

## These notes are for:

- Years 7-10
- 13+yrs
- Secondary

## Key Learning Areas:

- English
- Art
- Health

## Example of:

- Young Adult Fiction
- Letter Writing
- Print Text

## Experience of:

- Youth Culture
- Social Perspectives
- Australian Literature
- Reading & Writing
- Speaking & Listening
- Viewing & Creating

## Values addressed:

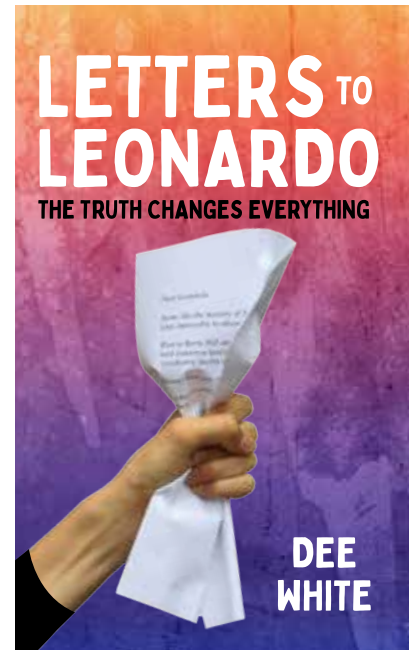
- Honesty and Trustworthiness
- Responsibility
- Compassion
- Understanding & Tolerance

## Themes:

- Mental Illness – Bipolar Disorder
- Art – Leonardo da Vinci
- Family Relationships
- Emotional Control

\*Notes may be downloaded and printed for regular classroom use only.

## Letters to Leonardo - Overview



Letters To Leonardo  
By Dee White

Publisher : Mazo Publishers  
Paperback : 168 pages  
ISBN-13 : 978-1946124555  
Dimensions : 6 x 9 inches

## Outline:

On his fifteenth birthday, Matt receives a card from his mother – the mother he grew up believing was dead. Feeling betrayed by both his parents, Matt is in disarray and begins writing letters to Leonardo da Vinci as a way to sort out the ‘mess’ in his head. Through the connections he makes between his own life and that of Leonardo, Matt unravels the mystery that his life has become and discovers his mother’s secrets and the reasons behind his abandonment.

**Letters to Leonardo** is a powerful, unique and sometimes confronting coming-of-age story told in an engaging and realistic manner. Themes of life, art, loss, grief and mental illness are weaved into this unique story. Dee White’s contemporary voice will engage students and help to raise discussions on important issues while encouraging self-expression and the exploration of identity.

## Author Information:

**Dee White** lives in a small rural country town, which has more kangaroos than people, and is married with two boys aged 10 and 12. She has worked as an advertising copywriter and journalist and has had numerous career changes because until recently, writing wasn’t considered to be a proper job. *Letters to Leonardo* is her first novel for Walker Books Australia.

## How to Use These Notes:

This story works on many levels. The suggested activities are therefore for a wide age and ability range. Please select accordingly.

## Classroom Ideas for *Letters to Leonardo*:

Note: Page numbers may not match the current edition.

### Before reading *Letters to Leonardo*:

- View the front cover. Ask students to write a description of the boy on the front cover. Include information about his personality, age and where he might live.
- Using only the front cover and the blurb ask students to discuss what they think this story is about. Who might Leonardo be? Why would letters be written to him? What age do they think the intended audience is?

