JABEBABE

AUSTRALIAN FILM COMMISSION

STUDYGUIDE

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'This story belongs to Jabe Babe who started small but grew and grew . . .'





Introduction

JabeBabe, a Heightened Life is a documentary written and directed by Janet Merewether and produced by Janet Merewether, Deborah Szapiro and Georgia Wallace-Crabbe. Nominated for Best Documentary at both the 2005 AFI and IF awards, the film tells the story of Jabe Bromhall – Jabe Babe, a 188cm tall dominatrix who lives with the life threatening genetic condition Marfan Syndrome.

Jabe Bromhall is an unusual woman and the film employs an unusual documentary style to tell her story. Whilst the initial appeal of this documentary may appear to be based on voyeurism the piece is not a sensationalistic portrayal of its subject. Rather, it is a sensory experience that plays with the notion of distorted reality by juxtaposing the use of colour, stylized sets and fictionalized accounts against more traditional narrative techniques to illustrate the life, motivations and world of Jabe Babe. In doing so, it asks its audience to consider matters as diverse as the nature of normality and abnormality, the eternal question of the 'what ifs' in life and the notion of truth in filmmaking.



Curriculum Links > May be a useful text for Media, Studies of Society and Environment, Health and Human Development, English and Biology. The documentary is suited to the seniorsecondarycurriculum, it will not be appropriate for all classrooms as it contains some confronting ideas and visual representations. For this reason it is important that teachers preview the text in its entirety before showing it in the classroom.

Synopsis

Jabe Babe, a Heightened Life is a reflexive documentary. The term reflexive means that the form and content of the documentary continuously draws attention to itself as a construction of reality rather than a realistic representation of it. Elements such as reconstruction, direct address and fictionalized sequences give way to parody and moments of heart wrenching openness in this overtly stylized production.

Jabe gave permission for the filmmaker to access her medical records for the purpose of research, discussion and filming. The documentary contains interviews with Jabe's doctors a well as informational segments constructed in the form of old black and white educational films. These are interspersed with monologues to camera, highly stylized fictional episodes and segments filmed at significant locations or with significant people in Jabe's life. The film uses non-naturalistic framing, colour and elaborate theatrical sets to construct, reinforce and emphasize its messages in an engaging manner.

Why study this film?

When I think of my childhood now, two things really stand out. Firstly, I was a freak. I just felt and looked so different from everybody else. Secondly, I was told many, many times that I would die very young so, you know, it is no wonder that I chose the career that I have.

In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in documentaries. A far cry from the worthy educational and often dull programs of the past, modern documentaries are popular with audiences both in cinemas and on television. *Jabe Babe* is an example of the modern documentary, it is entertaining, provocative and educational.

One cannot deny that many will watch this film because of simple human inquisitiveness. Most students will be interested because of its treatment of difference, the abnormal and the sex industry. This film is a sound vehicle for the discussion of such difficult subjects because of the openness and sensitivity with which it treats these subjects. Jabe may have a rare genetic condition and work as a dominatrix but it is not this that remains after viewing the film, it is our understanding of her difficult journey and the grace with which she approaches her memory of a childhood in which she was separated from her mother, often abused and largely spent in foster care.

Jabe Babe is a very interesting film to teach about the notion of constructed truth. Students will enjoy the representations of Jabe's world and discussing the truths embedded in the text. As an educational tool it is unabashedly subjective in the manner in which it approaches Jabe's life and condition. As a documentary it is a visual feast in which students will easily identify the elements of construction designed to position the audience to understand, sympathize and empathize with Jabe's life.

A MEDIA, HUMANITIES BASED APPROACH TO *JABE BABE*



Before Viewing

Ask students to consider the following:

- What is the purpose of documentary?
- Why do filmmakers make documentaries?
- Who watches documentaries and why do audiences choose these films?
- In recent years documentary films have enjoyed a resurgence in popularity, why do you think this is the case?
- What documentaries have you seen recently?



