

Teaching Notes

Destroying Avalon

Kate McCaffrey

Synopsis

Avalon and her family move from their country home of Grace Point to a coastal suburb in Perth for the start of Year 10. Her new school Westerly is large and sophisticated, an environment vastly different to her small, country school. Quickly she learns the school yard politics, the class system in place, from Group A- the Bitches to Group Z- the Weirdos and Queeros. Intimidated by the sophistication of the other students and embarrassed by her sheltered background Avalon attempts to ingratiate herself with the popular crowd.

Within the first two days she is rebuffed by the popular group for an errant comment and as a consolation, she is befriended by the social outcasts, the Weirdos and Queeros'.

Desperate not to be labelled the same, Avalon attempts to find another social group but her advances are crushed by the popular girls, the Bitches who make their feelings to the school body known. A text message directing her to an email leads her to a Blog site, used by students at her school, and the hate campaign begins.

Daily, vicious lies are being spread about her across the Net and through text messages. The organiser of the hate campaign is Dragon Girl- who Avalon believes is Alice, the leader of the Bitches. Avalon is hassled at school by students she doesn't even know and becomes obsessed and introverted at home, spending hours surfing the Net.

After several weeks the attack against her dies down and then she learns that her friend Marshall, is being targeted by the cyber bullies. The attacks against him become physical and he is assaulted at school.

In a confrontation on the school grounds Tamara, another of Avalon's friends, breaks a bully's nose and the small group is called to Administration, to be dealt with by teaching staff.

Avalon and Marshall are terrified of discovery. Marshall is frightened of the consequences of being labelled a dobber, and Avalon is worried about her parents' reaction.

Finally the stress of the last five weeks breaks Avalon's resolve to keep the secret and she reveals all to her parents. The cyber campaign is exposed and her parents spring into action. Unfortunately it is too late. At the same time Avalon confesses, Marshall has been beaten up on his way home from school. Also broken, he falls into deep despair and ends his own life.

The police investigate his suicide. Computers are accessed and charges of cyber stalking are laid against the culprits. The identity of Dragon Girl is finally revealed to Avalon. Not, as she suspected Alice, the leader of the Bitches, but her own insecure and socially inept friend Sukey.

Author's Inspiration

Before I became a full-time writer I was a high school teacher. The last school I worked in was a technology school, and it was at this school I saw the beginnings of cyber bullying. Kids were using email and internet accounts to sledge other kids. Teachers had to attend IT sessions to help 'catch up' with the students' advanced computer knowledge.

Then one day, when I was working on a different novel, I saw a talk show with a young American girl telling the host about the ordeal she'd just endured at her school. She spoke about the kids creating blog sites to spread rumours about her, the constant threatening emails and text messages, how there was no escape from it.

Cyber bullying, for the 'always on' generation is a 24/7 deal. Traditionally victims are safe, once they reach their homes. But with this technology the harassment is never ending, overwhelming and soul-destroying. I put aside my current work and quickly penned the outline of *Destroying Avalon*. But it was when I hit the internet, to research the facts, that I became aware of the wide reaching effects of cyberbullying.

Some Facts

- 50% of Canadian kids say that they are online most of the time
- Only 16% say they talk to their parents about what they do online
- 25% of young Canadian Internet users say that someone has sent them messages that have said hateful things about others (Source: Young Canadians in a Wired World –Mnet Survey, 2001)
- A 2002 British survey found that one in four youth, aged 11 to 19 has been threatened via their computers or cell phones, including death threats.

Bullying in schools is a world-wide phenomenon. The data in Australia mirrors that of other countries, such as Canada, Scandinavia, Ireland and England (Morrison,2001). Results from a large scale national survey of more than 38,000 school children between 7 and 17 years established that approximately one child in six was bullied by peers each week in Australian schools (Rigby, 1997).

A more recent survey conducted by the National Coalition Against Bullying and *Girlfriend* magazine (2206) found 42% of girls aged between 12-15 years reported being intimidated or denigrated online or via mobile phone text messaging. The survey also showed nearly half the girls interviewed wouldn't report the incident either at school or to their parents.

Educational Adaptability

Devised by Trudi Evans and Kate McCaffrey

Destroying Avalon is Young Adult Fiction and is aimed at the 15 – 18 year age group.

