



SONE SONG

SOMETIMES A SONG
PRESSES PAUSE
ON THE WORLD

A.J. BETTS

Teacher's Notes

One Song by A. J. Betts

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Introduction 03

Themes 03

Plot & Structure 08

Characters..... 09

Style & Use of Language..... 10

Setting 12

Writing Exercises 13

Questions for Discussion After Reading the Novel..... 15

Further Reading Ideas for Class Discussion 16

Further Ideas Using Technology 17

Conclusion 17

Author Note..... 17

Further Reading 18

INTRODUCTION

'But I don't want *fine*.
I want a song that isn't *shit*.
I want a song that is truly *good*.
I want a song that will win.' (pp 38–9)

Aspiring singer–songwriter Eva has one last chance to enter Triple J Unearthed High and break into the music industry. But after three failed attempts, she needs some help.

Cue the band: perfectionist Eva, charismatic Cooper, easy-going Ant and moody Ruby. Plus fly-on-the-wall Mim, who's filming them for her school Media project.

Five people who have nothing in common but music. One emotionally and creatively charged weekend.

Can they record the most important song of their lives?

THEMES

Music

Key Quote: 'This is how songwriting is for me: unrushed, intuitive, organic. Personal. It's countless days of subconscious construction and conscious rearrangement. Nights of lying in bed, my fingers tinkering with chords on the doona. Weeks of refining, building, cutting back, smoothing things out, over and over, reconfiguring by logic and gut feel until the song finds its own form and begins to feel solid. It's usually months before I dare share it with Liah, or Cooper or anyone else, by which time the song exists in a form that seems right.' (p 40)

Discussion Point: This novel is a glorious tribute to the passionate pursuit of music and songwriting, and what that commitment entails. Not only is Eva addicted to her passion but each of the band members of The Errants have their own commitments, driven by a variety of idiosyncratic influences. What does the novel convey about songwriting and performing music?

Discussion Point: Ruby believes that music must be created by the band organically. Eva believes in organic creation but initially favours the role of the lone songwriter. So they appear to be set on opposite paths when Ruby says: 'And they did it organically. That's how songs should happen. Songs should emerge from the dynamics of the band as a whole, not from one person's (exhalation) poems that are jam-packed with overworked metaphors –' (p 138) How do Eva and Ruby resolve these creative differences? How do the other band members assist them in this resolution?

Discussion Point: Having written ‘Tongue Twisted’ in a desperate attempt to win the Triple J Unearthed High competition in her final year at school, Eva reflects on the dangers of creating music or songs ‘by numbers’: ‘In a spreadsheet, I inputted all the songs of the past ten years that had either won or been finalists. I then listened to each of them, identifying lyrical and vocal qualities. I noted similarities and anomalies. I observed the trend away from a guitar/piano-based indie-folk sound to more produced songs by solo artists or bands with cross-genre capabilities. Distilling this into a formula was easier than expected. Generating a song from it wasn’t terribly difficult either. Then, once Cooper and I had gotten the other band members on board, I modified the song to appeal to each of them.’ (pp 40–1) She later regrets this and returns to her own creativity. Are there any popular songs that you imagine were created in this way?

Discussion Point: One of the dangers of creativity is succumbing to unhealthy creative competition. Winning the Triple J Unearthed High is the ultimate goal for Eva but it has become an obsession. Reality Talent Shows such as Idol and The X Factor manufacture an audience but can be equally damaging to both those who win and those who don’t. Winning can put enormous pressure on an artist to succeed in their next performance or recording. Not winning can discourage an artist in their resolve to succeed. How valuable is competition in the career trajectory of an artist?

Discussion Point: Another peril confronted by any musician is the difficulty of making a living. Ant is a perfect example of the resilience, inventiveness, and diversity necessary to survive. He plays in several bands, performs at pub gigs, studies at TAFE and plays a variety of instruments as well as singing. Eva reflects: ‘The odds of making a living from music are miniscule, especially now that the industry is less stable than ever. When Covid-19 came along and concerts got cancelled, even the most talented musos had to start driving buses and working on the mines. A life in music is hardly ‘viable’, I know; I’ve heard this countless times from countless teachers and career counsellors. Follow your passions, they advise, but in your spare time. Forge a career that’s stable. And I will, I promise. I’ll be sensible. I’ll be realistic.’ (pp 50–1) What did this novel ultimately affirm about choosing to be an artist?

