

## Wavelength

A.J. Betts

THEMES: YEAR 12, AGING, GROWING UP  
YEAR LEVEL: SECONDARY SCHOOLS, 15+

### Synopsis

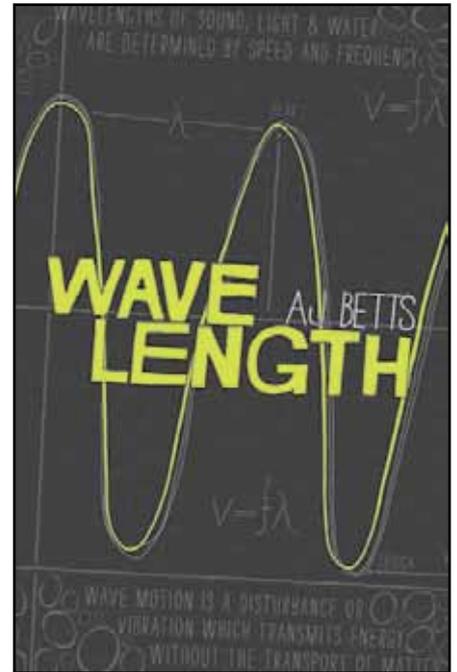
Oliver is less than calm. There's only a week of study before his final Year Twelve exams, the results of which determine everything. He and his three mates have made a pact to study geology at uni next year, but he needs 80% and it isn't going to be easy. Physics and chemistry still make no sense, and it doesn't help that his mum's muffin business — the Chunky Muffin Company — is waking him at ridiculous hours and taking over the entire house. He should be focusing on study, not looking after the chaotic household, consisting of his younger brother and sister, guinea pig, rooster, and workaholic mother.

So when his mum suggests he spends study week at his father's house down south (just out of Busselton) it seems an opportunity too good to miss.

But on the train to Bunbury, the theft of Oliver's luggage and textbooks sends Oliver's plans into turmoil. With no money or a phone, his future lies in the hands of his father Jim, and the staff and patrons of the Sunny Haven Recreation and Leisure Centre. Situated beside the Sunny Haven Retirement Village, Oliver's temporary study space is home to an array of elderly citizens, each with their own take on Oliver's revision and life in general. Study comes in different forms, and with fresh eyes.

As Oliver discovers more about Sunny Haven Estate and the people within it, his mind becomes opened to new possibilities. He begins to appreciate the kindness of small gestures, the value of wisdom, and the vulnerability all people have, especially under pressure. Most importantly, Oliver discovers that 'life is long'; that there are chances. Suddenly, the theories he's been studying — of forces, movement and energy — begin to make sense as Oliver's universe seems to expand before him.

*Wavelength* begins in Perth then continues outside of Busselton (in a fictional estate). The story spans nine days. Each of the nineteen chapters is headed by a scientific formula/theory that coincides with Oliver's study, while also suggesting an emerging theme.



## Themes

*Wavelength's* central theme is that of pressure, particularly in the final year of school. Students often experience unhealthy levels of stress, with the belief that their final exams will 'make or break' their futures. Oliver embodies this pressure in his hope for a career that he neither understands nor cares about; a career he wants to pursue because of the advice of peers, his school, society, and his own desire to escape from the perceived drudgery and shame of his mother's work. Through the course of the novel, Oliver's career motives are questioned and he begins to realise the importance of choosing a career based on passion. Life, after all, has a funny way of altering even the best-made plans. In this regard, the elderly citizens (and Jim and Emma) have much life experience to share with Oliver. The theme of pressure is enhanced metaphorically through geology (metamorphic rocks) and physics.

Other themes include the illusion of success — particularly relevant to Emma, the ex-champion swimmer — and the value of relationships and everyday kindness. Finally, it's about the opening up of possibilities that life can hold, as Oliver realises his future is unwritten, after all.

## Writing Style

The writing style is buoyant, resonating the energy of teenagers and the optimism that drives them. *Wavelength* is full of humour, wit, quirky characters and dry observations. Dialogue that 'jumps off the page' is a key feature, creating characters that are 'heard' as well as visualised. Dialogue is used to help define character and relationships, and establish tone.

