



THE ASPARAGUS BUNCH

JESSICA SCOTT-WHYTE

DISCUSSION NOTES

Leon John Crothers is 4779 days old (thirteen years and one month, if you're mathematically challenged), he has been 'moved on' from six different schools and most people think he has an attitude problem. Leon doesn't care for the label, in the same way that he doesn't care for Tim Burton, supermarket trolleys, train fanatics or Bounty bars.

This time, however, things may turn out differently as help comes from where he least expects it - Dr Snot, a physician at pains to help Leon navigate 'normal' and classmates, Tanya and Lawrence who both face their own challenges. When school bully Glen Jenkins humiliates Leon in the school canteen and almost destroys Lawrence, Leon very reluctantly agrees to the formation of a club, The Asparagus Bunch.

How Leon manages to navigate school woes and family drama – and astonishingly ends up with not one but two friends – is nothing short of a miracle, or maybe just simply down to being different.

A fresh and irreverent comedy starring a cast of neurodiverse characters.



The Asparagus Bunch by Jessica Scott-Whyte is published in paperback on 21 July 2022 for 11+ readers.

#ChooseDifferent

 @KidsWelbeck  @WelbeckKids


WELBECK
FLAME



Pre-reading Discussion

"Though there are common challenges that autistic people share, autism is a spectrum condition and affects people in different ways." – Author's Note.

What are your experiences or knowledge of people on the autistic spectrum? Discuss and compare your knowledge and experiences.

Discussion Questions

Leon

It was a Monday evening, two weeks before I was due to start at Deluney College: my new, new, new, new, new, new, new school.

Can you think of any reasons why Leon insists on calling his new school his new, new, new, new, new, new, new school?

When you write a story, you decide what happens: who wins or loses, who lives or dies. You have the control. Even if the 'back office' production teams want to exercise their power of authority, ultimately, you have the last word. Because without the writer, there is no story. Control. It's all about the control.

In what ways does Leon try to exert control over his own life and his mother's life?

Leon, allow me to let you in on an important life secret: you don't control anything. None of us do. We might think we control most aspects of our lives, but sooner or later we are confronted with the unexpected. Sometimes the unexpected can be good, sometimes bad, often daunting, and yes, at times unfair. Very unfair, even. But there is one thing that we humans do have absolute control over. We control whether we accept this fact or not. – Doctor Snot

What unexpected events happens to Leon? How does he react to them? Does he accept that he cannot control everything?

*'Oh, my gawd! Tans! Look! It's that racist little mate of yours!' – Denise
I'm not racist. Really, I'm not. Well, not on purpose anyway. – Leon*

In your opinion, is Leon racist? If he isn't, why does he make comments that give this impression?

Hello again, My name is Leon. I'm in the Asparagus Bunch.

This is how Leon concludes his story. What does it show us about how he has changed and what he has learned?

Tanya

Dyslexia is a neurological learning disability. In other words, if someone has dyslexia, his or her brain is simply wired to handle information differently. – Doctor Snot

How does Tanya's dyslexia impact upon her sense of self-worth? Why does she put up with Leon's difficult behaviour? What does she say about this herself?

Lawrence

We're the same, you and I – Lawrence

The same? Us two? Far from it – Leon

In what ways do Lawrence and Leon behave similarly? In what ways differently?

A funhouse. It's a funhouse. Leon, you have a funhouse in your back garden. You have a funhouse in your back garden. We can hang out here together all the time. We can form a club! – Lawrence

Why do you think Lawrence is so keen on the idea of forming a club?

Glen

He's not just your typical bully, Caroline. He's a sophisticated one.

What is bullying? What sorts of behaviour does bullying include? Do you agree with Leon's opinion of Glen? Why do you think people engage in bullying?

If this boy is being such a weasel, then why don't you just go and speak to the headmaster about it? I'll go with you, if you like.'

'Caroline, he's already been expelled from four other schools. Chances are he'll eventually get expelled from Deluney, only to be sent to another school and carry on his campaign of terror there. Vengeance is the only real solution.'

Leon seems to think that speaking to a teacher about Glen's behaviour would be hopeless. Do you agree with his analysis? Does your school provide ways for pupils to deal with bullying?

'Miss, I'm not disturbin',' Glen said in a street accent that could curdle milk.

Does this comment about Glen's accent tell you anything about Leon's attitude towards Glen?

Caroline

Caroline has a thing about the two of us eating together whenever her work schedule allows, for 'bonding' purposes.

What do you think of the way Caroline treats Leon? Would you describe her as a good mother?

Jim

I'm sure there's things about Jim that aren't that bad. Sure, he'll have his annoying bits, like the rest of us, but guess what, you treating him like a piece of dirt before even getting to know him? That's not very smart. – Leon

How does Jim deal with Leon's hostility?

Post-reading Discussion

Has reading *The Asparagus Bunch* changed the way you think about people with autism or dyslexia?

The best way to get through this bad stuff and come out the other side feeling better and stronger, is to accept that in life BAD STUFF HAPPENS! – Tanya

What do you think about this statement? Should we accept that bad stuff happens, or should we try to change things?

Post-reading Activity

In chapter 25, Leon writes the following letter to his mum, telling her that he has decided to leave home.

Caroline, In light of recent events, I'm writing to inform you that I have decided to leave home to seek out a life in pastures new. While there is no guarantee that they will be any greener, I anticipate that, at the very least, they won't be covered in bull-Snickers. – Leon

Write a letter in response to Leon to convince him not to leave home. You could write this as a character in the story such as Caroline or Tanya, or you could write it from your own perspective.

Discussion Notes created by Kathleen Ktorides and Brian Keaney
Text copyright © Jessica Scott-Whyte, 2022
Illustrations copyright © Thy Bui, 2022