

OUR WORLD WAS
EVERYTHING
AND IT
FINISHED
AT OUR
WALLS



A. J. BETTS

AUTHOR OF ZAC & MIA

Pan Macmillan Teacher's Notes

HIVE

A.J. BETTS

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Introduction

Hayley is a fifteen-year-old beekeeper and her realm is the garden. In her enclosed, self-sufficient community, people are assigned positions such as engineer, kitchener, gardener, seeder and netter. In this world, growlights determine the pattern of days, designated plants are nurtured, and some seeds are stored for a possible future. Water comes from the 'source', while 'meat' is harvested in the netter house. People live in hexagonal houses linked by ways, and above all is the home of the council and the judge. God rules over all, and as such, there is no word for 'accident'. Neither are there words for wind or rain, ocean or birds.

For many years, Hayley has suffered terrible headaches, for which the only relief available is from a herb called feverfew, smuggled out of the sickroom by her friend Celia. Inexplicably, Hayley also finds relief in the dark unused way behind the engineers' house, which links to the mysterious and unused service house, said to have been the site of a catastrophic fire many generations ago, and locked ever since.

Hayley uses the excuse of chasing a rogue bee to visit this way, and it's there she encounters 'the drip' – water falling from the ceiling. When she returns the next day, it's here she encounters the judge's mysterious son, which sets in motion a chain of events which lead her to question if all the things she has been told about the world are actually true. When Hayley witnesses an horrific scene, it turns everything she knows about her society upon its head until she fears that nothing is real – and that desperate measures will be necessary to survive.

One alternative presented to Hayley would be to simply forget – to live as if nothing has happened. This is the way totalitarian societies evolve, with fear leading to denial and atrocity.

Bees are symbolic in this novel, reflecting how the people are living in a controlled community with 'God' (or the Queen Bee) at the centre of the hive. Though this society is chilling, it is also prosperous and mostly harmonious.

Hive is a celebration of the power of storytelling, and the ambiguous ending will leave the reader seeking more.

'I came to know too much, which has led me up here to your land and your sky and you, so eager for stories.' (p 2)



Themes

Dystopian Worlds

Key Quote: 'Our world was this. A commons room surrounded by six hexagonal houses, each connected with a way – a corridor you might call it; a small, enclosed bridge. Ways linked the houses and us all. Above the commons was a smaller house divided into nursery and sickroom. Above that the upper house for the council. It was the smallest house and the highest one, closest to God.' (p 2)

This novel describes a society which has come about due to some past catastrophe. Creating such a world in fiction relies on establishing details as to how people live in such an imagined environment and the rules by which it operates. In this novel some of these details include:

- The closed and ordered community is (as described above) housed in 'hexagons' akin to the hives which Hayley, the narrator, tends in the garden.
- Artificial 'growlights' determine the passing of a day: 'Colours were how our days were measured, with growlights progressing through the spectrum that made sense for us and the plants.' (p 31)
- Water comes from only one 'source': God.
- People who go mad or seem troubled are given drugs or herbs which make them forget.
- They observe a bizarre marriage ritual – young girls mate for three days with a man of their choice, and celebrate with feasts and flowers, then give birth (pp 86–7). 'We all knew how it worked: a gardener girl plus a netter boy equalled an engineer baby. Celia's marriage would replace Geoffrey's loss, eventually, returning the houses to balance.' (p 87) They must marry from the right 'tree' or 'twig': 'Two wrong twigs will make a bad fruit baby.' (p 63) Children are immediately separated from their mothers; we learn that Hayley's mother has never met her, although she may be one of the kitcheners.

This world has elements of dystopia and, as in many dystopian stories, the truth gradually reveals itself through a central protagonist's eyes. Hayley has believed, like others in this world, that God takes the dead and transports them to His council house. But when she witnesses the horror of Aunt Kate's dismemberment (p 158) she knows



this is untrue and that therefore many other things may be untrue as well. Hayley is an anomaly in this society. Her headaches set her apart; her rebellious trips to the engine house and her growing discontent and suspicion about this world are classic dystopian tropes.

