

THE BOOK AND BEYOND

An educator's guide for exploring children's and YA literature



Title: The Upper World

Author(s): Femi Fadugba

Illustrator(s): Femi Fadugba

The aim of The Book and Beyond is to inspire an interest and passion for books and reading. This section is for your thoughts, questions and notes about different aspects of the book and to consider how you might frame discussion with students.

The book

Physical object

- Our paperback version is standard novel orientation and size.
- Cover has a matte texture favoured by recent teen/YA novels.

Design & cover

- Luminous silver title is the dominant feature and is embossed (raised) futuristic lettering contrasting with the deep black background. Title floats above a dark-skinned character's head, with figures, buildings, signage shattering/glitching — an explosion from the brain.
- Endorsement at the top of the front cover from actor/screenwriter [Daniel Kaluuya](#), known for performances that align with themes in the book (*Skins*, *Black Panther*, *Black Mirror*, *Judas and the Black Messiah*) who is now turning the novel into a Netflix series. Do star endorsements guide your (or your students') book picks? Why?

Illustration

- Black and white illustrations (created by the author) throughout the book help explain time/physics concepts.
- Appendix at the end shows all diagrams with explanations of concepts.

Characters

- Esso — as a youth in 2020, and tutor in 2035. A street-savvy, smart teen.
- Rhia — student in 2035, raised in foster homes. She's a talented football player, also streetwise and smart, driven, fiercely independent.
- The point of view is narrated by each character, for each time period.
- Font style shows the reader who is talking. Today: Esso/Rhia — traditional font (Baskerville MT Std). Future: modern font (not noted on imprint page).
- Olivia - Rhia's 'sister' is important in Rhia's story and Esso's Mum, Nadia, Rob and Kato feature in Esso's school and home action.

Plot

- Begins with a Plato allegory, written as a letter from Esso's father hinting at a concept of different worlds, and other critical points to build in philosophy to the science, change the pace.
- Two parallel plotlines in present and future, relatable problem for each character and each character's story moves in an arc to solve the mystery, with the worlds colliding to resolve/explain the connection.
- Narrative timeline in several parts named to reflect physics concepts (distance, time, matter, energy) then After-math as final.

Setting

- South London, in 2 time periods: 2020 & 2035.
- Specifically called 'Narm' — real slang name for Peckham — refers to Vietnam.
- Both settings/times are gritty, urban. The characters adapt to survive the unpredictability and sometimes violent/oppressive backdrop.
- Penny Hill Secondary School is important for the action, and reveals the gang tensions, commentary of teachers' attitude, but also comedy interactions of Esso's friends and budding romance.
- Rhia's football club, and the 'quadrants' of Peckham in the future cleverly highlight social tension and economic separation — and help us wonder/question the future.
- The points of entry into the Upper World are eerie, fractured and dreamlike.
- Link to contemporary rap music scene & London gangs.

Theme & message

- Time travel — dimensions in time, quantum physics.
- Free will and choice.
- Love and relationships. Family lost and found.
- Identity — search for who you are in connection to family.
- Explores gang culture, social tensions and expectations.

Language

- Physics, scientific language and concepts.
- First-person point of view leads to immediacy, tying in with characters.
- Dialogue — urban London slang — rhythmic, shortened and shorthand words e.g. 'mandem', 'roadman', 'wasteman'.
- Use of simple diagrams, online messaging format, breakout boxes as explainers of technical and complex terms add to the story, situation and comic effect.

Mood & feeling

- Tense, dark, overhanging and sometimes obvious threat of violence or impending problems.
- The fast pace of a thriller, balanced with reflections of family life, loss and sorrow.
- Comical interactions of Esso and Nadia, and of Esso's inner monologue on maintaining a reputation or appearance in school.

Genre & format

- YA novel format.
- Science fiction thriller.
- Uses contemporary devices to keep interest and plot moving e.g. diary, dialogue, straight prose, illustrated text messaging, diagrams on napkins of physics ideation.

The inquiry

Rich question(s)

This section is for creating and exploring questions that might guide an overall inquiry for a particular book. These questions might be inspired by ideas in the book section and/or personal responses and/or the NZ Curriculum and/or available resources.

