

Teacher's Notes



Stuff I'm (Not) Sorry For

Written and illustrated by Maxine Beneba
Clarke

Teacher's Notes by Ernest Price

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LEARNING OUTCOMES

RECOMMENDED FOR

Early high school-aged readers (ages 11–13, grades 7 and 8)

KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- Learning areas: English
- General capabilities:
 - Critical and Creative Thinking
 - Personal and Social Capability
 - Intercultural Understanding

THEMES

- Growing up
- Identity and belonging
- The role of language

SYNOPSIS

The unbearable itch of chicken pox. The annoyance of sharing a Spotify account with your parents. The delight of smearing tomato sauce over everything you eat.

The bright rainbow lights of the roller derby. The glorious sticky sweetness of fairy floss. The rebellion of the fake tattoo you know your nan will hate. The satisfaction of turning your childhood Barbie into a punk-novelist.

The shock of accidentally smashing a neighbour's window with a cricket ball. The shame of cheating on a test. The feeling of wearing your afro high and proud. The anxiety of reading text messages before school. The joy in Mum's solo standing ovation on concert night. The blowfly in the school toilets that none of the boys can catch ...

Maxine Beneba Clarke is back with 99 new poems for young people, following on from her multi-award-winning collection, *It's the Sound of the Thing*. In sonnets, pantoums, narrative verse, free verse, blackout poems, tongue-twisters, limericks, found poems, concrete poems, rhyming couplets, haiku and more, *Stuff I'm (Not) Sorry For* makes magic from the ordinary.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR/ ILLUSTRATOR

Maxine Beneba Clarke is the author of over fourteen books for adults and children, including the ABIA and Indie award-winning short fiction collection *Foreign Soil*, the critically acclaimed bestselling memoir *The Hate Race*, the self-illustrated picture book *When We Say Black Lives Matter*, which was longlisted for the UK's Kate Greenaway medal, and the CBCA Honour Book *The Patchwork Bike* (illustrated by Van T Rudd), which won the 2019 Boston Globe Horn Prize for Best Picture Book. Her poetry collections include *Carrying the World*, which won the 2017 Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Poetry, *How Decent Folk Behave*, and *It's the Sound of the Thing: 100 new poems for young people*, which won the 2024 ABIA for Book of the Year for Younger Readers. Maxine is the inaugural Peter Steele Poet in Residence at the University of Melbourne.

THEMES

Activities

- Introduce students to the overarching themes detailed below, scaffolding a brainstorm about the issues and ideas associated with these concepts.
- Ask students to curate a list of poems from the collection that might align with these ideas. Students should consider the way that these ideas are explored within individual poems, and how they develop across the work as a whole.

Growing up

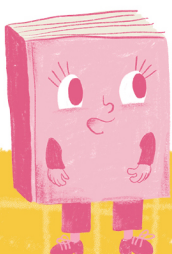
Stuff I'm (Not) Sorry For is at once playful and fierce, the embodiment of Clarke's wish to make 'a more poetic world for young people'. The collection explores the moment that young people find their voice, and learn to use it – for better or worse. The poems catalogue the pieces of ritual and folklore that characterise childhood, and celebrate the worlds that young people build away from the prying eyes of adults. Even as she centres this uniquely childlike sense of joy, Clarke does not shy away from the power that young people have to challenge the staid, oppressive beliefs that often run unquestioned through adult lives. She reckons with the unique trials of growing up – such as learning about the undeniably adult forms of cruelty and prejudice – whilst still retaining the wonder and energy that make childhood so intoxicating.

Identity and belonging

The title of the collection suggests that there is a beautiful, complex power that comes when young people learn to assert their autonomy. The young people in these 99 poems try on new hobbies, new clothes and new relationships, all as part of the process of finding their unique identities. Clarke reflects on the ways that a sense of belonging may be compromised by the prejudices of both individuals and social structures, and even with the best intentions of our nearest and dearest. Ultimately, the voices of her poems have a strong, abiding sense of love that creates connections and allows individuals the space to truly become themselves.