Discussion Point: The ‘excesses’ of the rock music industry are also canvassed in this novel. Cooper’s father, Phil, has been a celebrity rock star for Cooper’s entire life: ‘Even his conception happened at a festival – so I’ve been told. Homebake, Sydney, 2004. After Polyhedron finished their set, Phil Hunter headed out for a beer and a smoke, which is where he’d bumped into Antje, a Belgian backpacker on a trip around Australia. She was wearing the Polyhedron T-shirt she’d bought the night before at the merch stand. ‘Sign it, please?’ she’d said, with a thick accent. Apparently, she didn’t wear it for long.’ (p 92) How difficult would it be to retain a normal lifestyle as a celebrated musician?

Discussion Point: “This is the house that rock built. And Cooper is the boy that rock reared. Whenever he refers to a member of the Australian music canon by their first name (Peter, Jimmy, Tim, Chrissy, Bernard, Kevin, Daniel), he does so casually, without pretension. When he mentions his dad’s ‘on tour’, it’s with the same tone anyone else would use to say their dad’s ‘gone fishing’. He never boasts about receiving backstage tickets to gigs or having a godfather who’s been inducted into the ARIA Hall of Fame.’ (pp 93–4) What effect might such fame have had on the children of celebrities?

Discussion Point: Eva jams with the band and thinks: ‘So this is what it means to be in a band, I realise. It’s the back and forth. The trying and improving. The talking things through. The laughter and the letting things go.’ (p 196) How difficult must it be to create this sort of collaborative dynamic in a band? And how can a band retain it?

Love

Key Quote: ‘Cooper Hunter.

How many songs have I written for him?

About him?

Because of him? In every song I’ve written over the past two-and-a-half years, there’s been at least a hint of him there.

Not that he would know, of course. He’s been disguised so he couldn’t be found.’ (p 83)

Discussion Point: Although this novel traces Eva’s obsessive affection for Cooper and her gradual acceptance of the fact that he’s ‘just not into her’ and is really just out to have a good time, it also traces her gradual recognition of Ant’s qualities and her growing affection for him. Discuss these two aspects of romance: teenage infatuation versus a mature romantic relationship.

Anxiety and Depression

Key Quote: “I’m sure your parents mean well,” I offer. “And maybe there’s truth to it. Maybe you are depressed –”

“Of course I’m depressed.” A snort. “Isn’t everyone?”

It’s not a rhetorical question. It’s meant for me.

“I’m not depressed,” I say.

Her eyes fix me with an unflinching gaze.

“I can get a bit . . . anxious, sometimes,” I confess. I’ve heard they’re two sides of the same coin – anxiety and depression. They play out in different frequencies. “But I’m fine,” I tell her.

“Yeah, that panic attack before was totally fine.” If this were a staring competition, I’d have no hope. Her eyes burn into mine.

I have to look down.

I *am* fine. I mean, this weekend's been intense, but generally I'm okay.' (pp 284–5)

Discussion Point: Eva suffers from anxiety, but channels it into her drive for perfection and her attempt to manage and rigidly control the band as their leader, although that results in further emotional pressure. Ruby's parents have had her on anti-depressants since she was twelve: 'If she could make it to the finals of *Unearthed High*, she might succeed in convincing her parents that her music is a good thing. That her feelings aren't destructive or dangerous, but normal, to her. Even beneficial.' (p 296) What does this novel suggest about anxiety and depression, and the role that music might play in addressing such issues?

Copyright, Intellectual Property and Privacy

Key Quote: "But shouldn't we at least . . . get her permission?" I say. "Ask her to sign something?" Mim had laid herself bare in those text messages. They were only meant for an audience of one.