Discussion Point: Can you identify any other details such as rituals, rules or lore which set up the world in *Hive*? Which of them did you find most intriguing and/or convincing?

Discussion Point: Dystopian worlds often masquerade as utopian worlds. This community seems to be based on communal ownership and sharing: is it a dystopia? Would you like to live there?

Discussion Point: It is difficult not to invoke Margaret Atwood's chilling *The Handmaid's Tale* (Vintage Classics, 2011, 1985), a book, then film and now recently revitalised as a television series. It's a feminist or humanist treatise about women being used as 'breeders'. Read and compare to this text. [See **Further Reading Ideas for Class Discussion.**]

Discussion Point: A. J. Betts states she was influenced by the film *The Truman Show*, in which the protagonist realises he is living in a constructed film set and must decide whether he is willing to brave the unknown world beyond, or stay in his safe and relatively happy one. Can you think of other films/books in which the protagonist must make a similar choice between a safe world and the unknown?

Discussion Point: Some readers may find it difficult to accept that Hayley and the other inhabitants don't question what's on the other side of the walls. Can you think of ways this might relate to contemporary life? Give examples of ways we do not question/consider what is beyond the 'everyday'.

Discussion Point: '. . . if the other world's still there, and I hope it is, and if you find it you have to –' (p 255). Something catastrophic has occurred and this society has rejected technology to lead a closeted life. But clearly at the end of the novel, the reader discovers that outside there is water and another world. What does this novel suggest or hint about the society they have rejected or retreated from? Is this novel hopeful about the human race's ability to confront issues like climate change?



Storytelling and Traditional Rhymes

Key Quote: ‘Monsters weren’t real, of course. We knew they were fabrications meant for children. In the teachers’ tellings monsters would be hairy and hungry, but never too terrifying. With their big eyes, big teeth and big ears, they were the best parts of stories and they would dwell in our thoughts as we drew our night dreamings on the walls or made up stories of our own.’ (p 40)

Discussion Point: The novel is littered with references to stories and fairy tales. These people take comfort from hearing these old tales even though many of the references in them are obscure or arcane. Celia and Hayley try to decipher the meanings of *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* and the tale of *Jack and the Beanstalk* (pp 37–8). The idea of monsters is a recurring theme, and these tales fuel their fears but offer cathartic comfort as well. Hayley, in her fear of retribution, mistakes the word ‘accident’ (which is not used in this ordered world) for ‘axeman’ (p 67) and remembers the story of Little Red being saved from a monster. Discuss the role that fairy tales and rhymes play in this novel.

Discussion Point: Hayley asks the judge’s son: ‘You woke me up to . . . rescue me?’ (p 216) The idea of being rescued is foreign to Hayley although stories have taught her about the concept. What do the tropes of transformation or rescue suggest in this novel?

Morality and Values

Key Quote: ‘It’s not a wrong, you know, it isn’t a sin to keep a secret with the council, but more of a . . . responsibility.’ (p 78)

Discussion Point: The action in this novel is punctuated by decisions and choices which could provoke a broad discussion of values. What is truth? What is honesty? Are there times when lying is necessary for the greater good?

Discussion Point: What scene did you find most morally ambiguous?

Rite of Passage or Initiation into Adulthood

Key Quote: ‘The noise he made was all things – the cry of a baby, child, boy, son and man. A life’s frustration vocalised resounding from the walls.’ (p 246)

Discussion Point: Hayley and Celia are fifteen and sixteen respectively and about to marry and ‘become women’. In what other emotional and intellectual ways do they develop into adults in this novel?



Discussion Point: Are any of the other characters experiencing a rite of passage? How is this novel about maturation?

Communities and Societies

Key Quote: ‘Chaos, the previous engineer elect had warned, is what happens with terror and desperation. Chaos changes everything.’ (p 78)

Discussion Point: Do all societies rely on control in order to prevent chaos? How much control is too little or too much?