### Reading & Writing Activities for *Letters to Leonardo*

- As students read each chapter of *Letters to Leonardo* ask them to create an entry in their own diary. This can be a personal task – listing their feelings and emotions, or a critical task – listing their thoughts about the writing.
- Read the first page of *Letters to Leonardo* aloud. Ask students to answer the following questions: What is the effect of the questionnaire? Where does this place you as the reader? Who is this letter to? Who is writing the letter? How does Matt sign off his letter? Afterwards read the letter on page 8. How has the tone changed?
- Ask students to research conventional letter writing. What are some of the different ways to address/signoff a letter? Ask students to write a letter to someone that interests them, explaining why they chose them and an interesting fact about themselves. Model on Matt's letter, page 8.
- Ask students to read the three letters in Chapter 1. How do they differ in writing style? E.g. formal/informal. Why do they differ? Ask students to re-write their letter above in three different styles.
- Ask students to identify the simile on page 10. The author uses many similes throughout the book to describe situations. Ask students to list the similes that they find as they read (e.g. pages 14, 23, 35, 39, 63, 66, 67, 76, 109, 115 ...). Have students write their own similes.
- "Maybe writing this down might help me make sense of everything" (page 20). Ask students how writing can be cathartic. Then ask students to find different techniques of writing that might be helpful e.g. song lyrics, poetry, list making, letters. Are any of these used throughout the story?
- Most stories consist of a problem, a resolution and a conclusion. How is "the problem" identified in Chapter 1? Is there more than one problem? After students have read the first chapter have them list the different characters (giving as much detail about them as possible) and the problems that have arisen. For homework, ask the students to read the first chapter of another book. Are similar devices used, is "the problem" identified in the first chapter? Following this task ask students in groups to come up with three points to form an idea for their own story:
  1. What the problem will be
  2. How the problem might be solved
  3. The conclusion – what is gained/lost
- Ask students to read Chapter 2. Matt explicitly describes his actions as he ransacks his father's room. Modelling this writing technique ask students to write about a journey of their own e.g. to school, getting dressed in the morning. There are pauses in Matt's fury, ask students to try and include some pauses in their own description. They can do this activity in groups or individually.
- Ask students to read the letter on page 25. Matt is feeling angry with his Dad and separated from his mother. He begins to question his identity and turns to Leonardo da Vinci for answers. Ask students to create a list of the people they think have helped shape their identity. What do they have in common with their parents/friends? Are there any celebrities that they identify with?
- Read Chapter 4. Although Matt does something illegal the chapter finishes with a letter to Leonardo outlining an important value – truth. How is Matt justifying his actions? Do you think he should still suffer the consequence? In groups, have students discuss which values are important to them. Make a class list of the most important values.
- On page 45 Matt outlines the task that their teacher has given them. To "demonstrate an understanding of what life was like for our 'subject' and tell them about our modern world". Try this task yourself in class.
- Ask students to compare and contrast the two letters on pages 53-55. They should include differences in style, language, punctuation and mood.
- Read page 65. Matt realises how important art is in his life. Ask students to write a short paragraph or present to the class what is important in their life.
- Read page 68. Matt uses a painting as a metaphor for his life. "My life is layers of paint. Things keep getting peeled back and it's hard to know what's going to be revealed next". Ask students to write a metaphor for their own life, using an inanimate object.
- Read the newspaper reports on pages 70-71. How is the writing style different? Ask students to select different styles of writing from the media e.g. a reputable newspaper, a magazine, an online news article. How do the writing styles differ? How does the writing style predict the intended audience?

## Classroom Ideas for *Letters to Leonardo*:

### More Reading & Writing Activities for *Letters to Leonardo*

- Read Chapter 9. Ask students to discuss, in groups, what they think of Dave's actions. Was he protecting his son? What would have happened if Matt's mother had stayed with them? Ask students to write a list of the pros and cons of Dave's actions.
- "Kids need someone or something to love" (page 111). Ask students to discuss the topic of belonging in relation to this quote. How is loving someone or being loved an aspect of belonging? Ask students to write a short essay on the different aspects of emotional and physical belonging.
- Read page 112. Matt has collected objects from his childhood to show his mother. Ask students to write about what they would show someone they hadn't seen in ten years and why?
- Ask students to discuss the events that occur in Chapters 16-19. Throughout these chapters Matt's mother acts in ways that don't seem well thought-through. Do you think Zora has good intentions? How is Dave wary of this? Ask students to write a brief account of the actions and how they build the ominous tone in the story.
- Read Chapter 27. When Matt wakes up in hospital he is disoriented and it takes him some time to adjust. How as readers, are we also disoriented at this point of the book? What do we know? What don't we know? How does this help us understand Matt's situation and what he is feeling?
- Read the last letter. How has Matt's life changed over the last six months? Ask students to list the positive and negative outcomes of this story.