"She sent them to my phone, though," Cooper explains. "Which would mean they're technically mine, right?" (p 223)

Discussion Point: Eva is morally concerned about using the texts Mim had sent to Cooper as words in their songs. Cooper isn't at all concerned. Is Eva correct to be so worried? Could Cooper's use of Mim's words be considered an infringement of copyright?

Discussion Point: Artists today frequently use 'sampling techniques' to incorporate other artists' words and tunes into their music but this has become subject to litigation, in some major cases. Research and discuss contemporary examples of disputes about infringement of copyright in music. For example, Ed Sheeran's successful challenge to a lawsuit accusing him of appropriating Marvin Gaye's song 'Let's Get It On' in Sheeran's hit 'Thinking Out Loud'. (See Lee, 2023 in Further Reading.)

Discussion Point: 'Cooper's voice spikes with accusation. "You've been spying on us?"

"Cinéma vérité," says Mim. "Cinema of truth."

"That's illegal, isn't it?" Cooper looks to me, but I don't know. His face is pale. "That's an invasion of privacy."

"You knew the cameras were here," she tells him.

"Jesus, Mim. Spying? That's shady." (pp 229–230)

Cooper is incensed when he realises that Mim's cameras were filming after she left, and yet he had no problem with sharing her private texts with the band. Who is correct/incorrect in this scenario?

Friendship

Key Quote: ‘Despite it all, I feel lucky – lucky for the bonus Tim Tams (and the endorphins the chocolate will provide), and lucky for these two friends.

On my left is a girl who admires my music, and me, despite the crappy things I’ve done. A girl who believes in me. A girl brave enough to tell me her feelings.

On my right is a boy with kind eyes who chose to run out in the night to check on two girls in a storm. A boy who joined this band with no agenda, and no need for bribery. A boy with chocolate on his chin. A boy who only wants to play.

We’re an odd threesome, bonded by confession, hypothermia and contraband food.

It makes me feel strangely calm, despite the shivering. It compels me to believe that whatever happens next, it’s going to be okay. *I’m going to be okay.*’ (p 252)

Discussion Point: The novel is about a band and its music but it’s also about friendship, and ‘finding your tribe’. Despite their differences, what do the band members learn about each other and how do they come to respect their differences?

Discussion Point: Eva is surprised to find that Mim is attracted to her. She respects her honesty and begins to value her friendship:

‘I don’t know how I feel about Mim. Right now, I don’t know how I feel about Cooper, either. All I know is that Mim’s affection is honest and whole and much kinder than I deserve.

“I’m definitely changing the lyrics,” I tell her. She blinks, thinking it over.’ (p 245)

How do you think their friendship might evolve in the future?

Privilege

Key Quote: “He’s a good guy,” I say, mostly to myself. Admittedly, the way he acted with Mim last night was pretty lousy, but that was out of character – wasn’t it? “He isn’t bad.” I look to Mim. “Is he?”

Mim’s reading a plaque on the wall. Distractedly, she shakes her head. “He’s just a boy who’s used to getting what he wants.”

“I want this,” says Ruby, and I think she means Cooper’s privilege – the money, the perks, the paraphernalia – but what she means, specifically, is the white Fender Precision. Having removed it from the mount, she now holds it against her chest.’ (p 294–5)

Discussion Point: Society tends to envy those with privileged backgrounds. But how damaging to personal growth might privilege be?

Hope

Key Quote: ‘Hope is what’s left when the noise fades away.
Hope swells and swells, and floats me back up.’ (p 316)

Discussion Point: Is this novel primarily about hope, or resilience, or both?

Morality and Values

Key Quote: “So, you’re *not* angry at me?”
“Oh, I’m angry.” She looks down. Blinks away another raindrop. Or a tear. “I’m furious.”
“Because I stole your words?”
“Because you believed what he said.” (pp 238–9)

Discussion Point: Cooper, of all the characters, seems to struggle with being honest. He has had such a privileged background that he expects to be able to have or do whatever he wants. He doesn’t have qualms about lying about Mim. Or about having encouraged Eva to believe their time together was special to him. Do you think he learned anything over the weekend during which these events took place?

