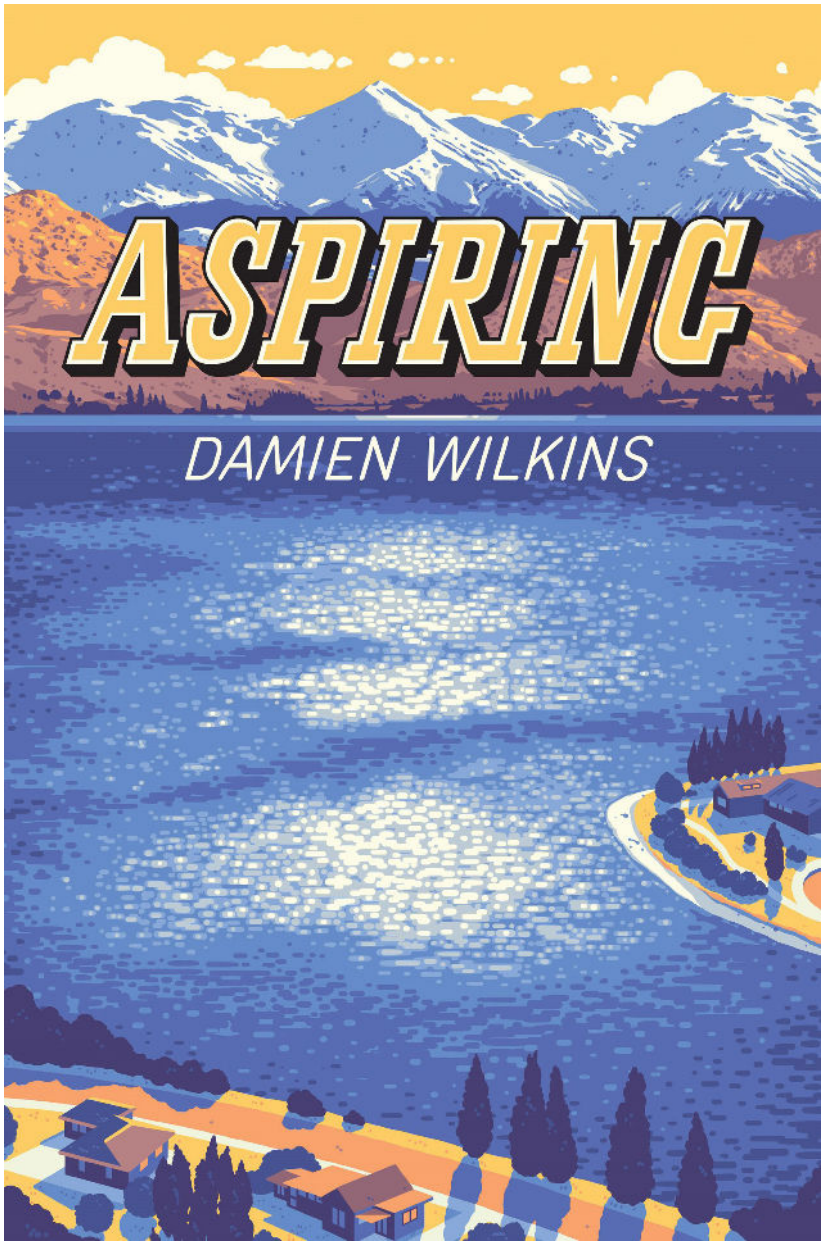
Teacher Notes for Damien Wilkins's *Aspiring*



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Contents

Pre-reading: Introduce the text

Activity 1. Word jumble 3

Activity 2. Supposed synopsis 3

Reading the novel: Language features

Activity 3. Narrative styles 3

Activity 4. Interior monologue 4

Reading the novel: Setting and Community

Activity 5. Compare and contrast 5

Activity 6. Quote match 7

Activity 7. Impact of tourism and development 8

Activity 8. Impact of climate change 8

Activity 9. Impact of inequality 8

Reading the novel: Themes

Activity 10. Full-sentence themes 9

Activity 11. Impact of loss 10

Activity 12. Coincidence and mystery 10

Activity 13. The title 10

Reading the novel: Characters

Activity 14. Character profile 11

Activity 15. Casting director 11

Activity 16. Aspiring playlist 11

Activity 17. Album cover/movie poster 11

Reading the novel: Events

Activity 18. Key events 12

Activity 19. The human library 12

Activity 20. The human library and Ricky's parents 13

Pre-reading: Introduce the text

Activity 1. Word jumble

The following list of words from the novel can be projected onto a screen or whiteboard. Give students one minute to look at the words without talking or taking notes. Then cover the words and give them a further minute to recall and write as many as they can remember.