Discussion Point: Many of the dystopian details in this novel are actually quite prevalent in our own society. For example, medications to make people forget; planned breeding programs; propagation of plants in artificial environments or in genetically modified ways. Discuss how this novel relates to or illuminates some of the developments in our own society.

Discussion Point: This community operates as any ‘commune’ might today. Everyone has a designated role, and tasks to perform each day; the community is self-sufficient and cut off from other communities; shared sleeping arrangements are in place; meals are also served in communal spaces. How does it differ from a commune?

Discussion Point: The son’s work in the night (p 214) is revealed as the source of his lassitude; he is not lazy but tired. His role as the son of the judge burdens him with responsibility. He is heir to this nightmare and cannot escape even though he knows the rules in this world are deplorable. ‘The world needed Will as a hive needs its queen.’ (p 256) Do leaders generally suffer from a lack of choice?



Friendship and Love

Key Quote: ‘This night was real. He knew me, and I knew him, and there were no secrets anymore.’ (p 200)

Discussion Point: Hayley is contented by her bees because they give her sanctuary: ‘How I envied them. Bees knew nothing of the demands of friendship. Neither did they have to grapple with responsibilities or secrets.’ (p 148) Is friendship always demanding?

Discussion Point: The judge’s son and Hayley seem to have developed a love in the short time they have known each other. What is that love founded upon?

Discussion Point: Celia’s friendship with Hayley quickly turns sour when jealousy rears its head. Is this a society which makes friendship almost impossible?

The Power of Memory

Key Quote: ‘Books never forgot.’ (p 231)

Discussion Point: Hayley is told by the judge’s son that she will forget the past (p 200). How frightening would it be to lose your memory?

Discussion Point: What does memory represent in a person’s life? What power does it have?

Discussion Point: What part do books or stories play in the development of a person or a community?



Plot & Structure

1. The **Dystopian fiction** genre adheres to certain conventions.

Activity: Study these conventions and then analyse this text in relation to them, identifying tropes and features which are common to such fictions. [See **Further Reading.**]

2. The novel is structured with a **prologue followed by seventeen chapters.**

Discussion Point: How does the prologue prepare the reader for what follows?

3. **Tension or suspense is essential to a novel's structure** and is created here by gradually revealing answers to several questions posed at the beginning.

Activity: Make a list of those questions, eg. Why does a drip matter so much? What is the 'source'? Why are some seeds stored and not planted? Why do marriages last only for three days?

Discussion Point: Are there questions unanswered in this novel? What are they? Discuss.

4. **Pacing a Story** to achieve minor and major climaxes is integral to a novel's structure. Each chapter begins with a tempting statement, for example: 'Monsters weren't real, of course.' (Ch 3, p 40) Each chapter ends with a cliffhanger, for example, 'The truth is, I'm here because of the madness.' (Prologue, p 3)

Discussion Point: In what other ways is pacing achieved in this story?

5. The events which make up the **plot** of a novel trace a **narrative arc** which describes characters and themes.

Discussion Point: What is the conflict, the climax and the resolution point in this narrative arc?



Characters

Action in this novel revolves around several major characters and a cast of minor characters.

1. **The major characters** are Hayley (narrator), Celia (her friend), Will (the judge's son) and Luka (the diarist).

Discussion Point: The novel is told from Hayley's point of view. How does that direct the reader's attention?

Discussion Point: The judge's son (Will) is something of a foil for Luka; they are both significant protagonists in Hayley's story but have different characteristics and backgrounds. What impressions does the reader gain of these two very different young men? What is their relationship, or likely future relationship, to Hayley?

