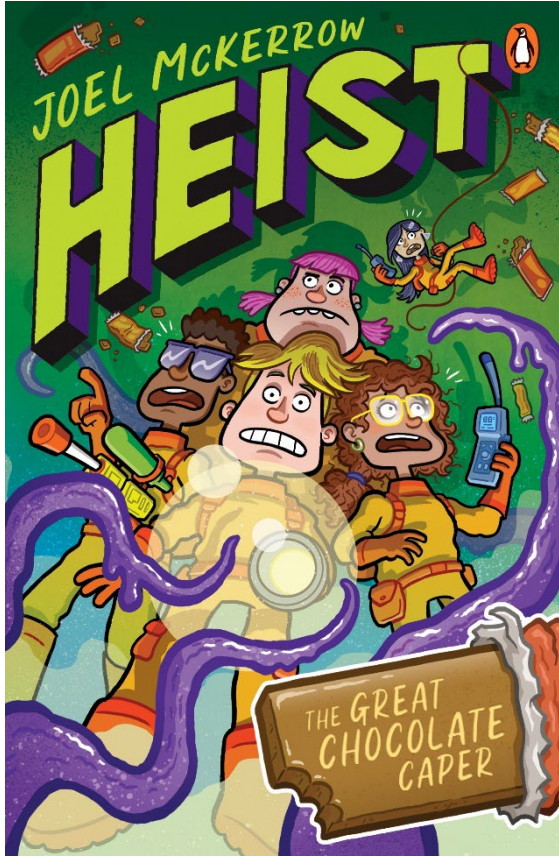




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PLOT SUMMARY

A hilarious middle-grade HEIST series that's out of this world.

Meet the Heist squad. AKA a motley crew of hot-headed misfits who HATE each other but LOVE chocolate. But then they discover a sinister chocolatey plot, right in the bowels of their high school, that will threaten the entire human race with utter annihilation. Can they put aside their differences to achieve the most audacious chocolate heist EVER and save the world?

**RECOMMENDED FOR ages 9+;
Years 4 to 8**

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KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

• Learning areas: English; HASS • General capabilities: Literacy; Critical and creative thinking; Personal and Social capability; Ethical understanding

REASONS FOR STUDYING THIS BOOK

• Exciting, action-packed heist trope – the first of its kind for a Middle-Grade children's readership • Humour • Mental Health and Wellbeing • Understanding ableism and the Social Model of Disability from an authentically represented disabled character with cerebral palsy • As a springboard for conversations about refugees and colonialism in a safe and hypothetical way.

THEMES

• Problem solving and STEAM skills • Fitting in and belonging • Friendship and bullying • Sci-fi aliens • Displaced peoples and races • Ableism • Coming of age

PUBLICATION DETAILS

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Heist 1: The Great Chocolate Caper

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joel McKerrow is an award-winning writer, keynote speaker, creativity specialist, children's author, educator and, having performed for hundreds of thousands of people throughout the world, is one of Australia's most successful performance poets.

Joel is the artist Ambassador for the aid and development organisation TEARFUND Australia, the 2025-2026 VIC/TAS president of Professional Speakers Australia and is the co-founder/host of The Deep Place Podcast. He was the third ever Australian representative at the Individual World Poetry Slam Championships and co-founder of community arts organisation 'The Centre for Poetics and Justice.'

Currently the Director of The School for Creative Development, Joel is extremely passionate about creative education, teaching in over fifty schools every year, as well as presenting at many of Australia's premiere literary festivals (including the 2025 Sydney Writers Festival, where *Heist: The Great Chocolate Caper* was the #1 bestselling book of the entire festival). Joel has taught hundreds of thousands of students throughout the world to tap into their imagination and spill it out onto the page in both story and poetry.

AUTHOR'S INSPIRATION

From Joel:

I've always loved Heist stories, and really wanted to write in that trope, but for a middle-grade audience. I always loved the Mission Impossible and Oceans Eleven movies, and wanted to recreate that action and clever trickery in a story for kids. I'd say this first story in the series is a mix of Mission Impossible meets Charlie and the Chocolate Factory with a little bit of Men in Black sci-fi thrown in there, too.