Aspiring	Tourism	Climate change	Community
Lake	Growth	Cadillac	Death
Basketball	Human library	Progress	Township
Sexual awakening	Tall	New Zealand	Development

Discussion questions

- Which words stood out and were easy to remember? Why?
- Which ones were forgotten?

As a class, discuss any terms the students don't understand. Then divide the list into two groups: concrete and abstract. Discuss the concept of abstraction and tease out the possibilities and layers of some of these words (death, progress, development, etc.). Be sure to cover the notion of a human library. Encourage students to speculate what this might be and how it might work.

Activity 2. Supposed synopsis

In pairs, have the students look closely at the novel's front cover and write a 200-word synopsis of what they imagine it's about. They should use the list of the words they've remembered to help with speculation. Students could then share their ideas with another pair or with the class.

Reading the novel: Language features

Activity 3. Narrative styles

On the first page, the reader is introduced to the protagonist, Ricky. They meet his particular style of narration and his interior monologue. Discuss the three different narrative styles with students (also called point of view). Then help them create their own table or share the one that follows, with or without blank spaces to fill.

	First person	Second person	Third person
Words used	I, we, me, us, my/mine, our/ours	You, your/yours	he/his/him, her/hers/she, it/its, their/theirs
Effects	Readers can get to know the characters intimately; they are 'inside' the characters' heads. Allows for the development of characters' personal voices.	Creates an unusual relationship between the reader, narrator, and character. Often used to show characters who are experiencing personal fracture – observing themselves from a distance. A less common narrative point of view.	Allows for omniscient narration: the narrator is all-knowing, so can give perspectives from a range of characters. Classical method for telling a story. Offers an informed voice but less intimate that first-person narration as readers are kept at a distance.

Identify the narrative style of the following quote from the first page of the novel:

> Pete's was where I had an after-school job. There was no one at the restaurant called Pete. The owner's name was Garth but he hadn't got around to changing the name. He didn't want to climb on a ladder and paint it up. 'Besides,' Garth said, 'who'd want to come to a place called Garth's? Sounds like someone clearing his throat.' I wouldn't have needed a ladder.

Using the table above, and their own close reading of the extract, ask students to explain what effects are created by writing in the first person. Together, find another quote from Ricky that has a similar effect.

Take the paragraph beginning 'As I worked …' (page 7) and rewrite it from the second- and third-person points of view.

Discussion questions

- What changes in the quality of the writing when different points of view are used?
- What things are left out?
- What is gained?
- Why might the author intend for us to be inside Ricky's head like this?

Activity 4. Interior monologue

On page 179, Ricky reveals:

> I have loops going around in my head, stuff I make up. Where I'm the star or I've got to figure something out, find something, locate someone.

Ricky has a habit of creating a monologue in his head. These moments are identified to the reader through the use of italics. Discuss and research the idea of an interior monologue and what it means. Together, write a definition of a monologue.

Find and record three examples of Ricky's monologues. Then discuss their affect on the reader.

Discussion questions

- What might be the author's purpose in using these examples?
- What effects do the examples create for the reader?
- How do these moments position the reader towards Ricky?

Reading the novel: Setting and Community

The town of Aspiring is the backdrop to the events that take place in the novel. It's a growing community, going through major development and its associated challenges. Like many of the communities in Aotearoa New Zealand, Aspiring is impacted by significant factors such as the health of the local economy, climate change, tourism, housing issues, and inequality.

Activity 5. Compare and contrast

To further explore ideas around community and place in the novel, compare and contrast your own region with that of Aspiring using the following table.

	Your city/town/region	Aspiring
What is the area known for?		
Why do people live here? (consider employment opportunities, facilities, lifestyle, family & family history)		
Why might people move here and why might they leave?		

What are the area's hardships?		
What are positive aspects of the area?		
What would you change if you had the power to improve something? What might Ricky change?		

Consider the differences between Aspiring and the students' home town/region.

Discussion questions

- What aspects of Ricky's home town are similar to your home town?
- What is it like to read a novel that has a setting you recognise?
- How do you respond to a setting that is unfamiliar?

