring her half to death. Love, when it comes, is nothing like what she expected.

“... a wonderfully intuitive story of which the writer has the ability to involve the reader in just the right amount of information allowing the layers of story to peel away effortlessly even when the novel is at its most specific.”

*Around the Bookshops*

“Jane Westaway’s first novel for young people has been eagerly awaited since her book of short stories, *Reliable Friendly Girls*, won a New Zealand Post award for best first book several years ago, and it doesn’t disappoint.”

*Evening Post*



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## RESOURCE KIT

for use in schools

Includes:

- Meeting the author
- Breakdown of novel, for classroom study
- Discussion topics
- Comprehension exercises
- Extension projects and activities

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# Meeting the Author

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JANE WESTAWAY writes fiction for adults and teenagers, and is also a journalist and reviewer. She has worked in offices, factories, canteens and shearing sheds, as a domestic servant and a ministerial speechwriter. She has two adult children and lives, usually in Wellington, New Zealand with writer Norman Bilbrough.

*Reliable Friendly Girls*, a collection of hard-hitting short stories, won Best First Book at the 1997 NZ Post Children's Book Awards. *Love & Other Excuses* is her first published novel.

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## QUESTIONS FOR THE AUTHOR

### ***How long did it take to write Love & Other Excuses?***

I got the idea for the novel an alarmingly long time ago. In late 1994 I was given a Creative New Zealand grant to write it, and began the first draft in early 1995. That took about six months, writing most mornings. Some mornings I wrote 2000 words; others, I ended up with fewer words than I'd started with. I wrote a second draft in 1996 and a third in 1997. In between, I was working on an adult novel and various stories, and earning a living. Longacre accepted the novel when I'd completed the fourth draft in early 1998, but I did more work on it between then and publication.

Such a protracted writing process can be frustrating, but in my case I think it's good for the work. The novel was alive for me even when I wasn't actually engaged in writing it, and I like time between drafts to mull things over, let them compost. I wouldn't feel comfortable publishing a novel I'd written quickly.

### ***Did you have a plan for the novel, including knowing how the ending would turn out? Did anything about the story change while you were writing it?***

Not exactly a plan, but a half-page synopsis I drew up when I applied for the grant. I knew the novel would be set in a boarding school – because I wanted that enclosed little world – and I knew who the main characters would be – Zoe and her parents, and Tom and his mother. I knew I wanted Zoe to be appalled by her mother's behaviour and determined not to go down the same path, so that when she fell for Tom she would feel terrible conflict. I knew I wanted her to be acutely aware of the behaviour and advice of those around her and to have to make up her own mind. And I knew I wanted to end the novel with a degree of reconciliation between Zoe and her mother, because that would allow Zoe to be more at peace with herself.

It was like starting with a skeleton and writing to put flesh on the bones. So no, the basic story didn't

change but it was elaborated and complicated by subplots that emerged when I wrote it – Zoe's Dad's relationship with Diane and his drunk driving charge, for instance, and Monty's one-night stand and resulting abortion. In fact, Monty's abortion proves to be a crisis for Zoe herself – she understands how badly Monty needs her mother because of her need for her own mother. And that was unplanned. Discovering things like this is one of the joys of writing.

### ***As an adult writer, why do you want to write for teenagers? How do you know what teenage protagonists would feel in certain situations?***

One answer is that part of me will always feel sixteen. But it can be irritating to hear a middle-aged woman say so! Nevertheless, I have strong memories of being that age, and though life has changed a lot superficially since then, I believe human – and therefore, teenage – nature hasn't. It's important to get the superficial things right in a story – not dressing characters in pleated skirts and blouses, for instance, unless you want them to be complete nerds – but if you're too up to the minute in fashion and slang and references to what's on TV, your book will quickly seem old-fashioned.

Another answer to this question is that I want to write the sort of books I wish I could have read as a teenager. There were very few young adult books then and I went straight from children's to adult books that were often boring and incomprehensible to me.

I think it can be a mistake to worry too much about how a teenager might feel in a situation. Teenagers are people; they're all different. And if writers couldn't invent plausible characters and give them credible thoughts and actions, they wouldn't be writers. Imagination is part of being a writer – without it, how could we have science fiction and fantasy? I just do my best and hope readers find it convincing.

