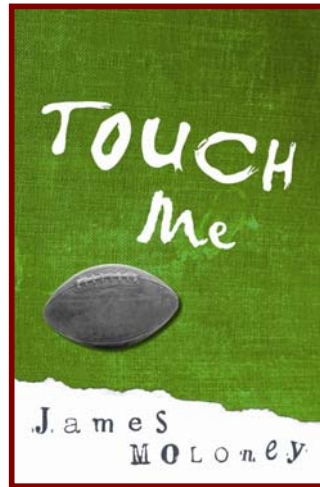


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Touch Me

James Moloney



Teachers' Notes

Written by James Moloney

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INTRODUCTION

Xavier McLachlan is in his final year at an all-boys school in Brisbane. As for most boys his age his mates and the idea of winning a First XV Jersey are the most important things in his life. But then Xavier meets Nuala McGee, a girl unlike any he has known before, and his world begins to change. A bad experience at her own school has caused Nuala to become wary of boys. To prevent them from making any unwelcome advances she takes to wearing the shapeless boys' school uniform and adopts a dismissive attitude in her actions and words. Yet, in spite of her odd behaviour, Xavier becomes increasingly attracted to Nuala and, with some degree of difficulty, they start his most important and intense relationship yet.

When Xavier invites Nuala to his school formal she is concerned by his intentions and refuses to go as she will be expected to wear a dress that she feels will draw unwanted attention, especially from the boys. With advice from his older sister, Felicity, Xavier allows Nuala to attend on her own terms and rents a suit for her. This action brings ridicule from most of his mates and causes Xavier to question the depth of their friendships. In the meantime he becomes increasingly close to Alex, a boy in his year whose experience with leukaemia forces Xavier to view the world differently. Xavier begins to question the win-at-all-costs attitude that is prevalent amongst his peers and many of their mentors. Alex's sudden death forces Xavier to make some important decisions about himself, his values and his relationships with others.

This is a beautifully sensitive depiction of the struggles and issues faced by many students in the final years of school. James Moloney's characters are well rounded and credible, enabling them to draw empathy from the reader. Many students will relate to the experiences and emotions of the central characters.

THEMES

Touch Me contains many powerful and relevant themes, including:

- Sport
- Winning at all costs
- Power and gossip
- Sexism
- Sexual stereotypes
- Mateship/Friendship

Sport

- The novel uses sport as a metaphor for life. The novel itself is divided into 6 parts, the titles of which mirror the stages in the football season.
- In Xavier's room the top 2 shelves were crowded with trophies and medallions.

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- The boys are constantly told to *Work harder. You've got to work harder.*
- When Xavier makes the First XV his emotion is one of relief rather than excitement.
- At the party when *Jacob was sober and a little restless. He wished Xave or Scott or even Luke was there so they could talk about the Loyola game.(p65)*

Nuala has little understanding of Xavier's love of sport:

Masochist. Why do it if you don't enjoy it?

No-one likes training much. Not with this guy anyway. He'd think he wasn't working us hard enough if we did.

It's the game. When you win, it's the greatest thing.

And when you lose?

I hate losing.

So you love the game when you win and hate the game when you lose. Fickle lover aren't you?

The idea is to win every time. Then you're always in love.

I've heard of love being a game but never a game being love. (p79)

It's how much you want it.

You hesitate just for a moment, if you think about it too much, if you think about getting hurt, then the other guy beats you every time.(p95)

- In what ways is the game of football shown to be a metaphor for love?

Nuala can't understand how Xavier feels when he is dropped from the First XV.

It was all a joke to Nuala. This was the first time in his life he had ever been dropped from any team, in any sport. It happened to other poor bastards every day.

You have to be a bloke to understand.(p152)

- For Xavier, what are the implications of being dropped from the team?
- Could a girl understand this situation?
- What would be a comparable situation for Nuala?

Surprisingly, Xavier finds an ally in Brother Allbecker:

It's like you have this idea of yourself. What you're like. Who you are. And then suddenly someone strips away the outside and you're different, not a bit like you thought you were.

If I couldn't play footy, I'd be nothing, nobody.

I've met a lot of hard me – in my time. Some I'm proud to know, but a few of them I wouldn't turn a hose on if they caught fire. There are a hundred kinds of courage. I've never met anyone who had them all, but you don't look to me like you lack many.(p176)

- In what ways is Xavier courageous?