The role of language

Clarke asks young people to follow her to the edge of what it is possible to do with language. She stretches the boundaries of both form and content, teaching her readers the many rules of poetic forms so that they can break them with flair and intention. She empowers her readers to tell inclusive, personal and joyful stories that will immortalise their communities on the page. These high-minded ideals are perfectly counter-balanced by a desire to find pleasure in the pure fact of wordplay – a skill in and of itself in a world where language is increasingly transactional and mechanical.



WRITING STYLE

Stuff I'm (Not) Sorry For is an expansive collection of poems that introduces readers to the almost infinite possibilities of language and theme. Young people can learn the rules and restrictions of a range of poetic forms, and make guided decisions about how to experiment with and challenge these conventions.

Activities

- Have students read 'A Note from Maxine'. What do they think motivated Clarke to write another collection of poems for young people? How does she imagine her readers might engage with the collection?
- The collection includes an epigraph from [American poet Carl Sandburg](#). Ask students to interpret its meaning, and to reflect on why Clarke might have chosen this quote. What might it say about her understanding of poetry? Can they find a quote online that reflects their feelings about poetry?
- Explore the [history of blackout poetry](#) with students. Have them experiment with this [blackout poetry generator](#).
- Introduce students to the [rules of the pantoum](#).
- Teach students the [rules and rationale of Found Poems](#). Have them return to the Found Poems in this collection.
- Have students consider [Free Verse](#).
- Students have likely had some experience with [Haiku](#) in primary school. Stretch them to consider not only the syllabic rules, but also the thematic concerns of the form. How does 'Fight' conform to or challenge these traditions?
- Ask students to consider [Poems for Many Voices](#). Why do they think Clarke chose this form for the poem 'Back in Our Day'?
- Work with students on understanding [Rhyming Couplets](#), differentiating the lesson for your learners.
- Introduce students to the [Sonnet](#).

COMPREHENSION

Activities

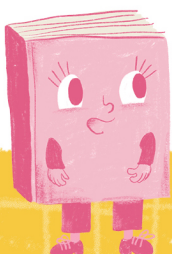
Have students answer the following questions, organised by theme.

- **Growing up**
 - What don't kids 'need proof' of to believe in 'The Five-Second Rule'?
 - How does 'Back in Our Day' challenge conventional ideas about the wisdom of adults?
 - Have you ever experienced an illness like the one detailed in 'Chicken Pox'?
 - Why did Clarke shape 'The Grown-ups Need Their Coffee' as a poem for many voices?
 - How does 'Crush' capture the feeling of liking someone?
 - Can you relate to the ideas explored in 'Spotify List'?
 - What is the key idea explored in 'I Do Not Like Consequences'?
 - Why does Clarke make a reference to the song 'Strange Fruit' in her collection?
 - What does 'Stuff I'm (Not) Sorry For' reflect about growing up?
 - How does the persona in 'Troll' respond to cyberbullying?



