

## Teacher Notes: *Heaven Sent*

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SJ Morgan (Sue Morgan) lives in Stirling, SA, a leafy green suburb in the Mt Lofty Ranges of Adelaide. Sue was a keen reader as a child, and she went on to study English Language and Literature at Swansea University in Wales.

Some years later, Sue and her partner bought a round-the-world air ticket. The plan was to travel for a year but ten months in, they'd had only reached the halfway point. They decided to take a pitstop in Wellington, NZ and find temporary work. Ten years later, they had a house and two children, and the rucksacks they'd arrived with had morphed into many cubic metres of possessions.

A new job opportunity then took them to Adelaide and, with their children about to start school, it gave Sue the chance to do what she'd always wanted to do: to write a novel.

Although she's now written several books, and has won awards for her writing, *Heaven Sent* is her first published novel. It tells the story of Evie, a girl who wears a back brace to treat her scoliosis. This is a condition that affected both Sue and her older sister in their teenage years; and something which she felt compelled to revisit in her writing.

### ABOUT THE BOOK

*Heaven Sent* is a gritty, contemporary tale of love, trust and redemption, set in the Adelaide Hills, South Australia.

At almost sixteen, EVIE's life isn't all she'd hoped it would be. She lives in the dodgy end of town with her mum and her mum's deadbeat boyfriend, SEB; and adolescent scoliosis means Evie's forced to wear a back brace until she's stopped growing.

Then one night, she meets GABE. Breathtakingly handsome, he crashes, spectacularly, into Evie's life. He says their meeting was no accident and convinces Evie he's been sent to turn her fortunes around. Evie's best friend, Paige, dismisses him as a pot-head, but Paige has issues of her own and has started spending all her time chasing older men instead of higher grades.

As the weeks go by, Evie's luck seems to be on a constant upswing and she begins to wonder if she and Gabe really were 'meant' to meet; even if she's noticed that so many aspects of Gabe's story don't add up...

But there's someone else waiting in the wings and, for Evie as well as for Gabe, life is about to get a whole lot more complicated.

## DISCUSSION POINTS

The prologue introduces us to a period in Evie's past, even though the rest of the novel is told in the present tense. What purpose does the prologue serve? Is the imagery from it repeated anywhere later in the novel, and how does the soldier-crab imagery relate to Evie's personality?

Evie makes many references to herself as being an outsider. Do you think this is how others see her or simply how she sees herself? Can you find evidence to confirm or suggest either point of view?

Gabe's Mercury chain is a feature throughout the novel. What does it reveal about Gabe? Does it help us to understand how he perceives his role in Evie's life?

On a number of occasions, Gabe quotes from the Bible. Can you find those quotations and explain what they mean and what they reveal about Gabe's thinking?

When Paige goes missing (following Evie's birthday meal), Isak and Evie have an awkward conversation, with neither of them wanting to say too much. What are they each trying to hide? Why are they both afraid of being honest?

At the start of the novel, Evie believes she spots Gabe on a number of occasions near the school. How do you account for this? Are the sightings real or imagined? Is there an explanation?

What impact does Evie's scoliosis have on the novel? In what way would it be different if she had no disability or a different sort of disability? Do you believe her 'difference' is as noticeable to others as she thinks?

We hear about many of Evie's problems at the beginning of the book; her scoliosis; her dislike of Seb; her estrangement from her real father. Why are we told about these at the outset? What difference does it make to our feelings about Evie?

On the one hand, Paige might be seen as feisty, fun-loving and confident. Underneath, though, do you believe this about her? Is she as she seems or does she have a more vulnerable side to her? Are we able to sympathise with her at all?

If this novel was set in the nineteen-eighties, before the days of the internet, mobile phones and Facebook, how different would it be? Are there events that wouldn't have happened? How would the plot have changed?

There are several references to dogs in *Heaven Sent* – and Evie's dog, Benson, plays a large part in the unfolding drama with Gabe. What impact does the inclusion of dogs have on the plot? What events and what emotions emerge as a result?

