



## **The Miseducation of Cameron Post**

### **Introduction to the novel**

*The Miseducation of Cameron Post* is a coming-of-age teen novel by Emily M. Danforth published in 2012. The novel's central character is Cameron Post, a 12-year-old girl living in Montana who is discovering her own homosexuality. After the death of her parents (who die in a car accident), her aunt moves in to the family home (where Cameron now lives with her grandmother) to help raise her. Cameron develops a relationship with her best friend and after her aunt finds out about a romantic/sexual encounter between the two girls, Cameron is sent to a religious conversion therapy camp that is supposed to “cure” her of her homosexuality. At the camp, Cameron makes new friends, but also comes face to face with the cost of denying her true identity.

In studying this novel, students will have opportunity to explore several themes, including grief/loss, attitudes toward homosexuality, substance use and friendship. Each of these themes can be highlighted through related passages in the novel and students can engage with them by examining questions relating to each scene/topic.

### **The intersection between coming-of-age and adolescent substance use**

Young people may choose to use substances for different reasons, reasons that are often related to what they are going through at the time. For many young people, the use of drugs such as cannabis or alcohol is considered a “social thing,” something they do to have fun or relax with their friends, or it may be to “fit in.” As adolescents navigate the path to adulthood, they may see substance use as a rite of passage, or they may do it because it makes them feel “grown up.” Other young people may use substances to manage feelings, cope with uncomfortable emotions (some associated with adolescence and identity formation) or deal with life stresses.

### **Instructional strategies**

*The Miseducation of Cameron Post* provides opportunities to explore many themes that are relevant in building drug literacy competencies. These include the way substance use and sexual orientation are often discussed within a pathological framing. Identity formation and friendships are at the centre of the story and these impact our relationships with psychoactive substances. Unresolved issues of grief and loss are another important theme present in the novel. The story also provides an opportunity to explore reasons behind the higher prevalence of mental health issues and substance use among people who do not identify as heterosexual. In the course of your novel study, you may choose to discuss some or all of these topics. The following passages and suggested questions provide a way to use these themes to build drug literacy.

In exploring these themes it may be important to remind students that the goal of our discussions is not to convince the other to adopt our position but, rather, to expand our own understanding about other people’s perspectives. As Aristotle said, “It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.” This expanded understanding will help us all function together in a complex multi-cultural world.

To explore any of the following themes and their relationship to drug literacy, you might draw attention to the cited passages and then use the suggested questions to facilitate classroom or small group discussions.

### Attitudes toward homosexuality

*I'd certainly never considered that someday my feelings might grant me access to a community of like-minded women. If anything, weekly services at Gates of Praise had assured me of exactly the opposite. How could I possibly believe Lindsey when she told me that two women could live together like a man and wife, and even be accepted, when Pastor Crawford spoke with such authority about the wicked perversion of homosexuality? Not that he ever really said the word sex, even when it was burritoed inside another word; it came out more like 'homo-sesh-oo-ality' and even more often simply as 'sickness' and 'sin.' "God is very clear about this," he would tell us some Sunday morning when something happening with gay rights, something undoubtedly happening on one of the coasts, had worked its way to the Billings Gazette. "Don't be fooled by what you might see on television, the kinds of sick movements happening in parts of this country. Time and time again, in Leviticus, in Romans, the Bible is exact and unwavering about homo-sesh-oo-al acts as clear abominations upon the Lord." He would then go on to explain that people lured into this sort of unhealthy lifestyle were those in most desperate need of Christ's love: junkies, prostitutes, the mentally ill, and teenage runaways like the kind actors portrayed in tattered denim jackets and with dirty-looking hair in those Boys Town National Hotline commercials they played during late-night TV. Why not throw orphans into the mix? (pp. 99-100)*

- When Pastor Crawford refers to homosexuality as a 'sickness,' what does that imply?
- Can you think of other scenes in the novel that portray homosexuality in a similar way?
- What effects (positive or negative) might comments like that have on a young person?
- Have you ever been labeled (in relation to your ethnicity, culture, gender, mental health, or any other factor)? How did that make you feel?
- How does Cameron feel about religion, and why do you think she struggles with faith?