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

PLOT & STRUCTURE

1. The rite of passage **genre** adheres to certain conventions. It traces the maturation of teenage characters as they navigate choices, decisions, and turning points in their lives.

Activity: Analyse this text in relation to these conventions, identifying tropes and features which are common to such fictions.

2. The novel is **structured** as follows: Part One Intro Ch 1–3; Part Two Verse Ch 4 –10; Part Three Pre-Chorus Ch 11–17; Part Four Chorus Ch 18 –23; Part Five Bridge Ch 24–27; Part Six Outro Ch 28; Epilogue. These relate to the parts of a song:

‘the four of us shape the pieces that click into place: intro, verse, pre-chorus, chorus, bridge, outro’ (p 199).

Discussion Point: How does the use of a six-part structure headed with musical terms inform the narrative? (Students with musical knowledge may have special insights into this.) What is the purpose of the Epilogue?

3. **Tension or suspense is essential to a novel’s structure** and here it is created by the fact

that Eva is the narrator and isn't cognisant of what the other characters are thinking. It is also enhanced by the interviews which reveal facts unknown to Eva.

Discussion Point: What event/incident created the most tension for you in reading this novel? Which turning point had the most impact? For example, after Mim leaves there is a prevailing sense that she might reveal to her social media audience what has transpired. But when Mim returns there are further revelations which are contrary to our preconceived notions of her willingness to be involved with the band.

4. **Several questions remain unanswered in this novel.** Will Eva and the band win the competition? Will Ant and Eva embark on a romance? Will Cooper devote himself to music or is he likely to choose another path?

Discussion Point: What other questions might you have? Discuss.

5. **Pacing a story** to achieve minor and major climaxes is integral to a novel's structure. Each chapter begins and ends with a tempting statement, for example:
Beginning: 'The inside of my mouth feels like a pineapple. A whole one, spiky bits and all.' (Ch 11, p 167)
Ending: 'The very worst combination imaginable.' (Ch 7, p 113)

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

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

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

CHARACTERS

Action in this novel revolves around five major characters locked together for a weekend and introduces only glimpses of a few minor characters, such as Liah, Eva's sister who drops her off, Ruby's parents, and the two policemen who visit in search of Ruby. (Ringo, the Hunters' dog, provides incidental entertainment!)

1. **The major characters are Eva Sidebottom, Cooper Hunter, Ant, Ruby Ha and Mim Sharma.**

Discussion Point: The novel is told from Eva's point of view but also includes interviews with each of the other band members conducted by Mim. How does Eva's opinion of a character differ from what is revealed in the interview conducted with them?

2. **Read these two quotes and then discuss Eva's personality:**

'Eva Sidebottom is cool and composed, her feathers unruffled.' (p 209)

'On the inside, though, it's different. Inside, there's always something going on. At minimum, it feels like a low-level fluttering, as if a butterfly's trapped in my chest. The feeling's there when I'm in class or having conversations; even when I'm laughing with my group at lunch. It's there most of the time except on the rarest of occasions, like when I hear a great song, or when I'm halfway through the Christmas holidays and I realise I don't have to be anywhere, or get anything done.

The feeling is anxiety – I know that. But it's my anxiety, and it's okay because it's normal to me now. Its constant fluttering has become a familiar kind of comfort.' (pp 209–210)

3. **Writers generally create a diverse group of characters** who portray obvious and hidden characteristics. In the course of any narrative the hidden characteristics are brought to light as the novel's themes develop. For example, Eva thinks of Mim: 'I've wholly underestimated her. Mim is a girl unafraid to enter the lion's den; a girl game enough to speak her mind in text messages. A girl who drips stormwater and doesn't betray how cold she feels. A girl so much tougher than me.' (p 227)

Discussion Point: Which characters did you understand or not understand? Which ones surprised you? Which characters did you have sympathy for and why? Were there any 'minor' characters you would have liked more information about?

4. **Dialogue** plays a big part in this novel. Given that it contains only five characters largely in one room for its duration, dialogue greatly contributes to the characterisation (although Eva's first person narrative is employed to describe each character as well).

