

# *Reliable Friendly Girls*

Stories by  
**Jane Westaway**

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*Reliable Friendly Girls* by Jane Westaway is a collection of short stories for Young Adults and is ideal for use in schools. Written in a clear, spare style these stories are strong and witty with appeal for a range of readers.

*Kelly wants to live in Paris, Marama wants to live in Auckland, Jeany wants to live anywhere but with her father. Mariah wants to keep her cat, Hamish wants to keep a dog, Lou just wants to keep her clothes on. Skip's alone, Janine's perfect, Donna's pregnant. These are Jane Westaway's stories, as real and raw and surprising as life itself.*

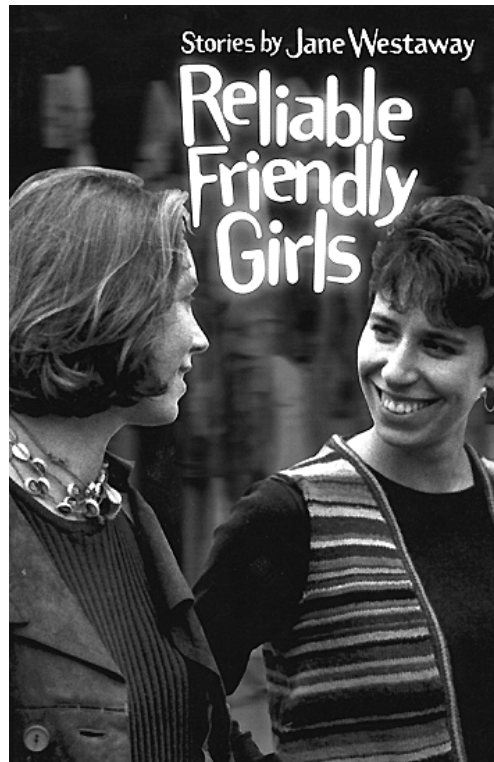
## **RESOURCE KIT for use in schools**

**Includes:**

- a personal statement by author, Jane Westaway;
- author's comment on each story;
- questions related to each story;
- suggestions for projects; and
- issues for classroom discussion.

*These are stories about real teenagers in real situations ... These are compelling, well-written stories that are sensitive to what it's like to be on the verge of adulthood.*

Iona McNaughton



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## RESOURCE KIT

# *Reliable Friendly Girls*

## Jane Westaway

### PERSONAL STATEMENT

I'm not one of those writers who wrote stories and poems from the age of six and always knew what they'd be when they grew up. Books like *Alice in Wonderland*, *Black Beauty*, *The Famous Five*, *What Katy Did* and *Little Women*, I read over and over again, but I never imagined someone had actually sat down and written them.

When I was about twelve and we still lived in England, my mother used to laugh at a column in the *Sunday Observer* written by a journalist called Katharine Whitehorn. And that was when it first occurred to me that writing was a real job, and how gratifying it would be to have people enjoy what you'd written.

As a teenager, I wasn't abused or poor or seriously neglected, but I did feel very alone, and I didn't feel loved. I thought this was normal. I came from England to New Zealand with my parents and two younger brothers in 1964 when I was sixteen. It seemed the most awful thing that could have happened to me. At an age when you most want to be like everyone else, I found myself on the other side of the world talking with a funny accent and feeling like an outsider.

I've been here more than 30 years now, and both my grown-up children were born here. New Zealand is my home and I don't want to live anywhere else.

I wrote my first short story 20 years ago and it was published in an anthology. Very soon afterwards I saw how feeble it was and felt embarrassed. So I stopped trying to write fiction and became a journalist. It's a wonderful job, and still helps me earn a living. I went to interesting places (China, and the West Coast) and met interesting people (Cliff Richard, who was horribly boring; a man in Nelson who discovered a comet using a telescope in his back yard; and girls at a posh school). But the best part was the writing, and in 1986 I realised what I really wanted to do was make up stories, not just write down other people's.