***What are some differences between writing for teenagers and writing for adults?***

The main difference for me is that I'm more relaxed writing teenage fiction. I'm not sure why. And of course, teenage fiction always has a teenage main character.

***Are you ever inspired by true-life events or characters, which you would like to develop into fictional stories?***

To an extent, yes. But not always by events and characters; settings can be just as important. When I was a journalist working for *NZ Woman's Weekly* in the mid-'80s, I spent a few days at a girls' boarding school to research an article. It struck me what an enclosed, hot-house little world it was. And when I got the idea for Zoe's story, I knew that was where I wanted to set it. A few of the stories in *Reliable Friendly Girls* I can also link directly to a place – the ice-cream shop in 'Thirteen Flavours', for instance, and the nudist camp in 'Absolutely Nothing to Wear'.

***What authors do you enjoy reading, and how do they influence your writing?***

I must admit I don't read a great deal of young adult fiction, mainly because I review and nearly always have a pile of new adult books to get through. But I've enjoyed New Zealand young adult writers Paula Boock, Norman Bilbrough, Kate De Goldi and Bob Kerr, and further afield, Robert Cormier, Gillian Rubinstein, Gary Paulsen and Norma Klein.

It's difficult for me to say how these writers influence me. Seeing how well other people write is always a two-edged sword – admiration tinged with envy and a hint of personal inadequacy. But reading poorly written books can spur me on too – a kind of *good grief, I can do better than that* reaction.

***How do you come up with names for characters?***

Quite often the right name springs into my head early on in the first draft, and it usually sticks. When this doesn't happen I resort to the little *Naming Your Baby* book a friend gave me, but then it can take ages to find one that's right this way. For surnames, I often read the phone book.

***Is there a reason why you used the name Zoe twice – in this novel and in the short-story 'You Know Who' from the Reliable Friendly Girls collection? – do they share some characteristics?***

Oh dear, no reason at all. Zoe in the novel originally had another name but the publisher and I decided it was too odd and I picked Zoe because it sounds strong,

not flowery or pretty. I'd forgotten all about the other Zoe, and I hope it doesn't confuse people – they're definitely not the same character. Though the Zoe in *Love & Other Excuses* sometimes behaves badly, it's because she's confused and unhappy. Not because she's a princess, like Zoe in the short story.

***Would you like to live in a town like Dutton?***

Certainly not, I'd go mad with boredom. I need a city life, maybe because I work on my own at home, so that when I go out of the front door, I want to know I can find people and bookshops and cafés and movies.

***Did you go to a boarding school?***

No, I didn't. It was threatened throughout my teens every time I misbehaved and at the time it sounded like an appalling punishment. Thinking about it later, I realised I might have spent some happier years at boarding school than I did at home.

***Did you have to do any research for the novel?***

Only a little. As I said before, I visited a boarding school when I was working for *NZ Woman's Weekly*, and I stayed at another for a couple of days researching for *Love and Other Excuses*. I thoroughly enjoyed it and would have liked to thank the school in the front of the book, but they didn't want me to in case it gave readers the impression that it was the school in the story where girls sometimes didn't behave themselves!

One of the advantages of being middle-aged is that you've had a lot of life experience, so when you come to write you can draw on it without having to do special research.

***Do you share Tom and Zoe's love of the native bush?***

Up to a point I do. I didn't come to New Zealand until I was sixteen, so New Zealand countryside and particularly the bush has always felt slightly alien to me. I love it, but it's not in my bones the way English countryside is. It was an advantage in this case as I could write about Tom's appreciation of the bush, but also about Zoe's distaste for it early on.

**Think of what sort of questions you would ask Jane Westaway, if you met her (or any other author of a book you have enjoyed).**

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# Breakdown of the Novel

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## PART ONE

### pp. 7-23

- Although Zoe's father is a celebrity, the family house does not display considerable wealth. What does this tell us about Zoe's father? What do you think the house represents for Zoe?
- What is Zoe trying to prove to her father by claiming not to be interested in the boy at McDonalds?
- Zoe realises on the drive to Riverdale that she has to discard her old life in order to take up a new one. How does she consider that her father is worse off than she is?
- What is the word most commonly associated with Zoe's mother, Jenny?

