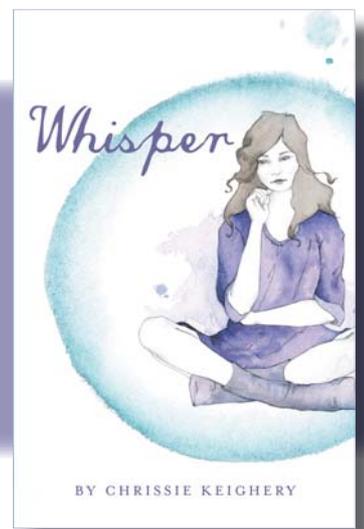


Whisper

By Chrissie Keighery



Summary

In this story, we are taken on an enlightening journey into the world of the deaf, accompanying a young woman who began her life in the hearing world. At just fourteen, Demi contracts meningitis, and a rare legacy for her is to lose her hearing completely. We meet her nearly two years later, aged sixteen, as she begins her year eleven studies at the School for the Deaf – her choice – as the return to her old school proved unsuccessful. We follow her over the months of this year, in which she wonders whether her desire to become a lawyer is still a realistic one. She is introduced to the culture of the deaf where she establishes new friendships. Older friendships are reshaped, and a new relationship begins. Most fundamentally, she rearranges her sense of identity. This book explores what happens when who we thought we were – our ambitions, our hopes, our sense of self – is changed fundamentally by circumstances.

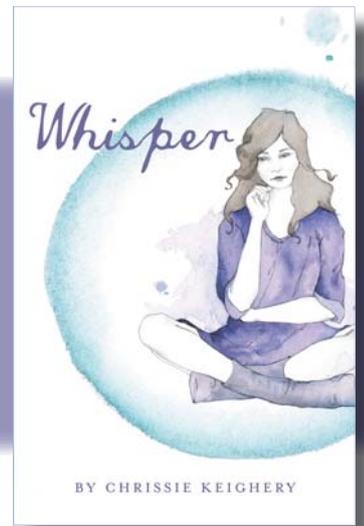
This is Demi's story as she reshapes her life and her identity.

Introducing the book:

- The gripping opening chapter begs to be read aloud. While it is very descriptive of a Melbourne tram journey, observant readers might notice that the descriptions are of sights, movement, touch, but no sounds.
- It also reveals the emotions of the central character – why is it important to be next to the door? Why does she look away from 'Horse Girl's' gaze? Why doesn't she care about her iPod anymore? Why does she need to read faces?
- This opening is like a puzzle, with subtle clues. Why does Nadia need to forgive her? What is the 'unknown ahead'? We have to trust the author that all will be revealed in good time, when Demi is ready to reveal it to us.

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Characters

Demi Valentino

- Sixteen and in year eleven. After contracting Meningitis she is left profoundly deaf.
- Strong, determined. Goes to deaf school against her mother's wishes. Wants to be told if she is not doing things, such as speaking, properly.
- P59 She has to get used to new ways of communicating and getting humour that is not spoken.
- Wants to study law like her sister and brother-in-law, Ryan.
- P90 Standing under the disabled sign is a potent image for her on her journey of finding who she is again
- She understands that identity is shaped by not only who we think we are, but how others perceive us.
- Have students list five words that describe Demi at the beginning of the novel and at the end. Is there much overlap? What has caused the changes in her?

Demi's mum

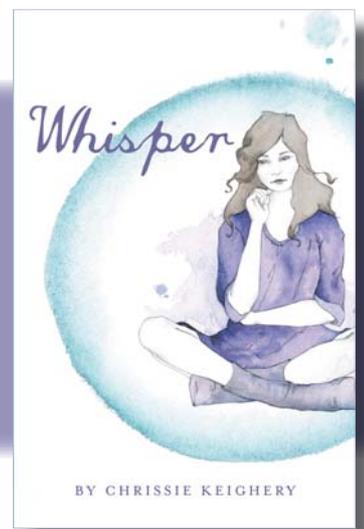
- She and Demi do not have an easy relationship. She reminds Demi that the family has 'adjusted' and they have learned to sign. She doesn't want Demi to go to the deaf school (p43), and wants her to keep speaking – clings to ideas of 'normal'.