I loathe to admit that the idea for the chocolate heist actually came from a bad choice I made in high school. Much of *The Great Chocolate Caper* is based on my true story, from my own high school years when I was in Grade 7. Just like in the story, my high school was

designed by a prison architect – it was a cement monstrosity, with big black iron gates, very much like a prison. And my bad choice moment came when some friends and I found out where the Year 12 students had stashed all the chocolate they were planning to sell in order to raise funds for their graduation formal at the end of the year. Their stash was stored in the woodwork storeroom, and we committed a heist to steal the chocolates that were in that store room. Just like Andy and his team in the book, we had a carefully constructed plan in which we each had distinct roles – two of us were to distract the woodwork teacher, two of us were lookouts, two of us had bags to stuff all the chocolate into... Unlike in the book, though, none of us had good intentions. We didn't do it to save the world from aliens.

I worked out that the amount of chocolate we stole was the equivalent of over \$5000-worth of chocolate. Some of which we ate, a lot of which we sold. We did get busted, and it was one of those wake-up call moments in life – I realised that I didn't want to be this person who makes bad choices, and I never stole again. And, I guess, you could say I used it for some good, as it was really great fodder for this first book in the Heist series.

Before you read the book

1. Genres are book categories – such as crime, fantasy, historical fiction, non-fiction. Look closely at the cover. What genre (other than heist) do you think this story falls into? Give reasons for your answers. (Look for clues in the font-type, colours, illustration and artwork style.)
2. A trope is a popular type of story. Heist is one such trope. There are many different tropes, which are like themes to a book, including timeslips, aliens, vampires, unicorns, school stories and time travel. Discuss the class's favourite books and whether any of them fall into a specific trope. You could take a class vote to find out which is the most popular trope and/or genre.
3. There is another type of trope called a literary trope. This is a writing device – such as a metaphor, an oxymoron and irony. Research the definitions for the different types of literary trope, and write example sentences for each one.



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Writing style

This book's story is told from a point in the future – from the end of Book 3, to be precise. And the Book 1 story is structured around the countdown to the heist. The series therefore utilises what is called a circular narrative – where the story ends at the same point that it began – but each individual book story is written within a viewpoint narrative – in which the story is told from the perspective of a narrator.

Questions and activities

1. The narrator for the heist books is the main character, Andy McGee. This means that the reader is told the story from his point-of-view. What are the pros and cons of using a character as the narrator?
2. Research the different types of narration: first person, second person and third person. Which narration style is used in *The Great Chocolate Caper*?
3. Humour is hard to write – because not everyone finds the same things funny – but it can be a very effective writing device. Were there any parts of the story and/or narration that you found funny? Pick out your favourite parts and analyse why you found them funny. Consider whether it was dialogue between characters, Andy's thoughts or something specific that happens in the action. Consider timing, pace and language in your reasons for thinking it funny.
4. The book's story is structured within a countdown to the heist. How does this add to the anticipation and excitement of the action? Does it make *you* want to keep reading?

KEY STUDY TOPICS

Heist trope

There are certain elements to a heist story that make it a heist story. They are:

- a team of individuals, each with a specific role
- a mastermind leader
- a high-stakes plot
- a plan
- a problem with the plan
- a new plan

- a great escape
- a rewarding ending

Questions and activities

1. Identify each of the heist-trope elements listed above in *The Great Chocolate Caper*. For bonus points, can you remember what each character's specific role is in the heist?

