

Burning Blue

Paul Griffin

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Fiction, paperback

Recommended for Middle Secondary School

Resource Kit Contains

- Praise
- Synopsis
- Author information
- Themes
- Reading and writing exercises
- Questions for discussion/essay topics
- Research topics



Praise

'A funny, wrenching, often heartbreaking novel.' *The New York Times on Stay With Me*

'Lee Child...Elmore Leonard: these are the guys to whom Paul Griffin will surely be compared one day. Griffin writes with true grace.' *Scott Smith on Stay With Me*

'Manages the trick of being at once hard-nosed and sentimental, brutal and uplifting. A pit bull of a novel, with wagging tail and teeth that could take your face off.' *Bernard Beckett author of Genesis*

'Debut author Paul Griffin...delivers a heart-achingly authentic novel of love, loss and loyalty.' *Sunday Age on Ten Mile River*

Synopsis

Whatever your concept of gorgeous, Nicole Castro trumped it...It was unassailable, her splendour. Almost unassailable.

Nicole Castro is the most beautiful girl at Hollows High School until she has her face splashed with acid in a vicious attack. When her classmate Jay Nazarro, loner and brilliant hacker, meets her one day in the school psychologist's office he does more than just gawk at her. They become friends and he resolves to find her attacker.

Everyone is a suspect—even Nicole—and the list keeps getting longer as Jay struggles to find a lead before the attacker can strike again. Nicole's boyfriend, Dave Bendix, seems like a trustworthy guy as the founder of the school's anti-bullying program. But what does he want Nicole to lie about?

Jay is forced to defend his friendship with Nicole to his schoolmates when a relentless reporter continues to follow them for the latest scoop. He puts his hacking skills to the test as he eliminates suspects, but he continues to hit dead ends. It is only when he pairs up with another hacker named Angela that he begins to make some progress. However, the deeper he digs the more he falls for Nicole and the more dangerous things become.

Burning Blue is a high-stakes, soulful mystery that explores just how far love, or the other side of love, will take us

About the Author

When he's not writing, Paul Griffin works with at-risk teenagers. Text has published *Ten Mile River*, Paul's stunning debut novel about survival and friendship, and *Stay With Me*, a powerful love story that was named a Best Book of 2011 by *Kirkus Reviews* and the *School Library Journal*. Paul lives in New York with his wife and his dogs.

Themes

Body Image

Body image, how you view your physical self, is a major theme of the novel. Nicole is known for her beauty, but after the acid attack she finds it hard to think of herself as beautiful or even to say the word. Nicole struggles with the idea of her boyfriend Dave continuing to find her beautiful and as a result ends their relationship. She doesn't like what she sees when she looks in the mirror and she can't bring herself to look at or touch the burn. It takes Nicole a long time to trust Jay before she finally shows him her scars. This novel allows students to discuss ideas that we have about beauty, how body

image affects confidence and identity, and how words—such as 'beautiful'—can empower or disempower people.

Social Stigma

A social stigma is when you make assumptions or disapprove of people based on characteristics that are different from the norm. For example, people with a mental illness are often judged to be violent or are misrepresented in the media. Jay has epilepsy, a condition which often carries a stigma of fear in school and the workplace. His behaviour is often a result of his embarrassment about his epilepsy. Like Nicole, he has strategies in place to avoid interacting with people. Jay is a loner by choice, especially after a video of him having an epileptic attack went viral. The more time he spends with Nicole the more chance there is of him having an attack in front of her. Nicole's acid scars, a form of disfigurement, also carry issues of stigma. Students are able to discuss how they feel around people with disabilities and the difficulties associated with such conditions, especially in high school.

Privacy

The issue of personal privacy is dealt with throughout the novel. After Nicole is attacked, she is followed by photographers and her privacy is invaded. Many other people's private information is also invaded when they are hacked by Jay and Angela. Jay's seizures are broadcast on the Internet after bystanders film him. The changes in technology and their impact on people's privacy are explored in the novel. This theme allows discussion around personal privacy and the impact of the Internet and smart phones.

Control

The author explores the idea of control through a number of characters. Nicole continuously disobeys her mother's rules around driving, about not leaving the house, and about taking her pills. Jay could control his epilepsy through regular medication but he doesn't. He also assumes that Angela is not compliant with her meds either. In addition, the author explores control through self-harm, often a coping strategy for people dealing with feelings of difficulty or pain. It is revealed towards the end of the novel that Nicole has been harming herself. Her mother loses control of her family: her husband leaves her and her daughter will be leaving for college soon. Jay's father has also lost control of his life and uses alcohol as a coping mechanism. The theme of control allows discussion of social, moral and ethical dilemmas.