### Listening & Speaking Activities for *Letters to Leonardo*

- In Chapter 2 Matt finds a clue about his mother in his father's draw. What is this clue and how does he use it? Ask students to bring their own clue from home – it could be something old from their parents or friends. Ask students to present this object to the class and have fellow classmates guess the significance of it. Next, have students present the object to the class discussing the relevance of their object and where it comes from. Afterwards discuss how objects can contain 'memories'.  
  
Throughout the book there are several clues that occur to help Matt find his mother. Write these down as they occur e.g. pages 31, 51, 74, 103 & 106.
- After reading page 36, ask students to have a class debate on the topic: graffiti is art. Matt also refers to his graffiti as "eco-art" on page 77.
- Using dialogue from pages 85-90 create a short play between Matt and Troy or Matt and Dave. Ask students to perform their plays to the class. You can create props or improvise.
- Read page 106. Matt finds an address online for Zora Matthews. Have a class discussion about what information is available on the internet. Discuss *YouTube*, *Google*, *Twitter* and *Facebook*. Create a list of reasons as to why these are useful forms of communication and why they can be detrimental.

### Integrated English – Health Activities for *Letters to Leonardo*

- Ask students to list the physical and emotional reactions that characters have to their situations throughout the story. E.g. sometimes Matt has an emotional reaction and feels his anger burning. Dave has physical reactions, a nervous tic. Ask students to research physical and emotional reactions that humans have to certain stimuli. What can and can't we control?
- Matt reacts to his situation and mentions several times that he is fuelled by his anger. In groups discuss effective ways of managing anger. Create a list to share and discuss with the class.
- Read page 73. Matt suffers from shock when learning about his mother. What should you do if somebody suffers shock? Ask students to research effective methods of treating shock.
- On page 90 Dave describes Matt's mum as having an illness, a chemical imbalance in her brain. How would medication help this? Have class groups research different types of mental illnesses. Include information on how they affect people, how they are caused and possible treatment. Ask students to present their research to the class as a poster, pamphlet or digital presentation.
- Ask students to read Chapter 15. Matt and Dave discuss Zora's illness and bipolar disorder. Ask students to research bipolar disorder.
- Ask students to research youth groups and organisations that deal with youth suicide. Discuss suicide in groups in the classroom. Ask students to create a poster or pamphlet for one of the organisations. How can they raise awareness about youth suicide?

## Classroom Ideas for *Letters to Leonardo*:

### Integrated English – Art Activities for *Letters to Leonardo*

- On page 24 Matt references the Mona Lisa. Ask students what/who the Mona Lisa is? Why is this painting so famous? Matt wonders why he chose this painting. What do students think? Ask students to list each Leonardo da Vinci painting that is referenced in the book and to research them. What would they choose as their screen saver? Ask them to create their own Leonardo da Vinci screen saver.
- Matt describes himself as a type of painting on page 25. Ask students to research different types of paintings and bring in a picture of the type of painting they think they would be e.g. abstract, classical, cubist, impressionist.
- Several times throughout *Letters to Leonardo* Matt describes the details in a painting, creating a story for the work. Ask students to choose a painting and write a short story based on the work.
- Read Chapter 6. Ask students to draw the hospital that is described in this chapter. Although the description is short it paints a vivid picture of the dead-end that Matt has come to. Ask students to think about the type of colours that would best represent the mood of this chapter.
- In Chapter 12 Matt visits the local art gallery. Take the class to visit your local gallery. Ask students to choose a painting at the gallery to research including the history of the painting and the artist. Does your gallery have a library? Arrange a research visit.
- “I walk to the back of the room to look at one of the Archibald Prize Finalists” (pages 102-103). What is the Archibald Prize? Ask students to discuss who they would paint a portrait of and why?
- Ask students to research artists who have been afflicted with mental illness. Ask students to research therapy techniques that use art e.g. art therapy.