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- Contrary to Xavier's fears, to what extent does he not start to become a 'somebody' until he is dropped from the First XV?

Winning at All Costs

- The first time we meet the boys it's a competition in the gym to show off their physical prowess.
- They are initially reluctant to play touch against the girls, fearing that it will slow things up a bit.
- Xavier is sickened by the injury to Paul O'Donnell whose injury lets St Matthews win the game.
- *Scott wouldn't let her go on like this; he'd do something, say something. When he played games he had to win.(p219)*
- *It's a bloody war. Can't you see that? There's no prisoners, there's no second place. Just winners and the rest.(p224)*
- Scott's physical attack on Kyle was *pure animal rage.(p225)*
- When Xave plays golf with Alex and his father Mr Muray asks him *Do you always try this hard? It's a game. You're allowed to enjoy it.(p229)*
- Scott is overly rough on Kelly in the touch game.
- Preston uses Alex's death in his pep talk, even though Alex didn't even like football.

Nuala asks Xave, *So, to love the game properly you not only have to win, you have to play well yourself?*

Yeah, that's true, for me anyway. Some people don't care. There's an old expression. Any win is a good win. (p104)

- Make a list of the 'good wins' and the 'bad wins' illustrated in the novel and consider how the different characters react to each.

Power

- *She was flying, exultant. She had performed again for the bystanders and found her reward in the uncertain faces of the boys and the laughter of the girls.(p17)*
- *I thought maybe if I sent them up in front of everyone it would even the score a bit. But now I can't stop.(p134)*
- Nuala won't let a boy ask her out.
- She won't give Xave her phone number or tell him where she lives.
- Initially she speaks in riddles and tries to catch him out to the extent that Xave feels as though he has *to pass a test every time I meet you. (p61)*

In the novel both Nuala and Gavin and his mates engage in power plays as a form of revenge.

- How does Nuala expect her behaviour to take revenge on the boys?

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- Why do the boys make and spread mock-up photos of Nuala?
- Does either group win as a result of their behaviour?

Gossip can also provide another means of obtaining power. By spreading rumours about people we are able to manipulate the way in which others view them and the way in which they are treated.

Gossip plays a big part in *Touch Me*. The photos of Nuala and the story about her behaviour are all gossip, as is her rumoured pregnancy.

- What effect does gossip have in the novel?
- How can gossip affect our own lives and our friendships?

Sexism

The boys are distracted when the girls play touch in singlet tops and bike pants.

You're supposed to touch, not grope me.

He could have tapped her on the back or the thigh, but instead he reached around, brushing his hand across her stomach to start with, then sliding over the point of her hip.

Watch the hands.

This is touch football. What else am I going to use?

It's where you put them. (p30)

Throughout the novel how are boys shown to act towards the girls? In what ways are Alex's and Xavier's behaviour different?

Sexual Stereotypes

- Xavier is embarrassed at having won the ANZAC Day Essay Competition, especially when his teacher tells him that he has a *real talent for self expression.*(p32)
- Instead of congratulating him on his achievement, his mates ridicule him. *You're in the wrong subjects mate. Should be doing art and music and stuff.*(p32)
- Alex Murray is very different from the other boys.
- *The guy didn't play any sport. That was hard to understand, because you had to have fun sometime, get to know a few people. But not Alex Murray. As far as they could see, he preferred his books and his own company. Good luck to him.*(p20)
- Before he meets Nuala, Xavier has never been to a play.
- The younger boys in the school clearly idolize the members of the First XV.

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- Which boys usually assume the highest status within a school?
- What values or skills are regarded most highly?
- What behaviours would be accepted and what behaviours frowned upon?

When Nuala fails to fit in to the normal female stereotype, she is immediately labelled a dyke and a lesbian.

- What behaviours or attitudes do we expect from girls? Which girls usually assume the highest status? Is there a female equivalent of the First XV?

Nuala is convinced that her essay is better than Xavier's. *I suppose a place like the RSL is happier if a boy takes out first prize. It was supposed to be about war after all and that's mostly a boy's game.* (p36)

- Is there some degree of truth in this statement?

Schools are particularly notorious for encouraging gender stereotypes. Consider the following:

Have the boys been harassing you?

Some boys have said a few things. Honestly I don't take any notice. It happens everywhere. (p44)

Why would you ask for my number if you weren't planning to call?