The subject matter of the novel allows it to be taught across many different learning areas of the curriculum:

English Learning Area, students learn about the English language: how it works and how to use it effectively. They develop an understanding of the ways in which language operates as a social process and how to use language

in a variety of forms and situations. They learn to speak, listen, view, read and write effectively.

Technology and Enterprise Learning Area, students apply knowledge, skills, experience and resources to the development of technological solutions that are designed to meet the changing needs of individuals, societies and environments. Students become innovative, adaptable and reflective as they select and use appropriate materials, information, systems and processes to create solutions that consider the short- and long-term impact on societies and environments.

The Arts Learning Area students develop creative skills, critical appreciation and knowledge of artistic techniques and technologies in dance, drama, media, music, visual arts and combinations of arts forms. The Arts develop students' sense of personal and cultural identity and equips them for lifelong involvement in, and the appreciation of the arts.

As well as these three main learning areas, *Destroying Avalon* could be used to address three of the main directives contained within the Curriculum Framework:

Cyberbullying : The Curriculum Framework now addresses the issue of cyber bullying by including the following:

Cyberbullying is a new version of an old problem in the new domain of email, texting, blogging and online chat.

Teachers need to become familiar with these technologies that students use so confidently, so that they can recognise the issues and raise them with their students.

The Curriculum Framework provides the context:

Students recognise that everyone has the right to feel valued and be safe, and, in this regard, understand their rights and obligations and behave responsibly.

This outcome elaboration goes on to say students should 'respect the rights of others to equal access to resources and to a work and leisure environment which is non-threatening and free from harassment such as teasing, sarcasm or remarks that stereotype or denigrate others or their efforts.'

Information & Communication Technologies and the Curriculum :
The National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century (April 1999) includes a clear directive that:

Schooling should develop fully the talents and capacities of all students. In particular, when students leave schools they should: have the capacity for, and skills in, analysis and problem solving and the ability to communicate ideas and information, to plan and organise activities and to collaborate with others [1.1], and be confident, creative and productive users of new technologies, particularly information and communication technologies, and understand the impact of those technologies on society. [1.6]

Values Education: Every decision a school makes is values based.

The Curriculum Framework (1988) defines values as:

'the beliefs we hold. They are the ideas about what someone or a group thinks is important in life and they play a very important part in our decision making. These

values are either explicitly or implicitly endorsed in all of the Curriculum Framework's eight learning area outcomes. '

In a sense schools can never be values neutral.

Topics for the Classroom

1.) READING OUTCOME: COMPREHENSION

PROCESS WORK: Demonstrate your understanding of the novel by answering the following questions in your journal. Where possible support your ideas with references from the text. Include page numbers for future use.

1. How is the use of the pseudonym 'Afriend' ironic?
2. What is a blog page?
3. Avalon is overwhelmed by the content of the email from A Friend, what does this suggest about her character?
4. How is the chapter title 'The A-Bomb' significant to events that take place?
5. What attitudes and values do Avalon's parents have regarding education and family life?
6. Avalon is anxious about starting at Westerly High School do you think she has cause for concern? How are new students treated at your school? Does appearance matter?
7. Compare and contrast Caleb and Mitch. Predict the role each may play as the novel develops.
8. Describe the group of misfits that befriend Avalon.
9. Why was Avalon's bag sabotaged following the netball match?
10. The school is divided by a social hierarchy. Make a table with the headings A group, B group, C group, and Z group. Under each heading list the students appropriate to the group that have been mentioned so far. Add to the list as you read the novel.
11. Why does Avalon stretch the truth when she tells her friends about her life in the country?
12. By the end of the hockey tryouts, Avalon describes her first day at Westerly High School as, 'the worst day of my life'. Make a list of events that have brought her to this decision.
13. How does Avalon unintentionally manage to alienate herself further from Alice and her gang in both English and Science?
14. Describe Sukey's reaction to Avalon's knowledge of *Animal Farm*.
15. Describe Avalon's reaction to the blog entries she reads. How would you react under the same circumstances?
16. Who do you think is responsible for the blog entries at this point in the story? What would motivate somebody to behave in this way?
17. How do Avalon's new found friends offer their support? Why would they be so compassionate?
18. Why is Avalon embarrassed when the pensioner thanks her for helping her onto the bus?
19. Avalon checks the blog-ring vigilantly despite the probability that the entries will be upsetting. Why does she punish herself this way?
20. Avalon decides not to confide her problems to her parents, why not? What would you do in her position?
21. Make a list of both physical and emotional reactions that Avalon is experiencing.
22. Explain Alice's behaviour when she sees Avalon and her family at Bunnings.