*Wavelength* is written in third person (limited) perspective, allowing for some distance and objectivity while conveying emotion through dialogue and action. Present tense is useful in creating a feeling of immediacy, thereby encouraging audience interest. There is the sense of the story developing, rather than an historical recount of events.

A.J.'s writing style is influenced by her background, both as a published poet, and a teacher of English and Drama. Language is deliberately constructed to evoke imagery in a controlled way. As a result, the writing is fluid with careful use of metaphor, imagery and sensory description.

## Author Motivation

A.J. Betts says: “Having been engulfed by ‘over-planning’ with my first novel (*ShutterSpeed*), I made a conscious attempt to begin this novel in a more spontaneous fashion. *Wavelength* was born, therefore, out of my love of muffins; in particular, my intolerance for bad muffins. The character of Susan (Oliver’s mother) was developed first as a hard-working idealist who aims ‘to rescue the café-goers of Perth from muffin deficiency’. Oliver was consequently designed as a character in conflict with Susan, particularly her early baking routine. The concept of Year Twelve exams came logically, as this magnified his stress and conflict.

“Once I’d established key characters, the old instinct to plan asserted itself and I yielded. Through this extensive brainstorming process, I realised I wanted to explore the anxieties related to finishing school. To do this, I needed to create a ‘fish-out-of-water’ scenario, which led to the conception of Oliver’s father and the Sunny Haven Leisure Centre. The leisure centre was key in providing a contrast to Oliver’s pressurised school experience. With its slow routines and elderly citizens, the pool represented a ‘cleansing’ place for Oliver, where he has the choice to sink (like a rock) or swim. Unlike rock, the energy in the pool is fluid, communicated in waves. Here, Oliver learns the value of ‘going with the flow’.

“As a secondary teacher, I’ve been concerned for many years about the anxiety students feel in dealing with the pressure of exams, and the looming stress of career choice. I’ve seen the ways pressure can manifest itself, including mental illness in various degrees. As a student myself, I really struggled with choosing a career, weighed down by the momentous implications of my choices. I thought that what I chose to study would define me, and ultimately confine me for my entire working life. But adults know the truth — that life carries you along, and there are plenty of opportunities to change focus.

“In writing *Wavelength*, I hoped to express that a seventeen-year-old shouldn’t be expected to know what ‘to do’ for the rest of their lives — and nor should they feel locked into it. Life is fluid, and teenagers and adults should have the freedom to continually challenge themselves in roles they are drawn to, not just for monetary gain.”

## About the Author

A.J. was born in Bundaberg and grew up in Innisfail, Far North Queensland. When she wasn’t chewing on stalks of sugar cane, she was captivated by the magic of books. A keen reader and writer, she got the taste for fame at twelve when her first poem won her five dollars and publication in a national magazine. A.J. moved to Brisbane to study education at the Queensland University of Technology, and after a few years of teaching, she fled to the UK where she worked (as a teacher, waitress, and incompetent chalet maid) then backpacked around the world. Eventually the writing bug conquered the travel bug, and she drove herself to Perth where she sat still long enough to write her novels, *ShutterSpeed* (2008) and *Wavelength* (2010), both published by Fremantle Press. A.J. works as an English teacher in Perth. Her articles, poems and stories have been published in various media. Her biographical story of her grandfather was published in *Lines of Wisdom*, by Affirm Press (2008). She is a keen cyclist – she writes when she’s not pedalling.

## Study Notes

### A NOTE FOR TEACHERS

The following study questions/activities are divided into three sections:

1. Before Reading
2. During Reading (chapter questions)
3. After Reading (short answer questions, creative ideas, essay questions)

You may wish to pick and choose the questions to suit your class and focus.

### BEFORE READING

1. Before you read: Jot down your understanding of
  - a) What a wavelength is
  - b) What waves carry
  - c) What else the word 'wavelength' could refer to
2. Personal reflection: When you were a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?