We see Gabe's personality in different ways in different situations. Note his behaviour in the various scenes and consider why he is so changeable. Think about how you respond to his behaviour. Do you feel differently about him at the end to how you did at the beginning? And if so, why?

Gabe, Isak and their families are from Iceland. Why do you think the author chose them to be from a Nordic country and what effect does it have on the novel?

Evie's mum says of the split-up with her husband: 'No one came out of it well, not really.' – to which, Evie replies: 'Dad doesn't seem to have done too badly.' Who do you agree with? Mum, or Evie?

We hear a lot about the furniture that Gabe gave to Evie. Why is it important? What does it say about Gabe and about Evie? Why does she give it up so easily in the end?

What impact would you say Evie's scoliosis had on Gabe? She was embarrassed to have to tell him about it, but his reaction surprises her. Can you explain why he reacts as he does?

Evie has issues to do with her physical appearance, whereas Gabe suffers more psychologically. Although their problems are very different, do you believe that these two characters understand each other better because of their own personal struggles?

## ACTIVITIES

Exploring Social Issues: underage sex

Paige has begun chasing older men instead of chasing high grades. She flirts with one of her married teachers and then, later, has a relationship with Evie's step-dad. What are the laws and taboos around sexual relationships in Australia? Are they the same worldwide (eg Evie's dad married a younger woman in Malaysia) or do other countries consider girls 'adult' at a younger age?

Exploring Social Issues: miscarriage and menopause

Evie's mum suffers an ectopic pregnancy and there is discussion about *The Change*. At what age do women usually go through menopause and what are the symptoms (physical and emotional) of the change? What causes an ectopic pregnancy? Why would Evie's mum have had to go to hospital?

Research: what causes scoliosis and how is it treated?

Although scoliosis has long been regarded as a significant medical condition, today's treatments are relatively new. Spinal fusion (placing a steel rod against the spine) was developed in the mid-late twentieth century and bracing was used for more moderate curvature. What are the current advances in medicine that could change the course of the disease? How does it affect individuals at different times of their life?

<http://www.srs.org/>

Research: mental illness and treatment options

It becomes clear, as the story unfolds, that Gabe is dealing with mental health issues. In what ways does his mental illness become apparent and what are the likely treatment options that would be available to him? If you knew someone who was suffering from delusions, where would you advise them to go for help? Think about options on the phone, via the internet and the professionals and non-professionals who you might want to approach.

Writing Exercise: Considering personal perspective

Much of Gabe's early intrigue comes from the fact that we only see him through Evie's eyes. She likes his air of mystery and the fact he seems so unconventional. Choose a scene where Evie and Gabe are alone together and rewrite it either a) where Evie knows that Gabe has a mental illness or b) from Gabe's point of view.

Writing Exercise: Style

The contemporary feel of the novel derives, partly, from the language used. Take a scene from the novel (for instance, Paige and Evie on the bus, discussing Gabe's note; or Paige and Evie discussing Mr McArdle) and write the scene in the style of another (non-contemporary) author – eg Dickens, Jane Austen, Shakespeare.

Writing Exercise: Thinking Visually

When novels are turned into films, screenwriters have to tell the story in a very visual way. Using the scene where Benson the greyhound is bitten by a snake, write this as if you were writing it for the screen, putting in stage directions and only as much dialogue as required.

Writing Exercise: Point of View

There are almost as many events that happen to Evie's mum as happens to Evie. How different would the novel be if some of the scenes were written from her point of view? Choose one scene and write it from her point of view instead of from Evie's. How does this help us to understand her?

Writing Exercise: Exploring Character and Language

Part of what makes a character unique and believable is the language they use. And each character – just as each of us in real life – has their personal 'habits' of speech. Write a letter to Evie in the voice of either Seb, her mum or Paige. Pretend Evie is still on holiday in Iceland and you're writing to tell her about something that's happened at home. Keep to the same type of language as the character has used throughout the book.

Writing Exercise: Precis

Condensing a whole book into just a page or two is a very difficult thing to do. Writers have to do it all the time, to give publishers and agents a flavour of the book. Think about the main points of the story; the characters; the main actions. Could you condense *Heaven Sent* into one page?