### pp. 24-78

- What is the name given to the route between Riverdale and town?
- Why doesn't Zoe enjoy the movie *Sleepless in Seattle*?
- What is Zoe's reaction to Mrs Brannigan? Why do you think she feels this way?
- When Tom catches up with Zoe on the way back to school, she is furious with him. Why?
- What is so distressing about the apparently pleasant dream Zoe has?

## PART TWO

### pp. 79-109

- What is the first hint the reader gets that Steve has been to the Courtenay Place restaurant before, perhaps many times?
- Why doesn't Zoe want to tell her father about Tom?
- When Zoe is sent to her room, she obeys, even though she is too old to be treated like this. Why does she comply?
- What does Zoe use as an alibi for meeting Tom?
- Why is Zoe so dismissive when Tom tells her that he loves her?

#### Discuss:

... whether Tom had good reasons for breaking up with Zoe.

### pp. 110-152

- How does Daisy describe sex? What three words does she use?

- How does Zoe find out that her father has been convicted of drink-driving?
- When Zoe returns home for the Easter break, she is distressed to see how much the house has 'slumped'. How does she plan to fix this?

#### Discuss:

... whether it is a good thing for children to reverse the role of caregiver and take responsibility for their parents sometimes.

- Why doesn't Monty want her mother to find out that she is pregnant?
- Zoe genuinely cares for Monty, and wants to help her, so why is she so reluctant to go along with Monty's secret plan to have an abortion.
- How does Zoe react to the older couple in the abortion waiting room? What assumptions had she previously made about abortions, which she is compelled to rethink?

#### Discuss:

... whether you think Monty should have had an abortion.

- Why is the topic of the Talk-Show relevant to both Zoe and Monty's situation?
- Why does Zoe ring Monty's mother?

## PART THREE

### pp. 153-177

- What is the first moment that Zoe begins to forgive her mother?
- How does Monty justify the abortion, after she has gone through with it?
- What does Monty mean by saying that she has 'skipped a stage'?
- What are Tom's reasons for wanting to stay in Dutton? Why doesn't Zoe accept them?

#### Discuss:

... whether Zoe should have sex with Tom. Why or why not?

- What does Zoe mean when she thinks of sex being like a telescope?
- After the screen-saver incident, Zoe refuses to see Tom. Explain why.
- What does Zoe notice about her mother's physical appearance which surprises her?

**Discuss:**

... whether you think Zoe's behaviour towards her mother during their first meeting is rational or fair. Why does she behave like this? What effect do the italicised sentences have on our understanding of Zoe's feelings?

pp. 178-212

**Discuss:**

... whether you think that Helen Cox (the counsellor) is helpful to Zoe. What more could she have done? Does

she ever mention the word 'love' or acknowledge it as a valid teenage emotion?

- How does Zoe describe the difference between loving someone and being their enemy?
- Why does Zoe fling open Mrs Terpstra's door, without knocking first?
- Why does Zoe choose not to show her mother the secret house?
- What do you think this house symbolises to Zoe?

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## Discussion Topics

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### Putting Yourself in the Characters' Shoes...

- Should Zoe's mother have left? Try to think of reasons for and against.
- Do you think Zoe was right to call Monty's mother, even though she was betraying the wishes of her friend by doing so? Was her decision made from weakness or strength?
- Can you find any sympathy for Shannon?
- Do you agree with Monty's classification of people? What risks are there in stereotyping people like this – as one of the 'horsey' or 'social' set, 'celebs', 'arty lot' and so on? Imagine what category your friends might put you in, and how you would feel about it.
- Given the choice, would you like to be a celebrity, or not? Back up your decision. Would you enjoy being related to a celebrity? Give reasons why or why not.
- Zoe is in love with Tom, but few people discuss this with her. How is her relationship 'explained' by herself, and by others? Who acknowledges that she is in love, and when?
- What is it that brings Zoe and her mother together again? Is it that they both disagree with Steve about Tom, or because they are united by common experience – both having caused trouble for themselves by falling in love?

### The Nature of Love

Think about the title of the novel – *Love & Other Excuses*. What do you think this title means? Think about the kinds of love which are shown in the book, and whether the title has implication for all these kinds of love.