2. **A cast of other minor characters is mentioned, although many are never fully described:** Geoffrey, an engineer; Teacher Patrick; engineer elect Bradley; Teacher Sarah; students Helen, Edith, Darryl, Simon, gardener elect, Llewellyn; junior bee-keeper Penny; gardener girls, Krystal and Heidi; Teacher Jeremy; Fiona; the judge; Teacher Florence; Teacher Neil; Aunt Maggie; Noah, a netter boy; Spencer who tends fingerlings; Teacher Theo; Roxanne; Teacher Ava; Patty; Aunt Kate; Rose, the marriage-maker.

Discussion Point: Which of the minor characters is most intriguing and why?

3. Writers generally create a **mixture of characters, some intended to invoke sympathy in the reader, and others not to.** Others defy categorisation and their motives remain obscure.

Discussion Point: Which characters did you have sympathy for and why? Which ones were unsympathetic? Were there any 'minor' characters you would have liked more information about? For example, Llewellyn is mentioned a number of times but we could know more of her. The judge is a mysterious character as well.

4. **Dialogue** can also add to the characterisation established by direct descriptions of characters, for example, Celia's attack on Hayley (p 146) reveals her underlying insecurities; despite having been such a supportive friend she is easily moved to jealousy and fear.

Discussion Point: Choose another passage of dialogue and discuss what it reveals about the characters.



5. Characters in novels can be dynamic or static.

Discussion Point: Is Celia a dynamic or a static character? (Consult definitions of such types to answer this question, and use examples from the text.)



Style & Use of Language

1. The prologue is written in **first person plural**, and the rest of the novel in **first person singular**. Both are in **past tense**.

Discussion Point: Why is the prologue written in plural?

Activity: This narrative could also have been written in another voice. Choose a passage and rewrite it from Celia's perspective.

2. **Voice** is created by a range of devices including syntax and choice of words, use of language, etc.

Activity: Read a passage 'I granted him a generous smile . . . I had to play this right.' (pp 9–10) and analyse how it works, and what makes Hayley's narrative voice distinctive.

3. **Literary devices** are frequently used as description in this novel, eg. 'It tasted of salted memory.' (p 213)

Activity: Find examples of metaphor, simile, alliteration, personification and other devices in this novel. For example:

Personification: 'Garlic bulbs butted me with their papery heads. Vines raked at my hair with thin sticky fingers.' (p 151)

'Roots creaked and moaned as they pushed against their pots. Tendrils scratched at walls and at each other. Petals unravelled, burgeoning into cool still air. Stems stretched up as leaves prickled outwards. Sickroom walls strained with the pushing.' (pp 206–7)

4. **Words and word play** are explored in this text to cement the idea that **words have power; that naming things makes them real. It also suggests the ambiguous nature of stories or histories.** For example, words to describe the produce and the plants grown in the garden are enticingly poetic:

Strawberries: 'Everest, seascape, tristar, tribute' (p 24).

Bamboo: 'runners, nandinas and Robert Youngs' (p 29).

Bees: 'bluebanded or a honeybee' (p 68).

Blue and purple plants: 'lavender, salvia, bacopa, violets, purple heart and butterfly bush' (p 94).



Discussion Point: What other examples of names did you find particularly poignant?

Discussion Point: Arcane sayings such as ‘fit as a fiddle’ or ‘sharp as a tack’ (p 55) litter the text – remnants from a past world which have no meaning in the context of this world. Rhymes are repeatedly referred to as well, eg. ‘*With silver bells and cockle shells*’ (p 98). What do such rhymes represent in this society?

Discussion Point: Hayley, as our narrator, has limited linguistic knowledge and a limited vocabulary because of the world she has been brought up in. What challenges do you think that this might have presented to the author when writing *Hive*?

5. **Humour** is another device used by this writer to deal with serious themes, for example, the herb given to Hayley to relax her before her marriage night is called: ‘Necessary.’ (p 182)

Discussion Point: The novel has an intense tone and dark themes, yet there are moments of lightness. Find other examples of humour and discuss how and why it has been created.



Setting

1. **Setting** in a dystopian world must be suggested gradually by statements which are teasing hints that all is not quite as we might expect it to be in a 'real' world.