Activity 6. Quote match

The following quotes relate to the town of Aspiring and the way things such as tourism, climate change, growth and development, existential worries, and loss impact on the characters' lives. Identify who is speaking or narrating in each box below and the significant issue the quote relates to.

People always said, Wait till they discover Aspiring. Or, It's coming, you know. It's coming. You wait. Our town motto. Aspiring: you wait. (page 23)	The town was growing and growing. The primary school built a few years ago was already maxed out. (page 59)	Climate change was cooking our lake. Last summer the water was 21 degrees, warmer for weeks on end. (page 22)
You know there's a new pool going in, a new school. Forget Auckland, they're building new streets in Aspiring by the month. (page 85)	Where the wealthy were gathering in flight, building perches high above our lake, awaiting some cataclysm, grouped around their grand pianos for a final singalong in the softening snow and the melting ice. (page 25)	'There's a shitload of building going on,' Johnny said. 'The new subdivisions. Contractors everywhere. That's money, isn't it.' (page 44)
This is a place of great opportunity. Whenever I come, I get a lift from the sound of electric saws and hammers, the snap of architectural drawings in the breeze, the grind of cement mixers. Won't mean much to someone of your age but what this all means is growth. And you're part of that growth. (page 84)	'You gotta get out of here, Ricky.' 'I know. Why?' 'Because look at this place.' 'Right. It's really coming along in leaps and bounds. Growing. What's wrong with it?' 'It's disturbing.' 'Yes. In what way?' (page 166)	I looked out the window at what was always called by any visitor to the school a million-dollar view. The mountains seemed higher some days, closer, as if they were growing and not us, and one day we would look out and they would be there, accusingly, having crossed the now-dry lakebed. You, we want a word with you. (page 20)
Aren't you supposed to tell me how great it is?' 'Am I? Like, what? Tourism Southern Lakes? Top ten things to do that don't include sitting quietly in a corner, considering the pointlessness of existence in the light of a natural feature as staggering and mysterious as a lake formed millions of years ago?' (page 95)	'Hi,' I said. 'He's tall,' said Keri to her father. 'To state the obvious. How tall are you?' 'Six-seven, I don't know,' I said. 'Last time I looked.' 'He's on the chart here,' said Garth, pointing at the wall. 'That was my chart,' she said. 'Back in the day.' She looked at her father. 'Why'd you always want to measure people?' 'To see progress.' (page 82)	I'd lost my job. We'd lost the play-off. I'd lost my sense of self. So many losses! What else? I'd lost my brother! Poor Mikey had never got to be in this position. Probably it had never even occurred to him to be in this position. Loss after loss. Now I was losing my virginity! (page 164)

Activity 7. Impact of tourism and development

Tourism in Aotearoa New Zealand accounts for around 6% of our GDP (approximately $16 billion) and is one of our biggest industries. It's also the economic backbone of many smaller communities, providing employment and business opportunities. However, Ricky is alert to many of the downsides associated with tourism and related development. Read page 11 and record three drawbacks of tourism as experienced by the Aspiring community.

Discussion questions

- Who benefits from tourism?
- Who loses out?
- How does tourism affect your region?
- Where else is it happening in New Zealand or globally?
- How is the growth and development of Aspiring mirrored in Ricky's own life?
- What are the positives and negatives of his growth and development?

Activity 8. Impact of climate change

According to the Ministry of Environment, before the end of the century, New Zealand is likely to experience higher temperatures, rising sea levels, and more frequent extreme-weather events such as droughts and floods.

Discussion questions

- How is climate change affecting your region?
- Where else in New Zealand can you see the effects of climate change? What about internationally?
- How is the impact of climate change evident in *Aspiring*?
- How is it evident that Ricky is aware of climate change? What impact is it having on him?

Activity 9. Impact of inequality

There are many kinds of inequality, including gender, ethnic, and sexual orientation (see http://www.inequality.org.nz/understand/). Inequality of income and wealth, sometimes known as socio-economic inequality, is a major issue in Aotearoa New Zealand. Income and wealth became more evenly distributed from the 1950s through until the 1980s, but over the next two decades, we developed the world's biggest increase in income inequality. Great wealth is now held by very few, and a considerable number of New Zealanders live in poverty.