**Discuss** the various examples there are of someone using love as an excuse for something.

- by Steve • by Jenny • by Zoe • by Tom • by Shannon

### The Nature of Sex

- Do you think that the novel shows teenage sex in a positive light, overall? Think about Zoe's analogy of the telescope – sex changing things, intensifying experiences, making the good times better and the bad times worse.
- What other risks are associated with sex?
- Do you agree with Riverdale's policy about boys, and its treatment of Zoe and Tom after they are caught together?

### Dealing With Grief

- When a family breaks up, all of its member are likely to experience grief. It is interesting to consider how individual people in this novel deal with grief, and some of the stages they go through. What are some of the ways in which Zoe copes with grief? Discuss which people or events helped her most, and which of her own reactions made things more difficult.
- Steve deals with grief in a different way than Zoe. Explain what some of his responses are, then discuss why he behaves differently to his daughter – whether it is because he is male, or an adult, or a different personality type, or another reason.
- Does Jenny show any signs of grieving for her lost family, even though she was the person who left?
- Another example of grief is shown by Tom, who stays in Dutton even though he is not happy there. What is his reason for staying? Do you consider that he is motivated by love, or a sense of obligation? What technique does he use in order to cope with his situation?

# Comprehension Exercises

## LOGICAL THINKING

There are several places in the novel where Zoe thinks about emotional issues like an equation, turning them into problems which can be solved merely by being puzzled out. When she decides not to tell her father about Tom, her reasoning is mathematical.

*“I knew at that moment that Tom Brannigan would stay a secret. That there were only finite amounts of love and happiness in the world, and that one person’s joy was automatically another’s misery, one person’s love another’s loss. It was simple as a primary school sum.”* (page 94)

Logicians could break her argument down like this:

1. Zoe believes that there is only a certain amount of love and happiness available in the world.

↓  
BUT

2. If she tells her father about her happiness and love for Tom, it will make him unhappy.

↓  
AND

3. She doesn’t want to cause her father’s unhappiness.

↓  
THEREFORE

4. She has to keep Tom a secret.

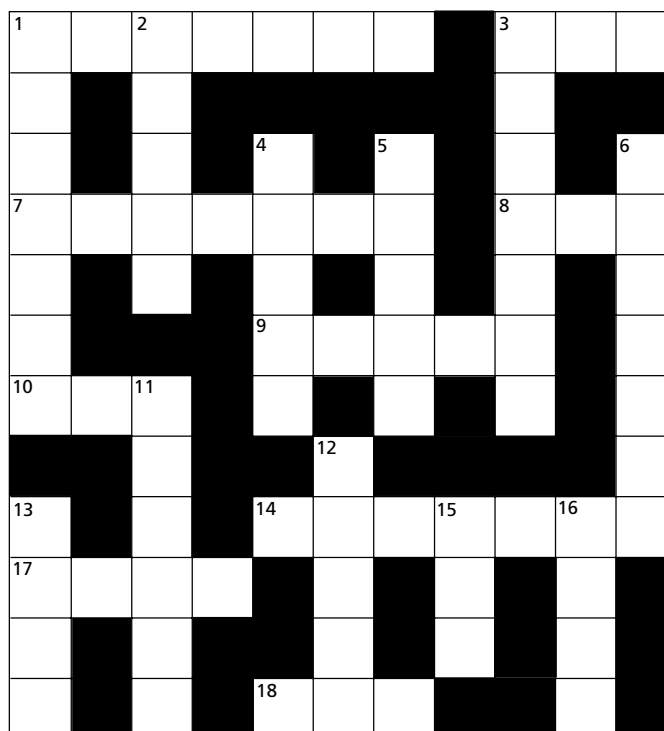
Later she makes another important emotional decision using logical reasoning, when she decides to start having sex with Tom. Read over her justification (page 159) and try to write out the main points in the same form as it is presented above, showing BUTs, ANDs and THEREFOREs as appropriate.

## TRUE/FALSE QUESTIONS

1. Zoe’s father is a famous sporting personality.
2. Monty’s mother is a feminist.
3. Zoe’s skills at school are in languages.
4. Steve met Diane at the pub.
5. Jenny went to live with Amos in Melbourne.
6. Tom’s parents are divorced.
7. Geneva King is famous for stealing boyfriends.
8. The name of Riverdale’s principal is Mrs Ruawai.
9. The flowers which arrive on Zoe’s birthday are from her father.
10. Zoe and Tom talk about going to Africa to see the giraffes.