Recall the principles promoted at God's Promise, both in the program's purpose statement and rules and in practice. (pp. 251-256)

- How does the program frame homosexuality? What effect does that have on the people attending the program? (Think of specific examples).
- Can you think of other issues in our society that are framed similarly to the way homosexuality is framed at God's Promise?
- How does Cameron cope? What are the consequences for her? Could she have reacted differently? What difference would that have made?

Recall the scene where Mark becomes very angry and loses control during one of the group support sessions and the way that is handled later.

*"Look, Mark was very confused yesterday; I don't need to tell you, you all saw that. He was in a lot of emotional and spiritual pain, and he caused himself physical harm to try to make all of that go away." [...] He [Rick] breathed in quick and blew it out and said, "Last night Mark used a razor to cut his genitals several times; then he poured bleach over the wounds." "Jesus," I [Cameron] said. Rick didn't blink at the word. "He passed out after that, and Adam heard the bottle of bleach hit the floor. Or I guess he could have heard Mark hit the floor too. Adam's the one who came and got me, and he helped me and Kevin carry Mark to the van after that." (pp. 380-381)*

- What was your reaction when you read what had happened to Mark? Would your reaction have been the same if Mark had been one of your close friends? Why or why not?
- Who is responsible? Why?
- What might have prevented this incident from happening? Why do you think so?

The 2008 BC Adolescent Health Survey shows that lesbian, gay and bisexual young people are at increased risk of suicide attempts and self-harm. And, compared to their heterosexual peers, LGB youth are more likely to report frequent binge drinking in the past month, heavy marijuana use and multiple consequences resulting

from their drug or alcohol use in the past year. (Konishi, Saewyc, Homma, & Poon, 2013; Smith et al., 2009, 2011)

- What are some of the factors that may contribute to this reality?
- What could be done to help change it?

### Identity

*“If you don’t know for sure, then what’s the big thing about trying stuff out?” Jamie said, not looking at me but looking out at that statue, just like Hennisz. I still didn’t have any of the right words. “It’s more like maybe I do know and I’m still confused too, at the same time. Does that make sense? I mean, it’s like how you noticed this thing about me tonight, you saw it, or you already knew it – it’s there. But that doesn’t mean it’s not confusing or whatever.”*

- What do you think Cameron meant when she said “I do know and I’m still confused too, at the same time”? Have you ever felt that way?
- Is Cameron struggling to find her identity? What does that mean?
- What makes you who you are? How does your environment influence your identity? How do other people influence it?
- Would you say that people’s identity changes overtime, or does it stay the same? Explain.
- What are some ways in which we express our identity? E.g., Do the things we wear reflect the way we see ourselves? Does it reflect the way we want others to see us? What about our use of alcohol or other drugs?
- What does it mean to “be yourself”? Are there times when you cannot “be yourself”? If so, how does that affect you or make you feel?

### Friendship

*Adam and I settled in beside her while she packed the pipe. It was perfect there on the floor of the forest on an early-fall afternoon, getting high. It was almost possible for me to forget why the three of us were together, the sin we had in common, the reason for our friendship. Jane had a couple of those little green cans of apple juice with her, like from snack time in preschool, and she had a pack of beef jerky too, and we sat and ate our little pioneer-type meal and passed the pipe. We were good with smoking and not talking. All of us did so much talking at Promise, even those of us who didn’t really say anything in all that talking. (pp. 309-310)*

- How are Cameron’s friendships with Adam and Jane unlike any she has experienced previously? How do they help Cameron survive – and escape – Promise?
- What role do cannabis and alcohol play in these friendships?
- Who counts as a friend? Who does not count as a friend? Can we have bad friends? Can friendships be healthy or unhealthy?
- Is friendship important? Why or why not?