Consider the following quotes:

> Lots of Yanks were buying up land around Aspiring. Helicopters flew over the town, depositing these rich-listers on remote hilltops where their low-roofed mansions were inserted into the landscape, harmonious, grey and slatey, with infinity pools like fallen mirrors. Most of the cargo on these flights was golf clubs and fly-fishing gear. The wine cellars were already stocked; the imported chefs were already at work. Sergio. Philippe. Mr Hua. My friend Sim's father flew for Aspiring Air. One time he couriered a grand piano up Mount Aspiring, swinging it into place six thousand feet up for some dude's birthday singalong. (page 11)

> We don't have homeless people in Aspiring, someone said. Hmm, said our teacher. At that moment I thought of Tessa Thompson, who lived with her mother in a caravan on a vacant section above Beacon Point. Not homeless, but it was rumoured they washed in the lake after dark. (page 18)

> The rich-listers continued to come, chiselling their homes from the rock. It was a quick hop over the Crown Range for all the golfing they wanted. (page 23)

Explain that the inequality index is the gap between the wealthiest and least wealthy in a community.

Discussion questions

- What do you make of the inequalities named here?
- Is inequality an issue in your region?
- Where can you see inequality at work within New Zealand or globally?

Reading the novel: Themes

Activity 10. Full-sentence themes

Themes are often named in essay questions as ideas or messages. In an essay, responding to a question about themes is most effective when you take a single word and create a full sentence with it in order to describe the theme in more detail. For example, 'love' is a common theme but rather too simple a word to discuss with much nuance. A full-sentence theme, such as 'Love is a transforming force', helps to narrow the focus and deepen the discussion, ensuring you have plenty of interesting and specific things to say across several paragraphs.

Take the following single-word themes from *Aspiring* and create three full-sentence themes for each. The first few have been done for you.

Growth	*Aspiring* shows the effect of growth and the challenges it brings.
	Aspiring is partly about growing pains, partly about growing gains.
Progress	
Change	
Aspiring	To aspire means to reach new heights within and beyond oneself.

Discuss the way the following ideas might work as themes:

- existential instability (relating to existence)
- adolescent yearning for something beyond the familiar
- family relationships
- young love and first relationships
- the essential unknowability of others

- ethical issues for a South Island town that relies on tourism and is experiencing population growth

Take two of these ideas and brainstorm the points you could make in relation to each one.

Activity 11. Impact of loss

Although Mikey's death is part of the novel's backstory, the effects of this event are very present. This loss permeates the individual lives and relationships in Ricky's family and has an impact on Ricky's own sense of self.

There are other, different kinds of losses, too: in the basketball final; when Ricky 'loses' his virginity. Make a list of these with the students. Then consider how they might structure an essay about the impact of loss in *Aspiring*. How does this theme involve different characters in the novel?

Activity 12. Coincidence and mystery

Consider the following quotes, with their commentary on coincidence and mystery.

> I told her then about the silver pin Le Clair wore and our family's connection to the Gateway Arch and the man on the viewing platform who'd told us about the thirteen men who were supposed to lose their lives. I didn't tell her about Mikey. I told her about the short black Caddy driving near our house, the measuring of my height. I told her about how he'd predicted stuff: buying booze for those guys, getting punched in the shoe store. It didn't really add up as I told it. I could see Keri was trying to follow the trail. Was there a trail? It was all random, wasn't it? Coincidence. (pages 125–126)

> 'Why do you want to know about Le Clair?'
>
> 'I don't know. He's a mystery.'
>
> 'Jesus, we're all mysteries, Ricky.' (page 155)

Discussion questions

- What do you make of Mr Le Clair?
- How do you interpret his conversation with Ricky at the Aspiring fair?
- What else is mysterious in the novel?
- What else is coincidence?
- Why do you think the author has included these elements?

With the students, discuss the following essay question:

'Describe a range of significant coincidences and mysteries in the novel. Explain how these reveal insights into the characters as well as the author's purpose.'

Together, outline a preliminary structure for the essay, with a main idea for each paragraph.

Activity 13. The Title

The word 'aspiring' is both the name of the town, an important theme, and the novel's title. Significant stuff! The title of a novel is important because it often represents the essence of a book. A really good title is able to be understood in different ways. Consider what themes from activities 10 and 11 relate to this novel's title.

If the students were given the following essay question, how might they plan a three-paragraph response?