## Discussing Symbolism in *Letters to Leonardo*:

### Fire:

- “White-hot anger gouges a hole inside me, burning for answers.” (page 13) Discuss the mood that is created by this sentence. Flames, fire and burning occur regularly throughout the book. Discuss with students how they are symbols for times of emotional turmoil e.g. Matt paints flames on the water tower. As students read *Letters to Leonardo* ask them to make reference of the times when fire, flames and burning are referred to.
- Ask students to list words that are used throughout this book to describe fire. How is fire a catalyst for events? Discuss.

### Sacrifice:

- Many of the characters in this story must sacrifice or give up something for another character. Discuss sacrifice in the story e.g. what does Dave sacrifice for Matt? What must Zora sacrifice for her painting? How is Matt’s life/school sacrificed in the pursuit of his mother?

### Painting:

- Steve teaches Matt several different artistic techniques but these techniques are also metaphors for Matt’s life. Discuss or write a brief paragraph on the relationship between these terms and the events in *Letters to Leonardo*.  
Page 176 – viewpoint. What are the different viewpoints in this story?  
Page 181 – symmetry. “symmetry is what you need in your life, but not in your artwork”.  
Page 192 – focal point. What is the focal point in *Letters to Leonardo*?
- As students read the story ask them to reference and list quotes of when Matt writes about the similarities between himself, Leonardo and painting. After reading the book discuss with students how effective these metaphors for Matt’s life were. Students can use the table example below to record their quotes.

Quotes from <i>Letters to Leonardo</i>				
Page #	Matt	Leo...	Painting	Quote
26	✓	✓		“Did you miss your mum? Did you ever wonder in those years you never saw her, what she really looked like?”
91	✓		✓	“Life is like a painting. Every time you look at it from another angle you see something totally different.”

## Focus on characters in *Letters to Leonardo*:

- **Dave**

Ask students to discuss the following. Why does Dave always refer to his “self-help” books? How do Dave’s “self-help” books help him/hinder him? Write down the pros and cons of “self-help” books.

Ask students to think about Dave’s character throughout the book and write down references where Matt discusses his like/dislike towards Dave. Matt refers to his father as Dad and Dave throughout the book. Why would Matt’s father hate him calling him Dave? How has the author used these words as an effective tool for showing Matt’s dislike/like towards Dave?

Ask students about the development of the character Dave. Do we always feel the same way towards Dave as Matt does or are we, as readers, able to view him differently?

- **Troy**

Troy is often telling jokes and mucking around. Discuss the importance of Troy’s character. How does he balance the rest of the story? How is he an antithesis to Matt? How do Matt and Troy’s lives contrast? Extend this task by discussing the antithesis to Dave?

- **Zora**

Why would Matt’s mother write letters to Matt and not send them? How does this mirror what Matt is doing with his letters to Leonardo? Ask students to discuss the similarities and differences between Matt and Zora.

Dave wants Matt to feel compassion for his mother (page 234). After reading *Letters to Leonardo* have a class discussion about whether Matt should forgive his mother. Why does she deserve compassion? How is she a complicated character?

- **Matt**

There are moments throughout the book where other characters are trying to help Matt but he is blinded by his emotions. Find references to these in the book. How is Matt naive to his situation?

Ask students to compare and contrast the character Matt at the beginning of the story, to the character Matt at the end of the story. Ask students to write a few paragraphs on how Matt’s character has changed after the situations he has been through. How has he grown up? Ask students to discuss if there have been any moments in their lives that have changed them.

## After Reading *Letters to Leonardo*:

- Ask students to give a five minute presentation on how writers appeal to young adults. How has *Letters to Leonardo* successfully done this? How are language forms and features used to appeal?
- Ask students to imagine *Letters to Leonardo* is to be made into a film. Prepare a pitch to the producer in which you provide a brief synopsis of the film, casting list, examples of two scripted scenes for the film with storyboards, and publicity material for the film release.
- If *Letters to Leonardo* were a painting what would it be? Ask students, using any medium, to create an image that best describes this book.
- Ask students to research the author of *Letters to Leonardo* and prepare a newspaper article on them and the book. They should include a cover image and review of the book.
- Read the question and answer with Dee White provided with these notes. Ask students to set up a similar interview with one of their classmates, questioning them on what the book was about and what they liked about it.