Disability and ableism

One of the characters in *The Great Chocolate Caper* is disabled – Marlie Balooby, who has cerebral palsy. Cerebral palsy is the most common childhood disability. The Heist books are not stories about disability, but the stories do convey a realistic representation of the Australian population: 1 in 5 Australians have a disability, and 1 of the 5 Heist squad is disabled. This disabled character is not in a 'special school' or 'school for specific purposes'. She is part of a mainstream high school, and she is included in everything. Inclusion is a word you might have heard people use when speaking about another important word: diversity. Often, people who are diverse or different, or who have different needs, are unable to do things because the world hasn't been set up with them in mind. For instance, a person who uses a wheelchair may be unable to go into a library because there isn't a ramp for them to use, or an autistic person might be unable to listen to a teacher in class who insists on whole-body listening because sitting still and making eye contact hurts them. Imagine being made to do something even if it hurts you just because everyone else does. Or imagine not being able to get into a place that all of your friends can go in just because someone decided to put steps in the entrance. When disabled people are unable to do things simply because of their disability, it is ableism.

Questions and activities

1. On pages 183-184, Marlie speaks to Andy about her disability following Fleassy's mean and ableist comments. During that speech, Marlie says, 'Yes, I might move a bit slower and differently to other people, but why does that mean I should be treated as less? Why does that mean I should expect less? Why does that mean I can contribute less? But that is what the world tells me every single day.'



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Consider Marlie's words in the context of a common saying in the disability community, and title of autistic actress Chloe Hayden's book: *Different, Not Less*. Discuss your thoughts on this as a class.

2. Ableism is a form of discrimination. Discrimination is when people are treated badly because of who they are. Do you know the names of any other types of discrimination? Some examples might include racism (treating someone badly because of their race), sexism (being mean to someone because of their sex (male or female)) and ageism.
3. Discrimination comes in many forms. It can be in the language we use as well as in our actions. Sometimes, we say things that we don't realise are discriminatory. For disabled people, this is called ableist language. The words below are considered ableist as they were once diagnoses that were used to lock people up in horrible institutions and as reasons to not include people with disabilities in society. This caused many to see people with disabilities as inferior to (or less than) people who weren't disabled. And the words that were medical diagnoses were then used in everyday language as negative insults – as if being disabled is a negative thing. Think about how often people say 'don't be so dumb', or 'that's crazy'. Despite these words being ableist, many of us still use them. Can you think of alternative words to use instead of the ableist words below?

- crazy, mad, insane

- stupid, idiot, moron – these were once medical terms used for people with intellectual disabilities. It is important to remember that there are many different ways to be intelligent, and people with intellectual disabilities have many strengths that are too-often overlooked.

- dumb – this describes someone who can't speak, but some people use it in everyday speech to say that someone is stupid. Just because someone doesn't speak, doesn't mean they don't think.

- lame – this is a medical term to describe body parts that don't function in the same way as most people's, but some people use it to say that something is boring or dull. Think about how Marlie Balooby would feel about that – is she dull just because she has a leg that is lame with a limp?

4. Stereotypes are assumptions made by one group of people about another. They can be extremely harmful, as they assume knowledge based on perceptions (or ideas) rather than reality. They oversimplify the diversity of individuals into a single characteristic.

What are some stereotypes that you know of? Examples might include all Asian people being good at maths, English people talking about the weather, all New Zealanders being rugby fans.

Problems arise when these assumptions become perceived as facts, and those 'facts' are used as reasons to discriminate against someone.

5. People who are disabled find themselves stereotyped all the time, because people who aren't disabled tend to look at what a person can't do instead of what they can. For instance, if someone is Deaf, people might describe that person as being unable to hear instead of describing them as communication through sign language. If someone uses a wheelchair, people might describe them as being unable to walk instead of describing them as a wheelchair user. These 'negative' descriptions of disabled people occur all the time, and lead to harmful and stereotypical perceptions of them as being unable to do things. Consider the difference between the words unable and disable.
6. Watch [this video](#) about ableism in James Bond movies. Can you think of any other stories in which the baddies have disabilities? And what stories can you think of in which the main character is a goodie with a disability? (Bonus points for naming stories with goodie disabled characters in them that aren't stories 'about' disability. *The Great Chocolate Caper* is one.)