Discussion Point: Choose a passage of dialogue and discuss what you learn about the two characters from that conversation.

5. **Each character in this novel can be described in distinctive terms.**

Discussion Point: Write a character study of any of these characters.

STYLE & USE OF LANGUAGE

1. The novel is written in **first person singular, in present tense from Eva's narrative perspective**. However, there are also alternative narratives included in the form of interviews conducted by Mim, in which the other characters' voices are heard (Eva pp 65–7, Ruby and Eva pp 134–142, Eva and Ant pp 247–252, Ant, Eva and Ruby pp 371–3), and also texts from Mim to Cooper (pp 192–3) translated into words for the song 'FYI' (pp 219–220), texts from Ruby's parents (pp 271, 273).

Activity: Re-write a small section of the narrative in past tense. How does this alter the narrative?

Activity: Cooper and Mim deliver two different accounts of what happened in his bedroom prior to Mim leaving. In this case Cooper was lying. Choose another event in the narrative and rewrite it from Cooper'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, and analyse how it works, and what makes Eva's narrative 'voice' distinctive.

3. **Literary Devices** are frequently used as description in this novel, for example:

'I can no longer remain here, in a feeble version of yoga Cobra pose, trying to piece together last night's puzzle without my stomach having something to say about it.

Idiot, it says, in a gurgling language I understand.

I'd like to reply but don't dare open my mouth in case something real comes gushing out.

Let me out! urge the restless contents of my stomach.

Wait! I think, before pushing myself violently to sitting, which makes everything in the room spin and spin like a disappointing carousel: couch, beanbag, kitchen, instruments, amps. I try to locate something to vomit into.

Dog bowl? Too shallow.

Chip bowl? Too small.

Upturned snare drum? Potentially.' (p 170)

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

Metaphor: 'I thought I had time under control, marshalled into solid blocks in the schedule in my head. I had the minutes and hours all lined up, in a linear, systematic fashion, yet time has gone and changed the rules, turning from solid to liquid and then again to gas so it can float to wherever the fuck it wants, when it wants, in some insubordinate haze.' (p 201)

Metaphor: 'I lean further out, over the metaphorical moat. Crocodiles snap at my toes.' (p 232)

Simile as Oppositions in Meaning: 'And though the lyrics sound bitter, the tone is counterbalanced by the music's bouncing, jaunty playfulness. It's a juxtaposition that works, like bacon and maple syrup, or sweet-and-sour lollies. It's fun yet strong. Innocent yet powerful. Raw but measured. It's indie rock with elements of pop and ironic grunge.' (p 221)

Other humorous references are made here:

"I'm stuck writing shit songs and feeling like . . . like I'm part-human, part-cloud." She winces. Makes a sound of disgust. "God. Look what you've done. You've made me use metaphor."

Simile, I think, but don't correct her.' (p 283)

'Nerves make me blurt, "It was a metaphor."

The cops blink, waiting for more. "A what?"

"A metaphor. It means it wasn't literal. The door wasn't actually locked. There was no moat. Ruby could've left at any time."

Surely they can see I'm not strong enough or charismatic enough to hold anyone hostage.' (pp 297–8)

4. **Musical allusions litter the text in counterpoint to the action throughout this novel**, to cement the theme of musical creativity. For example, 'Your songs are like this perfect blend of Montaigne, Amy Shark, Phoebe Bridgers and Vera Blue.' (p 244)

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

5. **Humour** is used by this writer to deal with serious themes, for example,

Irony: 'Sitting on Cooper's bed, I try to recall the songwriting unit we did in Music last year. Mr Newman had talked about motifs and melodies, but I hadn't paid much attention because I already had my own songwriting method: Cooper + piano + metaphors + time. I didn't need a new approach because mine always worked, and it did again, because I got an A for the solo songwriting assessment.' (p 212)

Exaggeration and Hyperbole: 'I'm doomed to a uni degree I may not even like followed by a career I might even hate, but it'll be too late then 'cos I'll be locked in, with a massive uni debt, and my whole life will be a series of unsatisfactory days racked with regret.' (p 280)

Sarcasm: "My period has caused lasting emotional trauma," she quotes. Eyes still closed, she chuckles. "Now that's Shakespeare.'" (p 281)

Discussion Point: Find other examples of humour and discuss the strategies employed such as irony, exaggeration, sarcasm or bathos.