Doctor/nurse	<input type="checkbox"/>	Teacher	<input type="checkbox"/>	Fireman/woman	<input type="checkbox"/>
Actor	<input type="checkbox"/>	Dancer	<input type="checkbox"/>	Singer/musician	<input type="checkbox"/>
Prime Minister	<input type="checkbox"/>	Artist	<input type="checkbox"/>	Celebrity	<input type="checkbox"/>
Police officer	<input type="checkbox"/>	Racing car driver	<input type="checkbox"/>	Footballer	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other:					

- a) What is your current career choice: \_\_\_\_\_
- b) If the answers for 1 and 2 are different, explain why: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- c) Do you think your choice of career might change? Give reasons that might affect this. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## DURING READING

*Chapter One. Stress = Force/Area*

- The chapter heading is 'Stress = Force/Area'. Which people feel stressed in this chapter? What are the sources of stress?
- How are Oliver and his mum (Susan) similar?
- Do you find it easy to study at home? Explain your answer.
- List three things Oliver hates about muffins.
- Why do you think Oliver wants to study geology?

*Chapter Two. Weight = Mass x Gravity*

- Name five things we learn about Oliver's dad (Jim) in this chapter?
- Besides ANZAC biscuits, list three other items that are associated with Jim?

*Chapter Three. Impulse = Force x Time*

- By the end of this chapter, how does Oliver feel about going to visit his dad?

*Chapter Four. Newton's First Law of Motion: In the absence of a net force, a body is at rest or moves in a straight line with constant speed.*

- Below is a list of the items stolen from Oliver. Put them in order of importance to him, then yourself (ie which would you be most concerned with losing). 1 = most important; 8 = least important.

Item	Importance to Oliver	Importance to you
Suitcase		
Mobile phone		
Calculator		
Textbooks		
Wallet		
Clothes		
Backpack		
Notebooks		

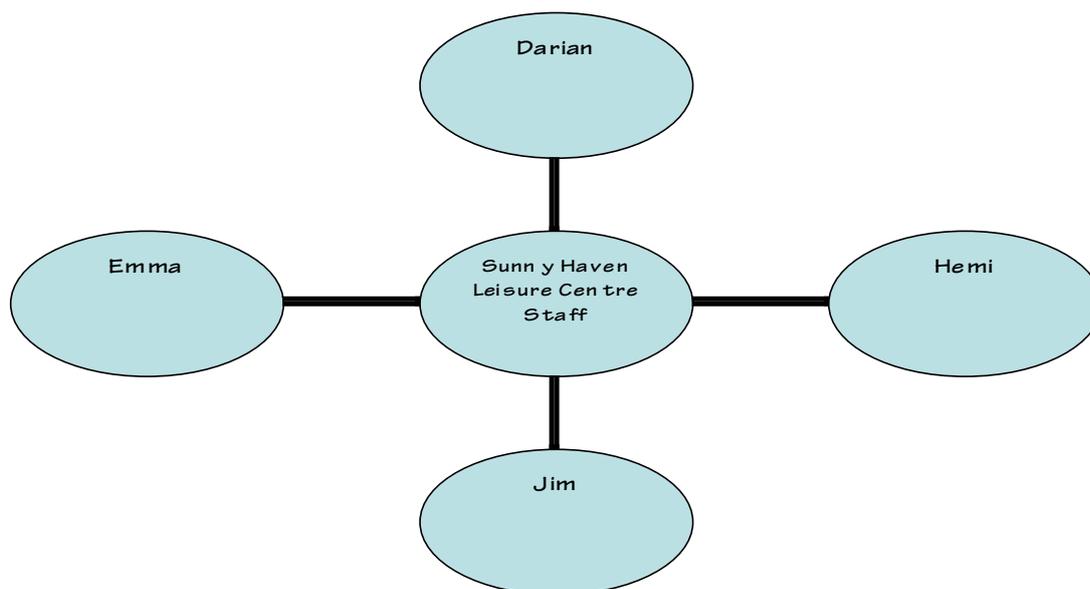
- How is Jim portrayed in this chapter? Find two pieces of evidence to show this.