'Describe how the title of the novel is significant. Explain how it is relevant to key ideas in the novel.'

Consider other themes and ideas central to the novel. Together, brainstorm three alternative titles.

Reading the novel: Characters

Activity 14. Character profile

Ricky is clearly the main character in *Aspiring*.

In pairs or groups, have the students draw an outline of Ricky in the centre of a large piece of paper. Divide the paper into four quadrants and fill with the following categories and quotes.

Quadrant 1. What does Ricky say about himself? (pages 178–179 is a good starting point)

Quadrant 2. What do others say about Ricky?

Quadrant 3. What does Ricky say about others?

Quadrant 4. What kind of character traits would you say Ricky has?

On the periphery of the paper, comment on the ways in which the loss of Mikey impacts on Ricky's character and psychology.

Discussion questions

- How does Ricky behave as a result of this monumental loss?
- What happens to him and his family after Mikey's death?

Profiles could be completed for other characters in the novel. Assign small groups a particular character and encourage them to present their portrait to the rest of the class.

Activity 15. Casting director

Together, make a list of the characters in the novel, both major and minor. Now imagine the novel is to be turned into a film. Who might you cast in each role? Think internationally, using actors and performers from across the globe. The students should present their ideas along with a headshot of each actor.

Activity 16. *Aspiring* playlist

Ask students to create an Aspiring playlist with songs that complement the themes explores in activities 10 and 11. They should aim for at least eight songs, including their title and the artist. Try to use music by artists from New Zealand and overseas. Don't forget to consider classical music.

Activity 17. Album cover/movie poster

The students could plan an album cover to go with their *Aspiring* playlist or a poster to promote the film. Encourage them to think about an appropriate central image, the use of colour, the font, and any symbolism that might highlight the themes or issues they want to focus on.

Reading the novel: Events

Key events are useful to track character development in a novel study. They can be used to identify pivotal moments and times of change for characters.

Activity 18. Key events

In pairs or groups, have students list, chronologically, what they see as the top eight events in the novel. Connect each event to a theme.

Discussion question

- If you were writing an essay about significant events in *Aspiring*, which three would you include? Why?

In preparation for writing the essay, have students draft three short paragraphs about each of their chosen events.

Activity 19. The human library

Draw students' attention to the following quote from page 17 in the novel.

> Our English teacher, Miss Clarke, had read about the idea of the human library — people being borrowed instead of books. Our task: find some interesting people (and everyone is interesting!), help them craft a brief story about their lives (but this is not about self-promotion), set up a 'library', invite borrowers/readers to choose a person/book. Lending time to be set at, say, ten minutes. It was a way of connecting people. A walk in someone else's shoes. Think about prejudices. Discrimination. Find the people whose stories are not often heard.

Discussion questions

- Are there people in your community you notice because they seem unusual but about whom you know very little? Who?
- If you were to 'borrow' them, what questions might you ask to draw out their story?
- What might you seek to understand?

Students could suggest their own subject for a human library. Have them fill in the table below.

Name	
Relationship to you	
What's a story they could tell that would not often be heard?	
How may they have experienced prejudice or discrimination?	

Activity 20. The human library and Ricky's parents.

One of the quiet themes of *Aspiring* is the suggestion that one's parents are to some degree unknowable. And there are periods in our lives when we don't care to know much anyway – for instance, arguably, our teenage years.

Discussion questions

- What reasons might Ricky have for drawing away from his parents?
- What part does the human library project play in Ricky's relationship with them?

On page 90, Miss Milton says to Ricky: 'Your father should be the book. He's the real hero. He could tell it with all the details, the excitement and so on.'

We also hear about his time in the navy and PNG, but as Ricky notes, 'We're not allowed to get our parents. Besides, he wouldn't ever agree.'

Ricky shows curiosity about his mother's story on page 105. 'But what would your story be like?' I said. 'Imagine you're a book. Tell me the first sentence. Mum?'

And of course each family member is significantly affected by the event of Mikey's death.

Discussion questions

- What details can you find that shape the parents' stories?
- What can you piece together about the beginning, middle and recent parts of their stories?

Then ask the students to fill in the following table.

	Detail from early in his/her life	Details from later in his/her life	Details from recent times
Dad			
Mum			

Ricky's dad eventually takes place in the human library project.

Discussion questions

- How is this inevitable?
- How is it unexpected?