Maybe I wanted to act like a boy. (p56)

I suppose you like action movies about the end of the world. (p56)

Typical boy, she said. Chase anything in a skirt. (p88)

- What are our expectations of Boys? Girls?
- Make a list of the behaviours in the novel that reinforce these gender stereotypes and those that contradict them.

Nuala is angered by Xavier coming to her rescue on the platform.

They could have hurt you.

And it was your job to stop them, right? Boys start fights, boys stop fights. I can take care of myself. (p48)

- Nuala will only go out with boys if she asks them out.
- Consider how the rules of dating and chivalry have changed.
- Is it acceptable for a girl to ask a boy out?
- Who should pay on a date?

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- Should a boy defend a girl in a fight?
- Should he open the door for her?
- Do you think dating in the 21st Century is harder than it used to be?

Mateship/Friendship

Xavier tries to explain his predicament to Nuala.

There's rumours going around that you're a boy and I'm bent.

Ooo, rumours. Nasty things. Could wreck your whole life.

Don't do this to me, please. I feel like I'm fading away. If guys don't respect you you're nothing. You can't even respect yourself.(p164)

- To what extent is this true?
- Whilst males tend to be less emotional than women, what role does mateship play?

Oh, go on Xave. be brave. Live on the wild side a little. You've got mates haven't you?

I don't know any more, Fee. I didn't think there was a thing in the world that I was afraid of, but lately it feels like the rug has been pulled out from under me.

I feel like I'm losing myself. That I'm a different person. If I took Nuala to the formal like that, it would be like crossing some sort of line.

Crossing the line is how you win the game, isn't it.

In footy it is. But this is different. This is so much harder.(p170)

I'm sorry Xave. I never understood how tough it would be for you. I was just thinking about me. I figured a few boys would blow up, but I didn't think your mates would have a go at you like that.

They're not my mates.(p187)

It's mates when it's football, always mates when there's some kind of enemy, but where were my mates at the formal? I needed you that night but you walked away.(p305)

- Are Xavier's mates real friends?
- Consider the notion that it is not until Xavier lets go of his mates that he is able to be true to both himself and to Nuala.

When Brother Allbecker talks to the class about death and dying no one other than Alex contributes. When he leaves the room the traditional friendship groups form and the conversation goes back to being about football, Saturday night and girls.

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When Xave goes across to Brian and Alex Brian immediately talks to Xave about football. Xavier is disappointed as he wants to participate in a real conversation. (p113)

- Why can't Xavier ever seem to have a 'real' conversation with his footy mates?

Xavier has a very different relationship with Alex who is much softer and gentler than the other boys.

Xavier found himself smiling, glad that he could tell someone who was interested instead of disapproving. (p80)

When Xave decides not to go to the formal *he knew that he would have to tell his mates soon, but when Alex Murray turned up it seemed easier to tell him first. (p179)*

- In what ways is Alex a better friend to Xavier than his mates?

After Xavier goes to the play, *it was still very much on Xavier's mind and he wanted to talk about it, but here were his mates and he was hardly going to fob them off. (p128)*

- Mateship is a celebrated Australian characteristic. Can it ever be a bad thing?
- Are mateship and friendship necessarily the same thing?

Much less is revealed about female friendships, but there are some insights, such as this.

... some of the girls were hoping Nuala would come down with a crash, and when the first pictures went around the school the girls were laughing more than the boys. But when it got nasty that was different. (p100)

- Why would the girls have initially been pleased that Nuala was being ridiculed?
- Do girls' friendships work in a similar way to those of boys?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Sydney, James Moloney grew up and was educated in Brisbane. He completed teacher training at Griffith University and also holds diplomas in Teacher Librarianship and Computer Education. He has taught in a number of Queensland State Schools as both a classroom teacher and a librarian. His experiences as a young teacher in western Queensland have had a profound effect on his writing, especially in his early novels.

James now writes full-time and has written over twenty books for children and Young Adults. His first novel, *Crossfire* was listed as a Notable Book in the CBCA awards in 1993. His short novel *Swashbuckler* won the Children's Book

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Council of Australia Book of the Year Award in 1996 and in the following year, *A Bridge to Wiseman's Cove* was named Book of the Year in the CBCA's Older Readers category. His other titles have appeared regularly on shortlists for literary prizes and children's choice awards ever since.

James says: 'I like to get inside the head of today's adolescents, to connect with the passion they have for life and understand what they care about. The challenge then is to express it in a story. That challenge keeps me young. I love it.'