Fiction is a weird mixture of things that have really happened and things you imagine. Sometimes it's difficult to remember what's true and what you've made up. Writing fiction is like saying to yourself 'What if?' and the story is the answer. Short stories are fun to write because you set up a situation and resolve it in a few thousand words or less. Novels are a harder slog, but it's exhilarating to create characters that become real people, and whom you miss when you've finished writing.

## Reliable Friendly Girls

**Author comment** *The title story is probably the most ‘made up’ one in the book. I noticed an advertisement in The Dominion newspaper for ‘Reliable friendly girls’. It took me a moment to realise that someone was advertising for women to work in a massage parlour, and I thought, if I were sixteen or seventeen and wanted to make some money, I might apply. That’s what Kelly and Jacks do. Kelly reads a lot, which Jacks thinks is pretty much a waste of time. But it’s Kelly who realises the sort of job they’re being interviewed for, because although fiction is ‘made up’, it can tell you a lot about how the world works.*

- Why does Jacks think reading is a waste of time?
- Why do Kelly and Jacks want a job?
- When does Kelly work out what the interview is about?
- Describe Max Talbott.
- Find as many examples as you can of advertisements for jobs that don’t explain what the job is. Work out what they might be for. Why haven’t they been specific?
- Dramatise the job interview. Then invent a scene in which Max Talbott runs into Kelly’s father at the next Rotary meeting.

## How Dare You!

**Author comment** *This story is dedicated to a close friend, not because it’s exactly what happened to her but because she got me thinking what it must be like to live with a violent father – and lots of kids do. Jeany is gutsy. Maybe gutsier than most girls could be in her situation. She’s also smart, getting Mr Poata to come with her when she decides to leave. I gave her a dog because I couldn’t bear her to be totally on her own. For me, the saddest part of this story is when Jeany tries to kiss her mother goodbye, and her mother turns away. It doesn’t matter how gutsy and smart and determined you are, you can’t always rescue other people. Even those who need it most.*

- How does Jeany’s mother react to her husband?
- Why does Jeany answer back to her father?
- What do you think is going on in Mr Poata’s head when Jeany talks to him?
- Comment on the differences between Tara’s house and Jeany’s.
- Imagine you are Mr Poata or Mrs Billington and write an affidavit (signed statement) to the Family Court describing what you know of the family situation and why you supported Jeany’s action.
- Should neighbours get involved in domestic violence? Why?
- Write about or dramatise a moment in your own life when you decided to stand up to someone you were afraid of.

## *That Cat*

**Author comment** *Pets are important ‘people’ in families – more than just animals. That Cat was a real live cat as repellent as the one in the story. It belonged to my partner’s daughter, but she went flatting and left the cat with him. Once you start not loving animals (or people) it’s a vicious circle. The less you love them, the more horrible they become, and the less you love them. Mariah is scared stiff about her father’s girlfriend coming to live with them, but doesn’t want to say so. When she suggests having the cat put down, she’s really testing her father. She needs to know he still loves her. Fortunately the girlfriend is kind and sensible.*

- Why is Mariah so upset about Portly’s state?
- What does Mariah think about Kristen moving in?
- List the things that make Portly repulsive.
  
- Write an obituary for Portly.
  
- Jane Westaway says pets aren’t just animals. What does she mean?
  
- Illustrate the cover of a book about Portly.

## *Absolutely Nothing to Wear*

**Author comment** *Grim stories are easier to write than funny ones, but everyone enjoys a laugh so I wanted some funny stories in the book. I was taken to a nudist camp by friends when I was much older than Lou, but I can’t claim it was any less traumatic for me. I like the idea of a mother who was always going on about having absolutely nothing to wear, and a daughter who was more or less forced to appear stark naked in public.*

- How did Lou’s mum win a trip to London?
- What’s a consort?
- What sort of club did Lou think Tansy’s family was taking her to?
  