23. Do you think it is fair for Avalon to assume that Alice is the instigator of the hate campaign?
24. What connotations does the name Dragon Girl have? Make a list of the other animal imagery Avalon uses when describing Alice.
25. What is BITS an acronym of?
26. Why is Marshall victimised by the school bullies?
27. What prevents Avalon from confronting Dragon Girl online?
28. Do you think Marshall is gay? Support your answer.
29. Why would Avalon's friends want to attend Alice's party even though she treats them like rejects?
30. What does Sukey's house suggest about her home life?
31. Since the bullying, Avalon's behaviour, language and family relationships have deteriorated. Make a list of at least 15 changes you have noticed.
32. How does Avalon justify her cruel treatment of Ruby?
33. What life lesson does Avalon learn from climbing the Gloucester Tree? How is the lesson relevant to her current situation?
34. How does the story of the Orange people parallel the events at her own school?
35. What is the relevance of Missy Higgins' song *Scar*?
36. How is Marshall's response to the bullying different to Avalon's?
37. What events in the chapter 'Liverpool Kiss' challenge our ideas of gender roles?
38. Why doesn't Avalon confide in Ms McKenzie? Would it have helped at this point in time?
39. What happens that finally causes Avalon to tell her parents about the cyber bullying?
40. Explain the meaning of each of the following phrases;
'... my parents, like puppets, jumping and dancing to the words that shifted the balance.'
'... it bounced like a nodding dog on the back of a ute.'
'... my mouth still half wired up.'
'... They ricocheted off the walls.'
... 'Tamara smashed his lights out.'
41. In the chapter 'Eve of Destruction', where do you think Marshall is?
42. How unexpected is Marshall's death?
43. In the chapter 'The Scream' Avalon's words are personified '... they twirled and twisted on the light breeze.' explain the effect of this technique.
44. Examine the use of repetition as the news of Marshall's death starts to sink in to Avalon. What does it indicate about how Avalon is feeling? How does it make you feel?
45. In the chapter 'Broken Down' there is a blurred line between dream and reality as Avalon deals with her shock and grief at her friend's death. What techniques have been employed to achieve this surreal feeling?
46. Avalon pictures Marshall on the chair his mother used to nurse him on as a baby when he committed suicide. Why would she think this and how does it add to the sadness of his life?
47. Why does Avalon blame herself for Marshall's death?
48. What do we learn about the real Marshall from his mother's speech at the funeral?

49. 'I touched the cool wood gently, the outline of my fingertips visible for a second before it evaporated.' This is a significant line about the transience of life. Explain your interpretation of this line.
50. Avalon emerges as a stronger character following the funeral. Draw a table showing Avalon before and after the calamity.
51. Avalon has been guilty of judging several people in the novel based on little evidence. Who has she jumped to conclusions about and how has this impacted on her life?
52. In the chapter 'Sticks and Stones May Break My Bones' the format of Marshall's journal entries is as important as the content in conveying his feelings. Analyse each entry to track the emotions and events that lead to his suicide. Enter your ideas in a table like the one below.

DATE OF ENTRY	FORMAT (Consider font, size, style, page format etc.)	LANGUAGE AND STYLE (Sentence structure, vocab, repetition etc)	EVENTS

53. Match the characters in the book with their aliases.
54. Avalon concludes that modern technology is a breeding ground for bullies who can remain unidentified. Do you agree with her conclusions? Can this be avoided?
55. Do Jeremy, Chris and Tyson get what they deserve?
56. What strategies does the school put into place to combat bullying? Do you think they will be successful?
57. What finally motivates Dragon Girl to admit her part in the bullying campaign and reveal her identity?
58. What part did Alice play in the bullying? Does this make her as bad as Dragon Girl?
59. What kind of character is Alice? How is she different from what Avalon leads the reader to believe?
60. What reasons does Dragon Girl give for her deceit?
61. In some ways it would have been easier for Avalon if Alice had been Dragon Girl. How so?
62. Do you think Marshall's prophecy is right or will Avalon's torment be with her forever?
63. What changes do you notice in Avalon from the beginning of the novel to the end?
64. What has Avalon learned about herself?
65. Describe the representation of family in *Destroying Avalon*.