SETTING

1. **The setting of the novel is largely** in Cooper Hunter's 'guesthouse'; a limited setting which poses challenges for the author. Descriptions of the contents of the room and garden are employed, and sounds such as the beginning of the thunderstorm are also employed to set the scene.

Activity: Identify key details used to bring the setting to life.

2. **Dialogue** can also be used to set a scene.

Discussion Point: How is dialogue employed in evoking setting in this novel?

3. **Time period** is another aspect of setting. This novel is very contemporary and is framed by the COVID 19 pandemic which immediately preceded it. In fact, Eva blames the forced isolation caused by the pandemic on the demise of her romance with Cooper: ‘What if there is another Eva on another Earth on which a diseased bat wasn’t eaten in Wuhan in 2019 and the Covid pandemic never happened? What if, on that other Earth, there exists an Eva and a Cooper who didn’t have an ill-fated spanner thrown into their new and precious relationship? What if they kept on seeing each other; kept learning about each other. Kept growing together, the way we were supposed to?’ (p 103)

Discussion Point: Discuss how this and other contemporary issues infuse the setting in this book.

4. **Place is evoked by beautiful description.** John Marsden in *Everything I Know About Writing* (Pan Macmillan, 1992) reminds writers to use detail in describing setting (p 113) and words which appeal to all the senses (pp 121–6); to describe what can be seen, felt, heard, touched, smelt etc.

Discussion Point: Find examples of sensory description in which A.J. Betts achieves this.

5. Setting is also evoked via **moods and atmosphere.**

Discussion Point: This novel is set largely in Cooper’s guesthouse in the grounds of his father’s mansion. The closeted nature of this environment sets the emotional tone for the novel. Find particular passages which use this closeness to metaphorically describe the characters’ feelings.

WRITING EXERCISES

1. Titles of books are designed to intrigue and entice.

Discussion Point: How do you interpret the title *One Song*? What did this title suggest to you before/after you read the novel? What other title might the novel have had?

2. The packaging of a book includes the cover and blurb which offers 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. This novel contains many tense dialogue exchanges between the characters, including the interviews conducted by Mim.

Activity: Create a graphic novel interpretation of any of the scenes using a template and graphic novel techniques such as panels, gutters, dialogue balloons, thought balloons, captions and sound effects.

4. Eva is horrified by Ant's songwriting suggestion:

“You know what we sometimes do in *The Virus Inside Us*?” says Ant, before I can get very far. “If we've jammed the song and we're on a roll, we just start jamming the lyrics, too. We'll muck around with syllables first, like –” he sings “– ba da da-da da da-da ba dum. Or something like that. You know, to start with. Then the singer starts replacing them with words or lines which might be things he's already written, or things he comes up with on the spot.”

“That's what Dad's band did, too,” says Cooper, remembering. “They used to call it a ‘word vomit’. They threw words around until they came up with something good. Hey, we should do that.” (p 197)

Activity: Break the class into groups and invite them to apply a ‘word vomit’ to a simple melody and then to discuss the results.

5. Imagine that this book has a sequel.

Activity: Write your own imagined synopsis or blurb for a sequel set a year later.

6. Cooper advises Eva that one can gain inspiration for songs from reading seemingly irrelevant texts such as science textbooks: ‘*Pretty cool. And I have to admit that drawing inspiration from science isn't the worst idea. It's better than the time wasting we've done so far.*’ (p 102)

Activity: One of the quotes Eva reads is: ‘*Opposites attract. The planet Earth is a giant magnet.*’ (p 103) Later, the band jam and write:

I can't swim away

'Cos I'm caught in your dragnet

There's no point trying

When your love is a magnet.