### Grief and loss

*So when Grandma met us on the front steps in her purple housecoat, and hugged a stiff Mr. Klauson beneath the orange glow of the porch light, the millers swooping around their awkward embrace, and then sat me on the couch, and gave me the mug of now lukewarm, too-sweet tea she had been drinking, and wrapped my hands in hers and told me that she was just sitting down to watch TV when the doorbell rang, and it was a state trooper, and there had been an accident, and Mom and Dad, my mom and dad, had died, the first thing I thought, the first thing, was: She doesn’t know about Irene and me at all. Nobody knows. And even right after she said it, and I guess I knew then that my parents were gone, or at least I had to have heard her, it still didn’t register right. I mean, I had to have known this big thing, this massive news about my whole entire world, but I just kept*

*thinking, Mom and Dad don't know about us. They don't know, so we're safe – even though there was no more Mom and Dad to know about anything.* (p. 29)

- How does Cameron later reflect on her initial reaction to her parents' death? What feelings does she develop with regard to it?
- As Cameron processes her grief, does she eventually feel differently? Think about the last scene of the novel, when she addresses her parents at the lake.
- How do you see happiness and sadness? In what ways might they give meaning to each other?
- People often show and share the 'happy' sides of their life (e.g., in social media by posting pictures and videos of the happy moments), but they rarely share moments of sadness or pain. Why might that be? What impact might this have on others? On themselves?
- Do you think addictive behaviours related to substance use, gambling, shopping, or whatever might in any way be linked to the guilt we feel about the discrepancy between the stories we tell about ourselves and the private images we hold of ourselves? Why or why not?

#### Substance use

*I took a drink of the beer, which was growing warmer by the minute. I wasn't such a big fan of drinking alone, but something about these phone calls with Lindsay made the alcohol seem necessary, partly because I liked the idea that while she was filling me in on everything I wasn't doing (and she was), I could be breaking the rules too, and partly because I needed to be just a little numb to listen to her [sexual] exploits.* (p. 136)

*We'd told her [Aunt Ruth] we were leaving a little early to drag a couple of Mains (drive the Main Street loop) and to stop for pictures at Brett's Aunt's house. Instead, Brett pulled into a space by the community college track, the parking lot empty, the lone jog-walker in a teal running suit puffing through a lap, and the coast as clear as it was gonna get. We took turns with the Jim Beam until Jamie said he didn't want to drink as much of that shit as he was going to need to get through prom, produced his pipe, and after watching him pack it, Coley spoke for the group when she said she'd 'give it a whirl,' but only if we did it outside, because she was 'not showing up to prom reeking of marijuana.' We borrowed scratchy stadium blankets from the trunk and Jamie and Brett took off their jackets. The puffing jog-walker did a perfect comic double take as the four of us – Coley and I wrapped in wool cocoons with bare legs and strappy shoes, Jamie and Brett mostly in their tuxes – crossed the parking lot to the thin cluster of juniper bushes and cottonwoods, found cover next to one of the picnic tables, and lit up. Coley coughed and coughed. Brett coughed and coughed. Jamie jogged to the Coke machine just outside the doors to the recreation center and bought a Sprite to cool their throats, jogged it back, and proceeded to pop open the too-jostled can and spray himself in sticky lemon-lime.* (p. 148)

- In your opinion, why, does Cameron use alcohol? Marijuana? What different reasons might people have for using these or other drugs?
- Do you think that the reasons a person uses a drug could impact the potential for harm or benefit associated with that drug? Explain and provide examples.
- What risks of harm might be associated with the drug use of the characters in the story? How might they manage or minimize those risks?
- Can you avoid risk altogether when using drugs? Why or why not?

### Curricular competencies

- Apply appropriate strategies to comprehend written, oral and visual texts, guide inquiry, and extend thinking
- Think critically, creatively and reflectively to explore ideas within, between and beyond texts
- Construct meaningful personal connections between self, text and world
- Respond to text in personal, creative and critical ways
- Exchange ideas and viewpoints to build shared understanding and extend thinking

### Drug literacy objectives

- Assess the complex ways in which drugs impact the health and wellbeing of individuals, communities and societies
- Explore and appreciate diversity related to the reasons people use drugs, the impact of drug use and the social attitudes toward various drugs
- Recognize binary constructs (e.g., good vs bad) and assess their limitation in addressing complex social issues like drug use
- Recognize how official responses to drugs may have less to do with the drug than with other factors
- Develop social and communication skills in addressing discourse and behaviour related to drugs
- Develop personal and social strategies to manage the risks and harms related to drugs

### References

- Konishi, C., Saewyc, E., Homma, Y., & Poon, C. (2013). Population-level evaluation of school-based interventions to prevent problem substance use among gay, lesbian and bisexual adolescents in Canada. *Preventive Medicine, 57*(6), 929–33. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4709168/>
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