Demi's dad

- He takes a lower profile in the story, but is caring and has a special understanding relationship with Demi.
- He is a scientist, and obviously knew there was no hope of Demi recovering her hearing, though initially Demi thinks he wasn't fighting hard enough for her, that he had given up on her.

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Felicity (Flawless/Flick)

- Demi's older step-sister and mother of two boys, Harry and Oscar.
- For much of the story, she is 'Flawless' - in Demi's eyes a boring wealthy housewife, with a perfect life.
- It is revealed that she doesn't actually have an easy life, or a happy relationship with her own mother. She gave up law when she became pregnant as a student and now feels the pressure of doing the right thing, bringing up children properly, looking perfect. She is married to Ryan, a lawyer, who is supportive.
- The change of the name by which Demi calls her sister over the course of the novel is reflective of her less self-obsessed view of the world and more balanced understandings.

Nadia

- Demi's best friend who struggles to work out the new relationships she has to make with Demi.
- P 78. Nadia wants to take care of Demi and that is the last thing Demi wants. Is Demi being fair? Is she unable to see things from another's point of view?
- Remains a good friend.

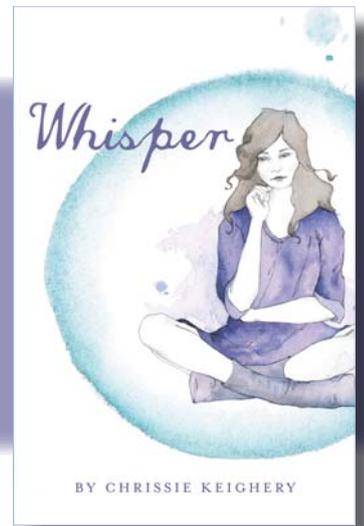
Classmates at deaf school

Keisha (Chatter)

- Friendly, matter-of-fact girl who likes Luke.
- She works in a café.
- Her mother can't sign so she speaks a lot.
- Has a playful sense of humour and sends up Demi

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Erica

- Has a cochlear implant that initially Demi finds ugly, and then stops noticing.
- She is a good friend to both girls.

Stella (Star)

- P85 We meet her first with a vivid evocation of her in her 'Rage against Audism' t-shirt.
- She is clearly at the centre of the group and changes the dynamic when she returns. She disrupts Demi's feeling of being 'settled' – a good thing for Demi?
- Her family are deaf so she signs only. She wants to go to Gallaudet University in the US, the only university for the deaf in the world. Students might like to research this academic institution.

Luke

- Funny, sends up Demi initially.
- A good footballer who plays in a hearing team.
- Eventually gets with Keisha.

Cam

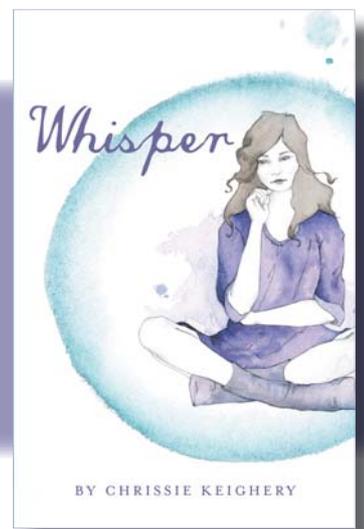
- Friendly with all of the group

Helena

- A teacher at the school. Married with two hearing children.
- Her husband is profoundly deaf and she is partly deaf – she calls her family a 'a mixed mob'. Demi likes this label.

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Jules

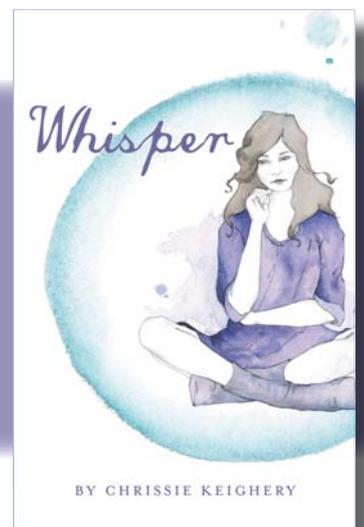
- Demi's interpreter and sign teacher at her old school, on whom Demi develops a crush..
- Demi is eventually able to get over her mortification at misreading the situation and apologise to him.

Ethan

- A lovely boy Demi meets first at the swimming pool in a less than ideal situation.
- He plays in the same football team as Luke so understands about not being able to hear.
- Demi being deaf is not all a problem for him, through she initially thinks it will be.
- Sends her long, fun text messages.