(Your love is a magnet. Your love is a magnet.)

It's a five-line chorus, with a slow-ish tempo and a vibe that's part Vance Joy, part Keane, part Coldplay.

It isn't much, but it could've been worse.’ (p 106)

Find other such quotes and use them to write a simple set of song lyrics.

7. The band struggle to come up with a name for both their band and a title for their song. They eventually settle on Band name: Modern Hominid (misspelled as Modem Homophone) and Song title: Something Good (misspelled as Sobering Foot) (p 381) for their entry.

Activity: What other band and song names can you come up with?

8. The lyrics for the song Eva uploaded to Triple J Unearthed High don't appear in the novel, but we hear that they were raw and honest.

Activity: Invite students to write the final lyrics.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AFTER READING THE NOVEL

1. The speech Eva delivers (p 49) to convince her new band members to stay the whole weekend in order to write and record the song is predicated on points she develops about the importance of pursuing music with a passion. Do you think Eva's points are valid or not?
2. 'And it's exactly the kind of scene Mim should be filming for her documentary, because it's intimate and unselfconscious and . . . exhilarating. Here we are: sweat-stained, bleary-eyed, vomit-flecked but victorious. We've battled our way through the swamps of stagnation and come out the other side, afloat on a billow of euphoria. It's a feeling that makes all the previous crap worthwhile and I wish I could capture these moments – the sounds and the laughter and the others' blissful, knowing faces – and preserve them in a capsule that I could crack open anytime I need a shot of reassurance or optimism or joy. I'm part of something bigger than me now, and it's something pretty special.' (pp 196–7)

Discuss this quote in relation to the novel's themes.

3. 'In the contemplative quiet, I'm reminded how much I dislike group projects at school. They're always a time-suck, plagued with idlers, arguers, underminers and egos. I hate all of it. The lulls like this one. The tangents and small talk. The excruciatingly slow negotiations. The unsatisfactory concessions. Because invariably a group is never more than the sum of its parts but a compromise of incompetence consisting of moments like these: four people saying nothing, getting absolutely nowhere.' (pp 78–9)

Invite students to agree or disagree with this statement.

4. Social media is also a topic in this novel. The texts that Mim sent to Cooper could be dangerous for her in the wrong hands. They had the potential to be shared on social media. Discuss with the students the ramifications of sharing in texts and emails, and on social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, their most personal feelings when the medium is potentially so public and so damaging.
5. 'I want to follow them physically, too. To go back out into the real world and a proper,

functioning society; a place where people are clean and civilised and don't hurt each other with mixed messages and lies and period misadventures and theft of text messages and awful, crushing, unrequited love.

Because what's left for me here? A boy I don't know how to feel about. A girl who deserves to know how I feel about her. A guy I've grossed out. And a song that doesn't exist.

We're not a band. We're a horror show.

The open door is a temptation. *Run! Be free!*

Until the male officer closes it and turns towards me. "So. Are you happy?" (pp 298–9)

What makes Eva stay on to finish the song?

FURTHER READING IDEAS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

1. **Music is often a theme in contemporary YA fiction.** Compare this novel to others about music. [See Further Reading.]
2. **Read more about songwriting** and try to employ that knowledge in creative activities. [See Further Reading.]
3. **Research and listen to the music, watch the videos of any of the bands or singers mentioned in this novel, and visit the Triple J Unearthed website to watch and listen to music which has been discovered via the competition.** This could provide an entertaining activity when studying *One Song*. Or you could watch films about music performance.
4. **Watch *The Breakfast Club* (1985)**, a film about five teenagers locked in a room for detention and how their relationships evolved. Compare to this novel.
5. **Read and discuss the words used in any contemporary songs and how they relate to Eva's and Ruby's descriptions of songwriting.**
6. For further insights, read essays and interviews with A.J. Betts:

'In the Writers Room with AJ Betts' with Claire Nichols *ABC The Book Show* 10 July 2018
<www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/the-book-show/writers-room:-aj-betts/9898240>

Niewenhuizen, Agnes 'Reading Australia: Zac and Mia by A.J. Betts' *Australian Book Review* 2 November 2016
<www.australianbookreview.com.au/reading-australia/zac-and-mia-by-a-j-betts>

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

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

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 included in these notes.
- Create a book trailer for this novel.
- Establish a class chatroom online about this and other young adult novels about contemporary music.