Refugees

Read pages 273-275, which is when Andy realises that the aliens who are trying to take over the human bodies are actually refugees, looking for a new home. Andy is instantly sympathetic towards the aliens with this new understanding.

Questions and activities

1. Look up the definition for refugee. How does this make you feel towards the aliens who are taking



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over human bodies? Does understanding their reasons make you feel more sympathetic towards their plight? Do you think it makes their taking over human bodies less wrong? Discuss your thoughts with your class.

Ethical considerations

How ethical are heists? Let's face it, heist stories are about thievery and trickery. Can stealing ever be for the right reasons?

Questions and activities

1. In groups, discuss whether it is ever okay to steal. Assign one group to develop an argument for "yes", and another group to develop an argument for "no". Write down the different reasons for both arguments before moving onto the next question.
2. In *The Great Chocolate Caper*, the heist team steal chocolate and destroy research in order to save the human race. But they do so at the cost of the alien race. Discuss the idea of right and wrong as concepts that aren't absolute but as subjective.



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Further reading from Penguin Random House

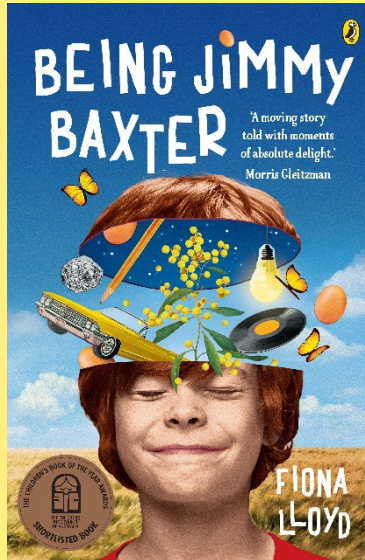


We Run Tomorrow
by Nat Amore,
Mike Barry

Sticks, Maki, Jed and Tommy live on the same street. But the adults around them are making decisions that could tear the four friends apart.

When they discover their favourite comic book series is being made into a blockbuster movie, they know what they have to do. Get to the audition. Get the parts. Stay together.

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Being Jimmy Baxter
by Fiona Lloyd

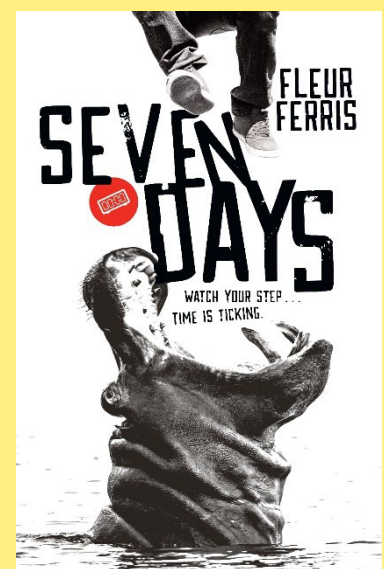
It's not eggsactly easy being Jimmy Baxter 'cause:

- The real Jimmy's hiding inside
- Ned Kelly's giving him the evil eye
- Mum's stopped going to work and stays in bed
- There's no eggs in the fridge — or anything else.

AND there's new jobs, bad-at-school brains and a whole lot of trouble called Duke.

But then . . . there's Mac.

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Seven Days
by Fleur Ferris

Seven days to solve a century-old crime. Seven days to unearth the treasure. Seven days to survive...

The countdown is on.

A fast-paced, action-packed story of how the past catches up to us, from bestselling and award-winning author Fleur Ferris.

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Order form

TITLE	AUTHOR	ISBN	SCHOOL YEAR	RRP	QTY	TOTAL
<i>Heist 1: The Great Chocolate Caper</i>	Joel McKerrow	9781761350276	4-8	\$17.99		
<i>We Run Tomorrow</i>	Nat Amooore	9781760897697	4-8	\$16.99		
<i>Being Jimmy Baxter</i>	Fiona Lloyd	9781760148515	4-8	\$16.99		
<i>Seven Days</i>	Fleur Ferris	9781761043352	4-8	\$16.99		
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