Style

Burning Blue is a mystery novel, which focuses on finding Nicole's attacker. Ask students to keep note of suspects and clues while they read and allow time throughout the reading of the novel to make comparisons with Jay's suspicions. Discuss who they think the culprit is.

- Brainstorm the common characteristics of mystery fiction.
- How does the author create suspense throughout this novel?
- How are clues revealed?
- Which clues are red herrings—designed to trick you—and are enough of them?
- Is the solution believable?

Voice

Burning Blue is written in first-person narration, mostly from Jay's perspective. This point of view is the most intimate way to write a story, allowing the reader to feel that the narrator is confiding in them.

Jay talks directly to the reader, for example:

I'd tell you how to do it to save you the trouble of downloading what you need from The Pirate Bay, but then you'd do it, and you shouldn't unless you have a good reason, and you don't. I did. (87)

- Why has the author chosen to do this and what effect does it have?

The author also uses first-person narration from Nicole, for example:

Remarkable, that his simple act of kindness triggered a relief from the numbness. It was forgetting and an awakening at the same time, transitory but deep. (29)

- Why does the author need to incorporate Nicole's journal entries throughout the novel?

Language

The author uses some sophisticated language that may require definitions or synonyms: unassailable, holstered, rejoinder, ramify, bifurcate, anglophile, narcissism, solipsism, ubiquitous.

This novel is set in America and uses American spelling. Ask students to make a list of American words that they come across by putting them in a table next to the Standard Australian English spelling.

Reading Questions

1. Explain how important body image is at high school.
2. Explain how Nicole's self-esteem has been affected by the attack.
3. After reading the e-mail sent before the attack, how much do you think jealousy played into the acid attack?
4. What are the pros and cons of home schooling?
5. What impact does Jay's epilepsy have on his behaviour? Find specific examples from the novel to use in your response.
6. Do you think there is stigma surrounding conditions such as epilepsy? Give examples of other forms of stigma that you know of and explain what you think causes it.

7. Explain the obsession people have with the personal lives of celebrities and the role the media plays in this, especially when there is a scandal or a tragedy. Why do you think the photographers are following Nicole?
8. Is e-mail, especially a Hotmail account, still a common communication form for your age group? If not, what has replaced it?
9. Jay uses headphones so no one talks to him. What are some other strategies people use to blend in or to be ignored?
10. Why do you think all three characters are reluctant to take their medication?
11. What is emancipation and what are the pros and cons of this?
12. What advice could you give someone so they could find help if you suspected they were harming themselves like Nicole?
13. A lot of the characters are dealing with a loss of control. What things in your life can't you control?
14. Did you suspect Nicole's mother as the attacker?
15. Why did it take Nicole and Jay so long to trust each other? Why is trust an issue for these characters?

Discussion Activities

Burning Blue

What day is it? What night? I'm burning, burning blue. (155)

With the class, discuss the title of the book and what this might refer to. (A blue flame is the hottest type of flame.)

First Aid

Mr Sager wrapped his hand in a rag towel and pried away Nicole's hands. He told a girl with a water bottle to douse the burn. Everybody with a water bottle did the same thing. (5)

Research the first aid for a chemical burn. Did Mr Sager do the right thing? Make a list of accidents that could happen at your school. Do you know the correct way to react in such emergencies?

Mirror, Mirror

What must people see when they look at me? No symmetry. No balance. (30)

According to studies, the more symmetrical a person's facial features are, the more beautiful they are and the more attractive they are to the opposite sex. Find pictures in a magazine of the 'most beautiful' celebrities and discuss their beauty in relation to such studies. What effect do these types of facts have on women, especially Nicole? How important is this to you?

Labels

Sixth-grade yearbook: MOST BEAUTIFUL: NICOLE CASTOR

The fake me.

Ridiculous, how beautiful you are—just beautiful.

Just? Nothing else? (9)

'Beautiful' has always been Nicole's identity. Choose one word to describe your identity. How does that label feel and how limiting is it? Explain. Nicole is both smart and beautiful. If you could only choose to be one, which would you choose and why? Discuss.

In Your Father's Footsteps

Wrestling was what my dad had done, so you bet it was good enough for me too. (12).