*Answers on next page.*

## CROSSWORD



### ACROSS

1. Zoe’s nickname for the man Monty picks up in the nightclub (7).
3. Tom is Mrs Brannigan’s ... (3).
7. What the name ‘Monty’ is short for (7).
8. Mrs Brannigan invites Zoe for afternoon ... (3).
9. Zoe’s father’s first name (5).
10. The answer Zoe gives Tom, which surprises him (3).
14. What Zoe’s first boyfriend was good at (7).
17. The name of Jenny’s lover (4).
18. Monty claims to be the ‘world expert on secret places to ... (3)’.

### DOWN

- 1, 11, & 15 down  
The equation between love and loss is as ‘simple as a ..... (7) ..... (6) ... (3)’.
2. The name of Dutton’s movie theatre: The ..... (5).
3. Zoe’s age at the beginning of the novel (7).
4. Zoe’s best friend in Wellington (5).
5. The name of Zoe’s first boyfriend (5).
6. The present which Tom gives Zoe for her birthday (7).
11. See 1 down.
- 12 & 13 down  
The boarding school Zoe is sent to: ..... (5) .... (4).
13. See 11 down.
15. See 1 down.
16. Zoe’s father reads the .... (4) on television.

*Answers on next page.*

## Answers to Crossword:



## Answers to True/False Questions:

1. **False.** He reads the news on television.
2. **True.**
3. **True.**
4. **False.** She was a researcher at his work.
5. **False.** They lived in Sydney.
6. **False.** Mr Brannigan died when Tom was four years old.
7. **True.**
8. **False.** Mrs Ruawai is the Tawa House Mother. Mrs Terpstra is the principal.
9. **False.** They are from her mother.
10. **True.**

## Extension Projects and Activities

### PROJECT IDEAS

#### A poster

Zoe and Tom share an abandoned house in the bush, which is their place to escape from the world; to relax and be themselves. Imagine your perfect Geta-way Place. Create a poster showing it, using your own art-work, or clippings from magazines. Remember to include any books, music or food you would keep there. Think about who you would invite, if anyone, to share it with you, and paste or draw them into the picture.

#### A pamphlet

Zoe claims to feel that her school in Wellington was a 'second home' to her, and although she doesn't initially like her new school, Riverdale, she eventually feels comfortable there. If you could design your ideal school, what would it be like? Would it be rural, urban, single-sex? How many pupils would there be? What subjects would be taught? What would the buildings look like? And so on. Design a pamphlet for potential students, describing the best features of your ideal school. This may include an architectural plan of the buildings, or map of the grounds.

#### A collage

Read Zoe's description of the 'nuclear family', at the bottom of page 18. Think about how the two images, nuclear and family, are put together in such a negative way. Make a collage relating both ideas: using quotes from the novel, your own words (maybe in poetic form), phrases or headlines from newspapers and magazines, and pasted images.

#### A creative writing exercise

Write a scene from the novel in the words of another character. For example, give Tom's perspective on the scene between him and Zoe in her room at Riverdale. Describe, from Jenny's point of view, the day when she left her family. Or make up your own example.

#### A debate

Bearing in mind the earlier discussion about logic, divide the class into those who believe they rely more on logic or instincts, when it comes to making decisions. Each side should begin by explaining the benefits of their attitude, then they should take turns to set each other a series of dilemmas. The challenge is to make the other team resort to answering the dilemma by using an opposing argument – logical or instinctive – than the one which belongs to the side they are on.

#### A drama exercise

One of the main themes of the novel is marital separation, which many young people have to cope with. Recent statistics show that one in three families are likely to experience a divorce at some time. Here are some ways in which children can attempt to deal with the separation of their parents:

- by feeling angry
- by feeling miserable (crying a required number of tears)
- by becoming aloof, tough, or cold-hearted
- by talking to counsellors
- by hearing the point of view of both parents
- by learning to feel sorry for parents
- by making new friends
- by confiding in old friends
- by being distracted by love
- by helping others with their problems

Write each of these responses down on individual cards, as well as some others the class can think of. Then each student selects one card at random and dramatises the response (trying not to be too obvious).