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Style of narrative

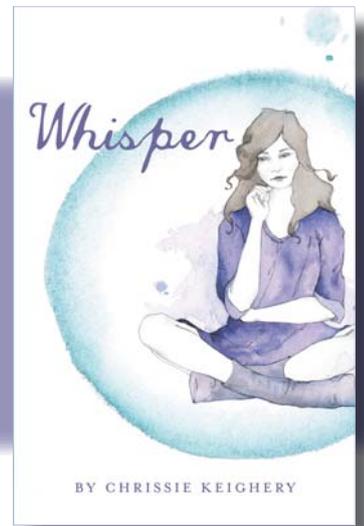
- Events are told in the first person by Demi, so we are given her thoughts and reactions to this life-changing event.
- Readers will also be alert to the fact that we are only getting Demi's view of events and people. Often we are aware that there are other possibilities for the interpretations of events and behaviour.
- Demi's reactions give us insight into her current state of mind, but knowing they might be inaccurate helps readers anticipate the way the plot will eventually reveal alternative points of view. How does she react when she finds out she is wrong?
- We are also given insights into the world of the deaf as they impact on Demi. There is no didacticism in this novel, though readers will learn much about a world unfamiliar to many of them.
- There are examples where the sign for a thing or an idea is stunningly expressive. Students might like to make comparisons with English. For example, on page 145 Demi describes Jules signing a 'sliver of moon' – a 'beautiful sign'. Read the description and then see if the students can write a description that is as evocative of this sort of moon. There are other examples students can identify throughout the book.

Mode of telling

- The reader is on the journey with Demi and she controls how she will tell us about what has happened to her. These slow revelations of her ambitions, and how she got to the school after becoming deaf, are intriguing. For instance, pages 38-39 suggest that there are more details to be revealed about Jules.

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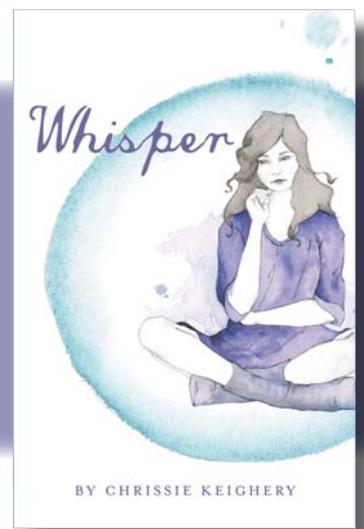
- One of the strengths of this telling is its control. Demi relates what happens and her thoughts in a direct voice. Initially, she is often angry, unreasonable and self pitying, as she attempts to shape a new sense of who she is.
- This style of slow revelations can serve as a wonderful model for student writing too – not telling all, but creating anticipation for the reader, respecting their ability to wait and put the pieces together.

Stages in the plot

- In this carefully constructed novel, we get pieces of information when Demi can revisit them, deal with them and see them in some sort of perspective.
- Chapter 2 describes her illness, and on page 8 a near-death experience. This sequence captures the awfulness of not knowing what was happening to her.
- P9 Demi realises she can't hear.
- P11 Demi goes to a new school for the deaf.
- P 61 The fight with Nadia.
- P67 Demi has a panic attack at the mention of Northfield.
- P109 Demi decides she can't go back to her old school, against her mother's wishes.
- P112 Describes Demi's gutsy speech and the way that some students send her up for being too loud. Discuss how students react to this. Imagine they are sitting in the hall listening. Is it legitimate 'fun' to send her up – part of the rough and tumble of school life? How do they feel on her behalf?
- P016 Demi meets Ethan and his reaction to her being deaf is a 'sip' rather than a 'gulp'. What does this suggest about him?
- P124 Keisha gives Ethan Demi's phone number – the romantic plot thickens. Will he ring or won't he? Students to predict with reasons.

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- P193 Demi's deaf friends share experiences they have had at mainstream schools, where they suffer unjust consequences for mishearing, and are accused of deliberately making trouble.
- P206 Demi gradually works out that her hearing friends need to make adjustments too – that she is not the only one having to adjust.
- P211 She learns this about her sister too, and is getting the world back into balance more.