- Jane Westaway says writing comedy is harder than writing about grim things. How does she make this story funny?
  
- Describe the visit to the club from Tansy’s point of view.
  
- What do you think of nudist clubs? Would you have gone with Tansy if you’d known? Why?

## Unaccompanied Minor

**Author comment** *This story was prompted by a young man I knew who suddenly stopped seeing his mother. She was puzzled and distressed. I tried to imagine what might have been going on in the boy's mind, and the story is told entirely in his voice, as though he's talking to the reader. To be independent is admirable, but Skip is staunchly independent partly because he's afraid of being let down by people and getting hurt. I was also interested in the idea that even good parents don't realise how they hurt their children. I'm pleased to say that after two years the real boy started seeing his mother again.*

- What's Skip's real name?
- What happens to make Skip's mother suggest he return to live in New Zealand?
- How does Skip feel about the letters his mother sends him?
- Skip says lots of things in this story about what he feels or doesn't feel. Pick out instances when you think he's not being honest, and discuss why.
- Skip says, 'When you leave home you leave all that behind, don't you?' Do you agree?
- Illustrate a room in Skip and Stew's flat.

## Thirteen Flavours

**Author comment** *Some summer Sundays, my partner and I drive to a beach near Wellington. Whether we walk or swim and just lie around, we usually end up in the ice-cream shop across the road. People press around the counter, trying to make up their minds what flavour they want, and the staff work incredibly hard. One day I said something sympathetic to the woman behind the counter, and she said she often wanted to scream at the customers, 'It doesn't matter what flavour you choose, it's only ice-cream, you can have another one tomorrow.' I imagined a teenage girl digging out ice-cream all day, and how you sometimes change your mind about boys as easily as you change your favourite ice-cream flavour.*

- What's the name of the ice-cream parlour in this story?
- Which flavour ice-cream does the narrator especially hate and why?
- What surprises the narrator into thinking about 'likes and dislikes'?
- Write the story from Daniel's point of view – what is he thinking while he's waiting in the queue?
- Notice how Jane Westaway uses a stream of consciousness technique to tell us what's going on in the narrator's head. Discuss the effects of this style and why you think the author chose it for this story.
- Imagine you are Bernard and write a newspaper advertisement for a job at the ice-cream parlour.

## You Know Who

**Author comment** *When I was at college there was a girl in our class the rest of us decided was a lesbian. There was absolutely no evidence for this. It was simply the worst thing we could think to call her, and a way of saying she wasn't one of us. Maybe kids today are more enlightened. But maybe not. Zoe seemed like a good counterpoint to the lonely girl – she's popular and successful and knows how to manipulate people. But the focus of the story is poor Bronny who doesn't know where she belongs. She feels like a fraud with Zoe's crowd, but is too scared to leave it. And when she tries to be friends with the girl, it doesn't work out.*

- What are Zoe and her friends suggesting about You Know Who?
- Why does Bronny go along with it?
- How does Bronny compare her likely future to Zoe's?
  
- Write about Bronny's friendly overtures from Paula's point of view.
- Devise and act the sort of commercial you think Zoe was in.
- Write about a time when you took part in something that you regret.

## Janine

**Author comment** *There was a girl in my class who was killed. I didn't know her well, but more than 30 years later I think about her, and it made me wonder about people dying 'instantly'. In fact they go on living in the minds of the people who knew them. This story's also a reminder – to me, mainly – that even seemingly perfect people are human and can be hurt by more 'ordinary' people, like the girl telling the story.*

- Why do Sandy and the narrator hate Janine?
- What are the four steps the trainer teaches them?
- How does Janine's statement during assertiveness training change the narrator's picture of her?
  
- Find out what you can about teenage deaths in car accidents. Include case studies if you can, or interview people involved. What can be done? Write up your findings in a research assignment.
  
- Enact the scene in assertiveness training between Janine and the narrator, or do your own four step session with another class member.
  