- Why did Clarke use the concrete form for 'Broken-hearted'?
- Why does Clarke centre '18 Messages and 2 Missed Calls' around the persona's phone?
- How does Clarke capture school scandal in 'Graffiti'?
- What ideas does Clarke explore in 'Grunge Barbie'?
- What does the persona observe about adult problems in 'No Longer Needed'?
- What does Clarke suggest about crushes in 'Harry-On-My-Wall'?
- How does Clarke capture ideas about mental health in 'The Black Dog'?
- Why does the persona in 'If I Woke Up a Grown-up' ultimately decide that they would prefer to remain a kid?
- **Identity and belonging**
 - What poetic techniques shape meaning in 'Loud'?
 - What games or events unite your neighbourhood in the style of 'Home Run'?
 - Why is being a 'Roller Derby Queen' such a powerful image?
 - Why does Maryam steal a Freddo Frog in 'The Shopkeeper'?
 - How do form and theme intersect in 'Joy', 'Love', 'Pride' and 'Anxiety'?
 - Why is the persona in 'I Am Not a Beach Kid!' so frustrated?
 - What is importance of the title 'Standing Ovation'?
 - How does Clarke challenge gender stereotypes in 'Whoever Said That Girls'?
 - What ideas are explored in 'I Don't Know Why It Matters'?
 - How can you interpret the title 'The Answers'?
 - Why is the persona dejected in 'Lead Weight'?
 - How does Clarke create a sense of place in 'Sunlight'?
 - What does Clarke suggest about the possible cultural importance of hair in 'Afro Proud'?
 - Why did Clarke choose the title 'The Smallest and Most Important of Gestures'?
 - How does 'Road Trip' capture changing familial relationships?
 - How does Clarke challenge gender stereotypes in 'Whoever Said That Boys'?
 - How do you interpret 'Change We Can Believe In'?
 - What is the significance of 'My Skin is Beautiful'?
- **The role of language**
 - Why does Clarke open the collection with 'Poetry Wasn't a Bore'?
 - What does 'There's No Rhyme for Purple' suggest about how we can use language?
 - How does 'Snapchat Clapback' capture the experience of the app?
 - What does 'Closed for Renovations' suggest about the role of libraries?
 - How does Clarke synthesise the plot of an entire play in 'Romeo'?
 - How does 'Only Poems That Are Silly' challenge conventional understandings about poetry?
 - Why does Clarke close the collection with 'There Once Was a Poet'?

WRITING EXERCISE



- Have students create a folio of their own poetry responding to the central themes of Clarke's work. Depending on your students' readiness, you can either mandate the forms that students must use, or you can have them select from the full breadth of Clarke's work.
- Have students write analytically about Clarke's work, either in a body paragraph or an essay. Scaffold their understanding by brainstorming responses to the following prompts as a class, generating ideas and evidence from specific poems.
 - 'Clarke explores young people's dynamic energy.' Discuss.
 - '*Stuff I'm (Not) Sorry For* shows the importance of finding your own voice.' Do you agree?
 - 'Clarke suggests that poetry is transformational.' Discuss.
 - '*Stuff I'm (Not) Sorry For* reflects the power of connection.' Do you agree?
 - 'Clarke challenges poetic and social conventions.' Do you agree?

ILLUSTRATION STYLE

Stuff I'm (Not) Sorry For is shaped by a range of line drawings that draw on the poem's subject matter. Clarke's illustrations create the sense of her work as organic, and true to the childhood experiences that she chronicles in her poetry.

Activities

- Ask students to create an alternate cover for *Stuff I'm (Not) Sorry For*.
- Show students the cover of *It's the Sound of a Thing*. Ask them to imagine what a third instalment in the series might look like.
- Have students select their favourite illustrated poem. What do they notice about the interaction between the words in the poem and the illustrations?
- Have students select an unillustrated poem and illustrate it in Clarke's style.

CREATIVE ACTIVITIES

Activities

- Have students experiment with substitution work using some of the poems in the collection. 'Whoever Said That Girls' and 'Spotify List' would make excellent starting points. What do students learn about Clarke's decision-making through this activity?
- Have students create a title, cover art and illustrations for their own poetry folios. Have them work within the thematic and form boundaries of *Stuff I'm (Not) Sorry For*.
- Ask students to perform at least one poem from their folio. They should work with small groups, experimenting with reading aloud. They should read their own work, and that of their peers, offering each other feedback on the most effective performance styles.
- Hold an event in class allowing students to showcase their poetry, both in performance and in the written form.

RELATED READING



- [What Does Poetry Mean to Me?](#) By Maxine Beneba Clarke
- [Blackout Poetry](#) on writers.com
- [Carl Sandburg](#) on poetryfoundation.org
- [Found Poem](#) on poetry.org
- [Free Verse](#) on poetry.org
- [Haiku](#) on poetry.org
- [Pantoum Poems](#) on writers.com
- [Poems for Multiple Voices](#) at the Illinois University School of Children's Literature
- [Rhyming Couplets](#) at Masterclass
- [Sonnets](#) on poetry.org