Discussion Point: These two quotes are examples of such detail being introduced as intriguing asides:

'Far above us the growlights hung green, the shade of avocado.' (p 23)

Or 'Every house in the world had a hub, but only the netters could be opened.' (p 101)

What other statements were particularly suggestive of an alternative world?

2. The **setting** in this novel contains descriptions of the luxuriant garden and the strange contained nature of the houses and the subterranean hubs or pools beneath them. It is an imagined place which the writer has the licence to create, but she fills it with recognisable details from our real world.

Activity: Identify any details in this imagined world which relate to our own, eg the industrial kitchen, the garden.

3. This novel is set in an **unknown futuristic time period** presumably sometime in the next century. The question of generations is raised towards the end and we are shocked to read that 'old times' were a mere five generations ago.

Discussion Point: What hints are there in the novel to when it is set?

4. **Place is evoked by beautiful description.** In *Everything I Know About Writing* (Pan Macmillan, 1992), John Marsden reminds writers to use detail in describing setting (p 113) and words which appeal to all the senses (pp 121–126); to describe what can be seen, felt, heard, touched, smelt etc.

Discussion Point: Does A.J. Betts achieve this? Choose a passage to illustrate your answer.

5. Setting evokes **mood and atmosphere.**

Discussion Point: Find particular passages which describe place. What mood do these descriptions convey?



Writing Exercises

1. **Titles** of books are designed to intrigue and entice. One word titles can be especially intriguing.

Discussion Point and Activity: What did this title suggest to you before/after you read the novel? Write a list of other potential titles.

2. The **packaging of a book includes the cover and blurb** which must offer the reader an insight into the contents without giving the ending away.

Activity: Assess this cover and then design your own cover in any medium. Write your own back cover blurb.

3. We are told that the death of Geoffrey is recorded in a play (p 131).

Activity: **Write the script** for such a play based on Celia's life.

4. Hayley describes her departure in the capsule.

Activity: Re-write this as a **diary account** from Will's perspective.

5. This book is to have a **sequel** entitled *Rogue*. Without reading the blurb for that novel, what might take place in it?

Activity: Write your own imagined synopsis or blurb for such a sequel.



Questions for Discussion after Reading the Novel

1. 'There was no word for love, but that doesn't mean we didn't feel it. Why does everything need a name?' (p 2) Discuss.
2. '*Imagine?* An awful word, in our world. A terrifying symptom of madness.' (p 27) Why is imagination so feared in this novel?
3. 'Bees had no ceremonies or prayers, no speeches or mourning. Bees had no secrets. No guilt.' (p 96) Is Hayley's statement correct? Or do we presume things about animals which we have no real authority to do so?
4. 'I'd prefer my wonders to reveal themselves gracefully, like plums, than to arrive violently with danger.' (p 105) Discuss Hayley's statement. Should we expect only enjoyable 'wonders' or are monstrous ones just as much a part of life?
5. 'People need to sleep peacefully knowing their lives make sense. They need to wake up in a world without unknowns. People need routine,' the son went on, as if compelled to, as if he'd said this before, as if he'd been practising this speech his whole life. 'People need to believe in a God that wouldn't ask for butchery. They need to feel safe from bees that can kill, and drips that appear for no real reason. You tend the hive, Hayley – I tend the night. I fix the dangers because nothing good comes from fear.' (pp 199 –200) Discuss the son's statement – is it possible to protect people from danger and fear? Is this the false premise on which all utopian societies are based?