*Chapter Five. Refraction: The change in direction of a wave due to a change of speed.*

- Quotes re pool (alliteration etc)
- What effect does seeing the pool have on Oliver?
- Creative task: write a 100 word paragraph describing a memory you have of being at a pool (perhaps it's at a swimming carnival, swimming lesson, birthday party, or with family. Use the senses and present tense, even though it's a flashback.

*Chapter Six. Earth's gravity = 9.81 m/sec<sup>2</sup>*

- What have we learnt about the SHLC characters so far? Fill in the diagram below:



- What have you learnt out about the SHLC itself?
- What does Oliver notice about the contents of his father's house?

*Chapter Seven. Newton's Second Law of Motion: Force equals Mass x Acceleration ( $F = ma$ )*

- How does Emma assert her power in this chapter? Propose four ways.

*Chapter Eight. Pascal's Principle: Pressure exerted anywhere in a confined fluid is transmitted equally in all directions throughout the fluid*

- What is the significance of this chapter heading?
- Why do you think the blue fairy wren is significant?
- Why doesn't Jim want Susan knowing about him?

*Chapter Nine. Any object, wholly or partially immersed in fluid, is buoyed up by a force equal to the weight of the fluid displaced by the object*

- How does Oliver view the elderly people at the pool? Use a quote from this section as evidence.
- How is this chapter heading relevant to the Sunny Haven Leisure Centre?

*Chapter Ten. Newton's Law of Universal Gravitation: Every particle in the universe attracts every other particle with a force which is directly proportional to the product of their masses and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between them*

- Give two reasons for Oliver staying.
- In this chapter, 'villas are joined like a string of pearls' in the dark. Earlier, they'd been referred to as 'crammed together like a row of knuckles'. Explain the shift in similes.
- Give your opinion: do you think Oliver's comments are offensive to Emma? Is she justified in reacting the way she does, or is she too highly strung?
- At Sunny Haven, 'there's none of that bullshit you get back in the city...there's just ... life.' Explain what else Jim likes about Sunny Haven.

*Chapter Eleven. The de Broglie Hypothesis: All matter, including light, has a wave-like nature*

- This morning in bed, some of Oliver's observations are different to previous mornings.

Suggest two things he considers in a new way.

- 'You should be so lucky, lucky, lucky, lucky.' What's the joke?
- 'Come on, it's not rocket science,' says Rudy about coffee making. What's Oliver's experience of it and how does he feel about it afterward?

*Chapter Twelve. Wavelength is determined by velocity divided by frequency ( $\lambda = v/f$ )*

- Why does Oliver 'need' Emma to help him study at the beginning of this chapter? Suggest two reasons.
- Why do you think Oliver 'gives in' and makes coffees for the women?
- 'You've got some things to learn Ol.' What do you think Jim is referring to?

*Chapter Thirteen. Kepler's First Law: The orbit of every planet is an ellipse with the sun at a focus*

- Why do you think Oliver is horrified at the idea of being a 'rock licker'?
- Doctor Dave speaks of 'passion'. List three things he's passionate about.

*Chapter Fourteen. Hooke's Law: The extension of an elastic spring is linearly proportional to its tension ( $F = kx$ )*

- Why does Oliver go to Gwendoline's house?
- 'But you might be somebody!' Why does Oliver say this to Emma, and what effect does it have?
- What is the relevance of the chapter heading to this scene?

*Chapter Fifteen. Ohm's Law: The current between two points is proportional to voltage and inversely proportional to the resistance between them ( $R = V/I$ )*

- List three things that annoy Oliver while fishing. Explain the real cause of irritation.
- What's the significance of Jim's fishing spot?
- At the barbecue, Oliver sees that 'Jim isn't lacking for anything'. Explain Oliver's changing feelings towards his father.

*Chapter Sixteen. Newton's Third Law of Motion: For every action, there is an equal, opposite reaction*

- 'He breathes it in, this dark energy he can't name.' What do you think this 'dark energy' around Oliver represents?
- How is the chapter heading relevant?
- What does Oliver envy in Emma?
- The chapter ends with Oliver floating and feeling 'weightless'. Explain why this is significant.