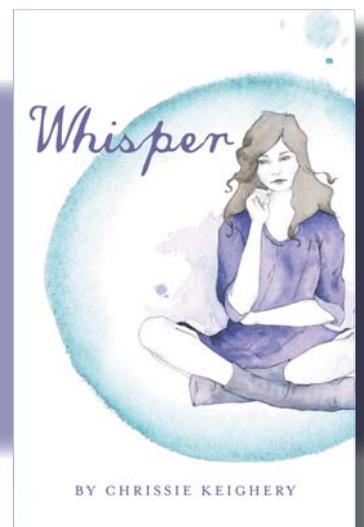
Different culture:

We gather that Demi tried returning to her old life, but in daily terms at school it was too difficult – there were too many 'gaps', in social encounters and academically, as she relied on lip reading and a part-time note-taker and interpreter. She then has to adjust to the new culture of deaf school. For instance:

- P11 No bells but a flashing light to signal beginning of class.
- P14 Teacher drums her feet to get the students' attention.
- P14 Demi thinks: 'They wear their feelings splashed over their faces'. Does this imply that people usually tend to hide feelings? Or does speech express them differently?
- P21 Keisha sees English as a second language. This is a new concept to Demi and probably to lots of students. Talk about what they know about sign. Do they think it is a version/dialect of English? What distinguishes languages from each other?
- P28 Demi learns how to read faces and body language.
- Pp31 Everyday changes: missing thunderstorms; swimming still the same; p34 she notices things about her friends she hadn't before
- P50 She uses subtitles on television, but describes their limitations. Students might have had experiences of this at the movies - 'always having to fill the gaps'.

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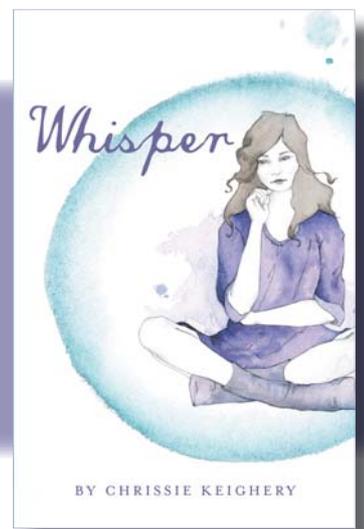
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- P51 Her Dad fills in the gaps for her on her favourite tv show.
- P61 Adjusting to being misinterpreted because she can't hear – 'not being told, not understanding'.
- There are differing views within the deaf community regarding cochlear implants, hearing aids, speaking and signing that Demi encounters - and so do we. At home she is pressured by her mother to speak as well as sign, whereas Stella sees this as virtual betrayal of deaf culture. This is worth discussing and perhaps researching more. It is a strength of the novel that the deaf community is presented as complex and various.
- P92 Stella's photographs provide readers with a strong metaphoric representation of her identity. This is a rich stimulus for students to create their idea of identity through symbolic visual images.
- P94 Demi recalls the public humiliation of the Northfield incident when she has a panic attack after being manhandled by a security guard and is wrongly accused of shop lifting. Invite readers to imagine how they would react if they could not hear what was happening.
- P97 Examples of how signers make their words expressive for emphasis – and humour. How Stella expresses how she feels about 'hearries'. Demi doesn't like that it places hearing people as the 'enemy'. The two girls come from completely different situations. Talk about why students think Stella has this view. Is it legitimate to see the discrimination as 'Audism' – as real oppression? Why or why not?
- P100-103 Keisha and Demi watch Luke play football with a hearing team. This is an opportunity for writing from Luke's point of view. Write about his experience on the ground, playing a game whose action he can hear and perhaps feel, but not hear. In preparation, watch a televised quarter of football with no sound. What do you notice, pay attention to, when there is no sound?