Further Reading Ideas for Class Discussion

1. Classic works of Dystopian fiction include Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (HarperPerennial, 2006, 1984); George Orwell's *1984* (Signet Classics, 1950); and Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (Penguin Classics, 2011, 1962). Read these and other works of Dystopian fiction and compare to *Hive*: James Bradley's *Clade* (Penguin, 2015); Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (Knopf, 2006); Robert Swindell's *Brother in the Land* (Puffin, 1984); Isobelle Carmody's *Scatterlings* (Scholastic, 1995, 1991); Kirsty Murray's *Vulture's Gate* (Allen & Unwin, 2009); Mark Smith's *The Road to Winter* (Text, 2017); Mark Smith's *Wilder Country* (Text, 2018); Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (Scholastic, 2008–2010); Lois Lowry's *The Giver Quartet* Boxed Set (HMH Books for Young Readers, 2014); Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies Pretties Specials Extras* Boxed Set (Simon Pulse, 2012); Philip Reeves' *Mortal Engines* (2001) and sequels; M.T. Anderson's *Feed* (2002); Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) (and sequels).

2. Hayley's community is an example of a commune. Research actual examples of communes and how they have or haven't survived.

3. 'Better never means better for everyone . . . It always means worse, for some.' (Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*) Discuss this quote in relation to this novel.

4. Read some of A.J. Betts' other novels and discuss ways *Hive* is different – and similar – to these.

5. For further insights, read essays and interviews with A.J. Betts:

'Exclusive Interview with A.J. Betts' by Lucy Moore *Female First* 12 September 2014 <<http://www.femalefirst.co.uk/books/aj-betts-zac-and-mia-529719.html>>

'Author Interview: A.J. Betts' *Kids Book Review Sunday* 26 September 2010 <<http://www.kids-bookreview.com/2010/09/author-interview-aj-betts.html>>

Niewenhuizen, Agnes 'Reading Australia: Zac & Mia by A.J. Betts' *Australian Book Review* Monday 9 January 2017 <<https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/reading-australia/a-j-betts/zac-and-mia-by-a-j-betts>>



Further Ideas Using Technology

- Access websites which offer insights into the work of A.J. Betts.
- Locate information about any of the themes or topics raised in these notes.
- Create a book trailer for this book.
- Establish a class chatroom online about this and other Dystopian novels.



Conclusion

Hive is a chilling novel about a possible future which eerily has much in common both with our present day society and some unsavoury eras in our historical past. A.J. Betts imagines a dystopian world depicting what might or could be, and warns us of the implications of mistakes we are making right now.

Hayley is a protagonist with few options, but she may just hold the future of those she has left behind, in her hands . . .

Author Note

A.J. Betts

A.J. Betts is an Australian author, speaker, teacher and cyclist. She has a PhD on the topic of wonder, in life and in fiction.

She has written three novels for young adults. Her third novel, *Zac & Mia*, won the 2012 Text Prize, the 2014 SCBWI Crystal Kite Award, and the 2014 Ethel Turner prize for young adults at the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards and was shortlisted for the 2014 Queensland Literary Award. Inspired by her work in a children's hospital, *Zac & Mia* is available in 14 countries. Adapted for television by California's AwesomenessTV, *Zac & Mia* is now an Emmy-award-winning series.

A.J. is originally from Queensland but has lived in Perth since 2004. See her website: <http://www.ajbetts.com/>



Further Reading

Teaching Activities:

‘Book Trailers for Readers’ by M. Harclerode Teacher Librarian

<<http://www.booktrailersforreaders.com/How+to+make+a+book+trailer?responseToken=0c2e4a301db0b64e25f8746f47567667>>

‘6 Tips for Making a Book Trailer that Works’ *Reading Agency*

<<http://www.booktrailersforreaders.com/How+to+make+a+book+trailer?responseToken=0c2e4a301db0b64e25f8746f47567667>>

‘How to Create a Book Trailer’ by Joanna Penn *The Creative Penn*

<<https://www.thecreativepenn.com/2011/01/07/how-to-create-a-book-trailer/>>

Research:

‘Beehive’ *Wikipedia*

<<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beehive>>

‘Commune’ *Wikipedia*

<<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commune>>

‘100 Works of Dystopian Fiction’ *Vulture*

<<http://www.vulture.com/article/best-dystopian-books.html>>

‘Utopian and Dystopian fiction’ *Wikipedia*

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Utopian_and_dystopian_fiction>