- Cut and paste the following link into your internet browser to see Dee White’s movie book preview –

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=LSQK9ahtZ5Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LSQK9ahtZ5Y)

Ask students to create their own movie book preview for *Letters to Leonardo*. Include a review quote at the end of the trailer.

- For more information on Dee White visit her website:

[www.deescribe.com.au](http://www.deescribe.com.au)

Use the information on the website to create a PowerPoint presentation on the author.

- Make a display in your school library of books that deal with mental illness, depression and/or suicide. World Mental Health Day occurs 10th October. Raise awareness for this day by using *Letters to Leonardo* and other titles.

## Question and Answers with Dee White author of *Letters to Leonardo*:

### **Can you please tell us what your book is about?**

On his fifteenth birthday, Matt Hudson discovers a mind-blowing secret. His dead mother is NOT dead. Matt sets out to find her and the truth about where she has been for most of his life.

Matt discovers the value of friendship and loyalty as he learns to deal with his mother's bipolar condition – the mental illness that forced her to abandon him. He must also resolve his anger towards the father who has lied to him for the last ten years.

In *Letters to Leonardo* Matt is forced to confront his past and his future. He must find answers to the unspoken question – has he inherited more from his mother than just her looks and artistic talent?

### **How did you come up with the idea of *Letters to Leonardo* – what was the inspiration?**

*Letters to Leonardo* is based on the true story of a man who discovered his mother wasn't dead, when he received a card from her on his twenty-first birthday.

### **Are the characters based on anyone you know?**

I knew someone who was bipolar and really did have a 'garage giveaway'. But other than that, the characters are a pastiche of people I know.

### **Do you do a lot of research?**

Yes, *Letters to Leonardo* took over ten years to write. Part of this was due to the amount of research involved, and part of it was due to the fact that things changed over the decade of the book's writing life. I had to redo all my research and writing on the mental health system because thankfully, Mental Institutions were abolished in Australia.

BIPOLAR – I did an enormous amount of research on bipolar and how it affected both the sufferers and their families. I wanted to understand what it felt like not to know if your life was 'real' or part of an 'episode'.

LEONARDO DA VINCI – A huge part of the research involved finding out about the life and works of Leonardo da Vinci. I wanted to find out what was behind his paintings – not just what he painted. Like my main character, Matt, the more I learned about Leonardo da Vinci, the more fascinated I became with him.

### **The book deals with some very emotional and sensitive heartfelt issues – how were you able to convey that through your writing?**

I have used the letters that Matt writes to Leonardo da Vinci as a way of conveying these issues. The letters are like Matt's internal monologue, but they also contribute important information to the story and give insight into Matt's character. I have tried to deal with Zora's mental illness with sensitivity and compassion – even though she turns out to be a very destructive force in her son's life.

As I was writing *Letters to Leonardo*, I became very attached to my characters, and had a lot of trouble allowing bad things to happen to them. I used Leonardo da Vinci's paintings to symbolise some of the things going on in Matt's life, and also to help him arrive at his own self-truths. For Matt, looking at Leonardo da Vinci's paintings, is like holding up a mirror to himself.

### **Why did you choose Leonardo da Vinci as a mentor for Matt?**

Apart from Leonardo da Vinci being an interesting character, there were a lot of parallels between his and Matt's life:

- both of them were taken away from their mothers when they were young, and essentially grew up without them
- both of them were 'seekers of truth'
- both of them were artistic and sensitive
- both of them were controlled to a certain extent (certainly when they were small) by their fathers
- both of them were perfectionists

### **What sets *Letters to Leonardo* apart from other books for this age group?**

*Letters to Leonardo* is unique in that it parallels the lives of two people who lived 500 years apart. It uses history to help the main character understand the present and deal with the future. The combination of letters and narrative provide a different format for readers – and a compelling way of getting inside the mind and heart of the main character. The story is in multiple layers like a painting. As the reader scrapes away one layer of paint, a new picture is revealed.

### **What advice do you have for aspiring writers or artists?**

Keep reading, keep writing and don't give up. If you have a good story, stick with it and make it work.