2). LISTENING & SPEAKING AND VIEWING OUTCOMES: POSTER DESIGN

Design and present an anti-bullying poster targeting students at your school.

- Research bullying using the internet and library resources
- Contact relevant organizations to gather information
- Revise codes of media. Consider the following:

- ❖ Target audience
- ❖ Colour imagery

- ❖ Symbolism
- ❖ Format
- ❖ Text – font size, shape and style
- ❖ Slogan
- ❖ Jargon
- ❖ Statistics
- ❖ Persuasive language

-Discuss persuasive techniques used in advertising and propaganda

-Prepare a three minute oral presentation explaining your poster and promoting the anti-bullying campaign you have devised.

3). VIEWING OUTCOME: INTERTEXTUALITY

Watch the film *Looking for Alibrandi*.

- Compare and contrast Jose Alibrandi's and Avalon's journey of personal growth.
- Both texts begin with a physical journey, explain how this foreshadows the events which follow.
- How is the bullying that Jose Alibrandi suffers similar to Avalon's?
- Jose deals with her enemies in a very different manner to Avalon. How are their strategies different? Is one more effective than the other?
- Both characters have family issues. Explain these issues highlighting similarities and differences. What is the pervading message about the importance of family?
- How do the different characters deal with their potential love interests committing suicide? How does it affect their personalities?
- How are Marshall and John Barton similar characters?

4). VIEWING OUTCOME: ART

Analyse the painting of Edvard Munch's 'The Scream' in terms of colour, shape, composition and content.

- Explain how it parallels Avalon's reaction in the chapter of the same title from *Destroying Avalon*.
- Discuss the chapter 'The Scream' as a class and in your journal make notes about Marshall's death.
- Examine the conventions of media: including symbolic and technical codes
- Discuss the colour, imagery and form in the painting

Answer the following questions:

- What is the overall feeling of the painting?
- How does colour and line convey feeling?
- Repetition is used in both the chapter and the painting. What is the effect of this?
- Find another image that represents Avalon's feelings in the first paragraph of the chapter 'The Scream'. Use media conventions to explain how it conveys emotions.

5). LISTENING & SPEAKING AND READING OUTCOMES: DEBATING

Create a panel discussion or debate on society's views of technology. The topic: *Technology: Friend or Foe?*

- Read and discuss a variety of texts that explore the pros and cons of the use of technology.
- Discuss how technology is presented in *Destroying Avalon*.
- In groups produce a *For* and *Against* chart. Include textual references and factual evidence to support ideas.
- Watch old episodes of 'The Panel' and discuss various roles
- Discuss task and assign roles- formulate opinions for the given topic and find supporting evidence from prior reading and viewing

6). LISTENING & SPEAKING OUTCOME: ORAL PRESENTATION

Conduct an interview with a character from the novel *Destroying Avalon* for a talk-back television programme.

- This task requires you to work in pairs.
- View and discuss a variety of television talk back programmes (Oprah, Dr Phil, Rove)
- In pairs develop an interview between the host and a character from the novel asking questions relating to the character's life as presented in the novel.

7). READING AND WRITING OUTCOMES: INFORMATION & COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

Write a narrative comprised of blog entries that develop a character and focus on an issue presented in *Destroying Avalon*

- Research one of the issues presented in the novel: bullying, family relationships, suicide, friendship
- plan an outline for the character, conflict, resolution and conclusion revolving around the issue researched
- In conjunction with the IT department devise a blog template, a school intranet site and blog-ring students can post their entries to.
- Draft your ideas into blog entry format focusing on time lapses and characterization.

8). READING AND WRITING OUTCOMES: ESSAY WRITING

Write an essay examining how characters from *Destroying Avalon* reflect attitudes and values in society.

- In groups share ideas about the main characters in the novel, use evidence from the text to support your statements
- Focusing on the novel's issues discuss the attitudes and values presented in the novel
- In groups draw A3 sized charts showing attitudes and values relating to content in the novel.
- Revise essay writing skills