How can a person's decisions and actions change their life?

How does conflict influence an individual's decisions and actions?

How are people transformed through their relationships with others?

What turning points determine our individual pathways to adulthood?

Why do people make and tell stories about the land and sea — the natural environment? Why and how are these kinds of stories important to a society or culture?

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Make connections

The aim of The Book and Beyond is to inspire an interest and passion for books and reading. This section is designed to help students use the book as inspiration to share, wonder, question, and explore ideas, possibilities, connections, feelings, experiences and other viewpoints — either alone or together.

Personal

Create

- Imagine you are making a film of the novel. Who would you cast as the characters? Build a list of your choices.
- What would be your music or soundtrack choices for the film scenes? Create a playlist, or compose some music yourself.
- Create a rap for your favourite character.

Explore language

- Read a section of a chapter in which Esso is the main character. Make a list of 5 slang words from the dialogue. Do you know the meaning of each?
- Do you and your friends talk in slang or use words from different languages, or made-up words when you talk? Think about words where you come from (NZ, or another country, or language used at home.)
- Consider the author's background and career (inside back cover and [info on publisher's website](#)) and how his experience is used in the content of the novel. Think about your own interests and skills and what sort of story you might write to include those.

Read more

Read the next in the series

- Sequel being written (out March 2023).
- ['How I wrote it: Femi Fadugba'](#) on *The Upper World* from publisher's website
- Find out about the people who have endorsed the book in the first few pages. There might be other books you would like to read as a result of this. Write your own endorsement for this or another favourite book.
- [Guardian article](#) about the evolution of the book.

Read another book by the same author

Read another book with the same idea/topic/genre

- Amie Kaufman and Jay Kristoff collaborative titles (*Illuminae*, *Aurora cycle*)
- Neil Shusterman & Jarrod Shusterman e.g. *Dry*.
- *A Thousand Pieces of You* by Claudia Gray.

Listen to an audio version of the book

- Audio available (great for those with reading difficulties or reluctant readers). The author had music specially composed for the audiobook.
- Audiobook & eBook are available from the [National Library Print Disabilities Wheelers ePlatform](#) (and on CD soon), for any student struggling with text.
- Netflix series being made by and starring Daniel Kaluuya

Social (Share your experience)

Share

- Check out Femi Fadugba's Twitter account [@FemiFadugba](#). He often retweets reviews and comments.
- Share your views on the novel with him or your school library's social media e.g. Instagram.
- [Plato's Allegory of the Cave](#). Here is a short clip that shows the philosophy/story that the book starts with, in Esso's father's letter.

What connections can you make to yourself, other texts, the world?

Text to self

- Would you like to be able to see into your future?
- If you could change something in your past what would your life be like now?

Text to text

Students may be able to think about similarities to:

- Netflix series — *Top Boy*. Rating 16.
- Movie — *Blue Story*. Rating 15.
- Movie — *Avengers: Endgame* (deals with time travel) Rating PG-13.

What are other texts (song, music, film, TV, gaming) that have time travel / parallel worlds to connect characters?

Text to world

- What do you know about time travel? Do you think it's possible?

NZ Curriculum

This section is intended as a prompt for thinking about how the book might relate to the NZ Curriculum. For example, is it a story about *cultural diversity*? What *language, symbols and text* tell the story?

Learning areas		Principles		Values		Key Competencies	
<input checked="" type="radio"/> English	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Maths & Statistics	<input type="radio"/> High expectations	<input type="radio"/> Future focus	<input type="radio"/> Excellence	<input type="radio"/> Community & participation	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Thinking	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Relating to others
<input type="radio"/> The Arts	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Science	<input type="radio"/> Treaty of Waitangi	<input type="radio"/> Learning to learn	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Innovation, inquiry, curiosity	<input type="radio"/> Ecological sustainability	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Using language, symbols & text	<input type="radio"/> Participating & contributing
<input type="radio"/> Health & PE	<input type="radio"/> Social Sciences	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Cultural diversity	<input type="radio"/> Community engagement	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Diversity	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Integrity	<input type="radio"/> Managing self	
<input type="radio"/> Languages	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Technology	<input type="radio"/> Inclusion		<input type="radio"/> Equity			