*Chapter Seventeen. Einstein's Theory of Relativity:  $E = mc^2$*

- When Jim and Oliver part, which is more meaningful — words or actions? Explain.

*Chapter Eighteen. Momentum = Mass x Velocity*

- What does Oliver learn about Doctor Dave?

*Chapter Nineteen. Energy cannot be created or destroyed, only changed from one type to another.*

- What is Oliver's reaction to his clothes?
- List the contents of the box Emma gives Oliver and the symbolism of each.

## AFTER READING

### Who said...?

- 'You've got one life Ol.' .....
- 'Most of the time pressure just crushes the crap out of things.' .....
- 'If I had my time again, I'd be concentrating on getting my rocks off.' .....
- 'Life's too short...!' .....
- 'Chaos is inherent in all compounded things.' .....
- 'All you can do is choose something you love.' .....
- 'Just be happy.' .....
- 'You turn up, bait up, put the line out and see what happens.' .....
- 'I'd be studying something I actually wanted to.' .....
- 'Life is long...if you're lucky, it's long.' .....
- 'We're just specks, you and I.' .....

### Short answer questions

**Motivation.** Which of these do you think drives Oliver most: Fear? Desire for wealth? Status? Pride? Peer pressure? Explain your answer in a paragraph.

**Study.** Oliver finds a 'sweet spot' at the pool for study:

*'He doesn't feel anxious the way he did last night... Here, with people and water sloshing nearby, scientific theories don't overwhelm him.'* (p172)

What does Oliver learn about his study habits? What have you learnt (if anything) about studying?

**Attitude.** Oliver wonders what the collective noun for a group of old women might be. On page 169, he considers '*a herd. A flock.*' Then while making coffees he thinks '*A swarm? A phalanx?*' Later he considers, '*A band of old women. A pride,*' (p180). Discuss how these suggest Oliver's changing views, and explain the reason for this.

**Memory.** Gwendoline's house '*seemed to be a safe-house of forgetting*'. What is suggested about memory in this novel? Refer to at least three characters.

**Value.** Oliver makes muffins for the women, while aware that '*Baking is not a skill to boast of.*' Discuss what skills Oliver values, and the basis of this judgment.

**Symbolism.** '*Is this it? Is this the man?*' (p225). Discuss in your own words the reason for Oliver's response to seeing his father's shirts. Explain the significance of this scene.

**Symbolism 2.** Each of the characters is 'weighed down' by something. Referring to two characters, discuss how rocks are used metaphorically.

**Symbolism 3.** Evaluate the use of science formulae/theories as chapter headings. Choose one heading in particular to discuss your opinion.

**Experience.** Sunny Haven provides Oliver with all kinds of new tastes and experiences. List as many types as you can.

Food:.....  
Clothing: .....  
Music: .....  
Activities/skills: .....

### *Questions for longer answers*

Discuss how symbolism has been used to convey the novel's themes.

Examine the construction of character in this novel with reference to at least three key scenes.

*'When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.'* (Buddha). Identify the 'teachers' who appear in the narrative, and the lessons (both practical and philosophical) that are conveyed.

Discuss how stylistic conventions have been used to render setting/s in the novel.

### *Creative ideas*

**Description.** Write a page describing the room of a person, without actually describing the person. Focus on objects and furniture that give a sense of the person's character. Remember to use the senses.

**Altered Scene.** How might you change the relationship between Emma and Oliver? Try rewriting alternative outcomes for them, either in the final 'pool scene' (p220) or the final scene (p235).

**Advice.** Does Oliver achieve his desired 80%? And if so, does he choose to study geology or something else? Write a letter to Oliver about what you think he should do.

**Additional Scene.** Imagine Emma and Oliver meet up again. Consider: where this might happen and when. Try writing this scene, keeping it in present tense, third person perspective.

**Additional Scene 2.** Select one of the following characters – Emma, Jim, Susan, Gwendoline or Darian – and invent a moment from his/her life. Using story or diary format, write a first person account of the event.