Both Jay and Dave are expected to follow in their father's footsteps. Discuss family traditions and some that you follow and would like to pass onto your children. What are some areas of life in which parents may put pressure on their children's decisions, and what are the consequences of this?

Bullying

I felt bad for Nicole, but not as terrible as I would have felt if it had happened to somebody nice or at least not a rich gorgeous snob. (14)

Is it easier to condone any type of mistreatment that happens to someone you don't like or to someone you think deserves it? Is it still bullying? Discuss.

Going Viral

The rest is blank, or would have been if not for the fact that everyone with an iPhone clipped me. I was a Hollows Facebook phenomenon for a week until Mrs. Marks, our assistant principal, said anybody caught circulating the video would be suspended. (17)

What does it mean when something goes viral? What videos or pictures have gone viral recently that have had both positive and negative consequences. Discuss the pros and cons of iPhone technology and research current memes.

Free Information

Most of that [information] comes from Facebook. Hackers don't have to hack so much anymore. Why would I take on the risk inherent in stealing information from you when you're willing to tell me everything about yourself for free? (64)

What are the privacy issues of social media websites like Facebook? Are you able to hide information from people such as your parents? Discuss the social consequences of not being on Facebook. What could a hacker use your information for? Research hacking scams and discuss.

Sticks and Stones

Before I left the Hollows for home school, pretty much everyone called me Spaceman. I'd gotten used to it back then, like whatever. What freshman doesn't have a derogatory nickname pinned to him? But now that I was two years older, I don't know. It stung. (21)

Why is the saying 'sticks and stones will break my bones but names will never hurt me' no longer relevant? Have you got a nickname that you find derogatory? Have you ever used a derogatory nickname to refer to someone

else? Discuss the consequences of verbal bullying despite how unimportant it may appear at the time.

Judging a Book by Its Cover

She was small boned to begin with but seemed to be starving herself, and she wanted everybody to know it with her skinny jeans and tight t-shirts. She struck me as an actress who's constantly trying out for very different parts, never sure which role she's supposed to play. (23)

Discuss the way we judge people according to their appearance and the way they dress. What assumptions do people tend to make about others with tattoos and piercings or who wear a lot of make-up? What groups do we put people into (emo, sporty etc.)?

How Soon is Now?

Then I know you have The Smiths all over your playlists, right? (46)

Look up the lyrics to some of The Smiths songs, especially 'How Soon is Now?' and 'Unlovable'. Why do you think Nicole connects with this band? How do these songs/lyrics parallel her feelings about the attack and how she has felt since the attack?

Literary Techniques

Symbolism

The author uses symbolism to represent deeper ideas. Consider the symbolism of a spider to represent the attacker, arachnomorph. Spiders spin intricate webs and know exactly how to catch their prey without getting caught. Is this a good symbol for the attacker?

Simile

The author uses a number of well-crafted similes for descriptive purposes. Consider some of these examples and explain why they are so effective:

The way he was looking at me, licking his lips like I was puff pastry, I was pretty sure he was going to honour his word when he promised he was going to break both of my arms. (11)

The power lines sprayed from the phone pole and attacked the side of our building like blown snot. Dented, pigeon-crap-covered Dish Network discs tilted like begging hands. (60)

Ask students to locate others in the text and to create some of their own that describe their high school or the town they live in.

Writing Activities

Diary Writing

Look at the diary entries—of the women mentioned in Chapter 6—in the two examples below (see links). The themes of these diary entries are similar to those in the main characters' lives. Ask the students to write a diary entry as either Jay or Nicole.

- The topic of Anne's last entry is contradictions and the two conflicting sides of her personality. Write a diary entry as Jay that discusses his inner conflicts.

- Sylvia's entry is about her fears and conflicts for the future. Write a diary entry as Nicole, discussing what she is scared of and the conflict between the old and new Nicole.

Anne Frank: <http://sexualityinart.wordpress.com/2007/11/06/the-last-entry-in-the-diary-of-anne-frank/>

Sylvia Plath: http://www.gcneville.us/senior_comp/senior_comp_pdf/01_plath_at_seventeen.pdf

Newspaper Writing

There are several pictures and newspaper headlines throughout the novel.

- Write an article that could accompany one of them for the local paper.

Essay Writing

In America, there is usually an essay question that accompanies your application to get into college. Discuss the material that Jay or Nicole could use to write theirs and how the events from the novel, or Jay's past, would meet the criteria of a college entrance essay.

- Ask students to choose their own life-changing moment to write about and how this moment has affected their future.