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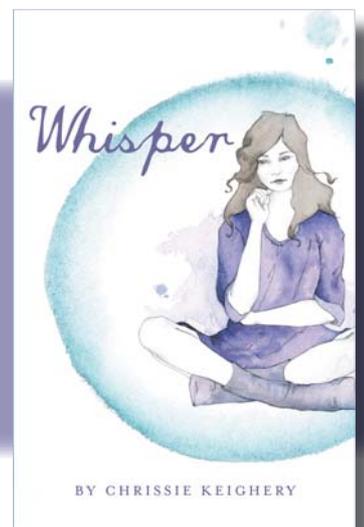
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- The hearing girls have dumped Keisha and Demi's bags on the ground – clearly an aggressive act. Then one of them sends up their signing, waving her arms. Why would she do this? If one of your friends did this, how would you react?
- P103 Keisha and Demi react differently to this act: Demi sees it as humiliating while Keisha sees it as annoying. Why do they react so differently?
- P125 Demi and her deaf friends go to the university expo and Demi translates for Stella who doesn't seem so confident out of her environment. Does this give more insight into her?
- P128-9 The support the woman from the university offers offends Demi. Why is Demi so offended? How do readers react? Should it be any different? How?
- P139 Demi explains about Jules and how she misinterpreted their relationship.
- P149 Demi goes to Stavros's party and enjoys herself dancing. Then Nadia and Shae talk critically about her new friends and Demi realises she is not the same as they are any more.
- P159 Demi is left at home alone and experiences how frightening and isolated it is when she can't hear. She can't even text the emergency number should she need to. She becomes paranoid, and perhaps justifiably selfish in regard to her mother and sister. How do students react to her in this episode? Is it possible to understand how vulnerable she feels? Are there parallels in students' experiences?
- P173 At school, in English, the class is given an example of discrimination against the deaf by an airline. Have the students write their response in a letter to the company, or to the editor of the newspaper.
- Demi thinks education is the answer to such discrimination. Stella is angry – sees it as deliberate oppression. Demi doesn't like her use of 'us and them'. Invite students to identify which view they sympathise with more.

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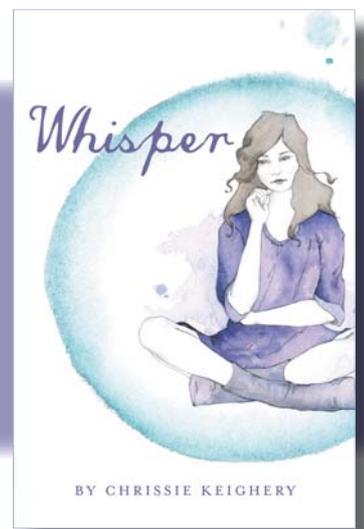
- P176 Stella says 'we should be proud to be deaf' and that it is being part of a culture which needs to be nurtured to build its own society and allowed to make its own rules. A good place for discussion of these ideas.
- P179 Stella says 'we will never belong; we will always be excluded'. The classroom impromptu 'debate' in the book would make an excellent opportunity for an actual classroom debate: choose teams for Stella's and Demi's opposing views.
- P180 Stella gives Demi an invitation to a deaf-only party at her house.
- P186 Demi goes to the party and is interested in how the family communicates, such as skypes a translator to order Thai food.
- P187 Demi glimpses living in a different way. She observes lively conversations and people having fun. Being deaf is not the 'handicap' that she has been viewing it as.
- P238 Keisha loses her job because she is deaf. Demi enlists Flick to the cause.
- Demi learns a new vocabulary: 'you're oral', 'hearies', 'deaf names', 'Audism'.

Identity

- While the narrative pivots around a teenager becoming profoundly deaf, it is really about identity, a work-in-progress for every adolescent. What happens to Demi forces her to change her sense of self. She is in a privileged position of being able to see (eg p130) her 'two selves' through the eyes of her old friends.

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Relationships

- All of Demi's relationships have to undergo change, and eventually she understands and accepts this.
- P4 'Mum can turn a lifeline into a chain'. This signifies that her relationship with her mother is not always easy – her mother always puts her point of view – but she does not block Demi's choices. Is she too hard on her mother? Can you understand the mother's reactions or should she be more understanding and supportive of Demi's decisions?
- Demi's relationship with her nephews, Harry and Oscar, is important to her, and she is able to love them unconditionally. Their childish directness provides some fine moments in the novel, such as Harry's comment which closes the story.

Related reading

Peeling the Onion by Wendy Orr

Looking for Alaska by John Green

Butterflies by Suzanne Gervay

Brown Skin Blue by Belinda Jeffrey

Speaking to Miranda by Caroline Macdonald

Follow on:

Find out more:

- Visit the Victorian College of the Deaf website to find out more (or the relevant school in your city). The College has a bilingual philosophy of teaching through Auslan and English as the second language. You can find about learning Auslan here too
- <http://www.deafchildrenaustralia.org.au/>
- Auslan Signbank – A website with videos showing many signs in Auslan.
www.auslan.org.au/