- Write about someone whose death matters to you. When and what do you think about them now?

## *Poodle Eyes*

**Author comment** *This is a revenge story – the writer getting the last word! I once looked after someone’s poodle for six weeks. It was as deeply neurotic as Cherie and did all the pathetic things she does. It occurred to me that if the dog was so unbearable for me to be around, how much worse it would be for a boy, who would naturally prefer to be in charge of something more manly – like Casey Bright’s Rottweilers. It seemed to me a whole weekend of this feeble creature might entirely put the boy off the girl who owned it.*

- Why doesn’t Hamish think girls like him?
- What does Cherie do to escape Casey Bright’s Rottweilers?
- Why doesn’t Hamish ask Lucy out at the end of the story?
  
- Write an account of the weekend from Cherie’s point of view. What did she think of Hamish?
  
- People sometimes say owners grow to be like their dogs. Write about one person and their dog who prove the rule.
  
- Dramatise the scene at the beach when Hamish meets Casey Bright and his Rottweilers. Have people act the respective dogs.

## *Kiss Me*

**Author comment** *This is based on a true story. I had a best friend called Mary who sat next to a boy I got a serious crush on. She told him, and he said he’d meet me at the park. And just as in the story, he got me to kiss him on the mouth by twisting Mary’s arm until she did it first. I’m ashamed of how I let Mary be treated, and that I never said sorry. I think this is a nasty little story – a boy getting what he wants by vicious means, and girls going along with it. Maybe this story is my way of saying sorry to Mary decades later.*

- What happens when the narrator first sees Jamie close up out of school?
- How does the narrator describe Jamie’s attitude to kisses?
- How does Jamie make the narrator kiss him?
  
- Describe the story from Mary’s point of view. What does she think of Jamie?
  
- Jane Westaway has written this in first person. Why do you think she chose that point of view, and what effect does it have?
  
- Write about a time when either: you put a friend in an unfair situation, or, a friend puts you in an unfair situation.

## Baby Talk

**Author comment** *Every year, hundreds of New Zealand schoolgirls have babies. Someone once told me about some girls, on the last day of term, asking each other what they were going to do in the holidays and, as in the story, one of them said, 'Have a baby.' I wondered what it would be like to be that girl's best friend. I imagined feeling angry and scared, and keeping away from her until eventually you decided she didn't like you any more. But Donna's a forthright person who won't let Kim away with that. I like to think that now they've come to grips with Donna's situation, the two girls will be friends for a long time.*

- How does Kim feel when she first hears that Donna's pregnant?
- Why didn't Donna tell Kim?
- What does Donna ask of Kim at the end of the story, and why?
- Kim's mother makes a distinction between mistakes and accidents. What is the difference, and which do you think is Donna's? Give reasons from the text.
- Donna always said she would have an abortion. Organise two groups and argue the pros and cons of abortion in a case like Donna's.
- In the author's comment she says, 'Every year hundreds of New Zealand schoolgirls have babies.' Find out more about this. What are the exact figures? Are they increasing or decreasing? Why? What about other countries? Write up your findings and present them to the class.

## Mountain

**Author comment** *One of the hardest things for me about being a teenager was feeling I was ready to run my own life, but still being at the mercy of what other people decided for me. Marama is seriously fed up – sick of school, sick of her small town. But she can't see a way out. When her mother offers her one, it's a shock, and not at all the way most of us would choose. Life hardly ever dishes out what we expect.*

- How does Marama imagine life in the city?
- What is the bigger feeling 'underneath everything' that Marama remembers when she was little?
- Why is Marama glad for once to see the mountain at the end of the story?
- Discuss how Jane Westaway uses the image of the mountain throughout this story. What do you think it represents?
- How do you think life will be for Marama, her mother and Ans Svenson in Auckland? Write a letter home from Marama to her father or Eddie, describing a normal day.
- Marama is singing in a band. Write the lyrics of her own song about her home in the country.