CONCLUSION

A.J. Betts has written an astoundingly inventive work. It is a love song to music, and songwriting, and to the arts generally, and it is also a poignantly touching and yet hilarious exploration of teenage maturation. It's also about romance and the travails of discovering true love. And finally, it is a statement about moral, ethical and creative decisions and how they interface.

AUTHOR NOTE

A.J. Betts is a Fremantle-based author, speaker, teacher, columnist and cyclist. Her last work was the two-book speculative fiction series comprising *Hive* and *Rogue*. 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. A.J.'s award-winning third novel, *Zac & Mia*, is also available in 14 countries, and its American television adaptation won two Emmys in 2018. Her earlier novels are *Wavelength* and *Shutterspeed*. In 2019, A.J. was awarded a PhD on the topic of Wonder at ECU, and was the recipient of the Western Australian Premier's Fellowship. A J. is originally from Queensland but has lived in Western Australia since 2004.

FURTHER READING

YA Fiction about Contemporary Music:

Alexander, Kwame and Rand Hess, *Mary Solo Blink*, 2017.

Barrow, Rebecca *This Is What It Feels Like* HarperCollins US, 2018.

Battle of the Bands edited by Eric Smith and Lauren Gibraldi. Candlewick, 2021.

Cohn, Rachel and Leviathan, David *Nick & Nora's Infinite Playlist* Alfred A. Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2006.

Dyson, Alex *When It Drops* Hardie Grant, 2020.

Goo, Maurene *Somewhere Only We Know* Farrar Straus Giroux, 2019.

Hahn, Erin *More Than Maybe* Wednesday Books, 2020.

Huang, Charlotte *For the Record* RHUS Children's Books, 2015.

LaCour, Nina *The Disenchantments* Speak, 2013.

Milanes, Janelle *The Victoria in my Head* Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2017.

Moldavsky, Goldy *Kill the Boy Band* Point, 2016.

Nelson, Colleen *Spin* Dundurn Press, 2019.

Oseman, Alice *I Was Born for This* HarperCollins, 2018.

Smetana, Sarah Nicole *The Midnights* HarperTeen, 2018.

Thomas, Angie *On the Come Up* Balzer and Bray, 2019.

Whitaker, Alecia *Wildflower* Little Brown, 2014.

Wilde, Jen *The Brightsiders* Swoon Reads, 2018.

Non-Fiction:

Behind the Song edited by K. M. Walton. Sourcebooks Fire, 2017.

Teaching Activities and Resources:

'How To Make a Book Trailer' *Tristan Bancks*

<www.tristanbancks.com/2015/05/how-to-make-book-trailer.html>

'How to Write Songs as a Teenager' co-authored by Halle Payne *Wikihow*
<www.wikihow.com/Write-Songs-As-a-Teenager>

Lee, Benjamin 'Ed Sheeran cleared of infringing copyright in Marvin Gaye lawsuit'
Guardian 5 May 2023
<www.theguardian.com/music/2023/may/04/ed-sheeran-verdict-not-liable-copyright-lawsuit-marvin-gaye>

Masterclass 'Songwriting Tips: 10 techniques for Writing Memorable Songs' *Masterclass*
December 11, 2021
<www.masterclass.com/articles/songwriting-tips-techniques-for-writing-memorable-songs>

Triple J Unearthed
<www.abc.net.au/triplejuneearthed>

Films:

The Breakfast Club (1985) directed by John Hughes
<www.imdb.com/title/tt0088847>

Sing Street (2016) directed by John Carney
<www.imdb.com/title/tt3544112>

Metal Lords (2022) directed by Peter Sollett
<www.imdb.com/title/tt12141112>

Television:

We Are Lady Parts (Series, 2021) created by Nida Manzoor
<www.imdb.com/video/vi483049497>