Realism in documentaries

It is a commonly held belief that documentaries should be truthful and realistic in the portrayal of their subjects. This is termed **realism**, the film should be as realistic as possible. However most filmmakers and media students know that the very question 'What is real?' is problematic indeed.

Documentaries, like all media products, are constructed from the lives of the subject. These selections are arranged according to the codes and conventions of the media form and the intentions of the filmmaker, producer and, in many but by no means all documentaries, the subject. Documentaries represent aspects of the subject but are not real in the way life is real. It is simply not possible to create a documentary that reveals every aspect of its subject, life is too complex and, mostly, too dull.

- Should documentaries be realistic?
- What does realism mean when we think of documentaries?

Your school and local library will both have collections of documentaries. Have a look at some of them to note the different ways subject matter can be presented.

Medical documentaries, current affairs segments and reality television are popular subgenres of the documentary form. Watch a few programs such as RPA, Today Tonight, Catalyst and Extreme Makeover to see how medical matters are covered by such texts. You will find that there are common themes and features in much medical programming. These include:

- The medical miracle
- The personal journey
- A struggle against the odds
- The victim of circumstance who deserves a break
- The happy ending

Similarly there are codes and conventions common to the construction of medical programs and segments. These include:

- The expert in the field
- Interviews set in front of medical machinery or models of body parts
- Operations and medical procedures
- Props and costumes such as medical equipment, the white coat and surgical clothing
- The use of colour to symbolize life and death
- Music and sound effects to manipulate audience emotional engagement
- Constructing the program so that the audience must wait until the end of the program to learn of the outcome of any medical procedures.

Brainstorm more codes and conventions common to the medical documentary genre.

Documentary form

Documentaries can be constructed in a range of forms. These include the **expository documentary** in which a narrator addresses the audience directly to present an exposition, or explanation of what they are seeing on screen.



The **observational documentary** allows the combination of vision and sound to tell the story which is then interpreted by the audience. It creates the impression of realism by allowing the story to unfold seemingly naturally, ignoring questions such as why the subject has been chosen for the documentary in the first place and what happens to the subject during those periods that they are not being filmed?

In **first person documentaries** a subject constructs a story about themselves of a subject of personal interest. Of all documentary forms these are considered the most subjective.

Reflexive documentaries are those which consciously draw attention to the way in which they are constructed and question the notion of truth and authority in documentary filmmaking.

Docudramas are a recent form in which segments are constructed or reconstructed, perhaps as a narrative, in order to illustrate subject matter that cannot be obtained in any other form.

Docusoaps are the newest documentary form in which narratives are constructed from the day to day lives of those appearing in them.

- What documentaries have you seen that conform to these forms?

What about *Jabe Babe*?

Whilst primarily employing the reflexive style, *Jabe Babe* is an amalgam of many documentary styles. Janet Merewether has decided to mix and match styles to both illustrate and mirror the topsy turvy life of its subject.

- When watching the film try to identify the different styles used. What do each contribute to their particular segment of Jabe's story?



After Viewing

Students will need time to think about *Jabe Babe* in terms of both content and construction. Allow time for individual reactions and questions. Students may be reluctant to discuss some of topics and issues raised by the film. One way around this is to ask students to write down one or more comments or questions which can be collected and addressed without identifying the student. This technique will provide a baseline for dealing with student interests and understanding. Another technique might be the use of guided questions.

Nature or Nurture?

Regardless of whether or not you were born perfect you can easily develop any abnormality … fate is what it is and there are certain things you can't control … I think that you should love and want your child no matter who or what it looks like.





- What makes us into the people we are? How much of our personality and the opportunities we have in our life are dependent on our genetic inheritance and how much is due to the circumstances of our upbringing?
- What kind of life would you lead if:
- Your mother was mentally unstable?
- You didn't know who your father was?
- You were fostered out from the age of seven?
- Your foster parents treated you very badly?
- You were abused as a child?
- You were abnormally tall?
- You had Marfan syndrome?
- You were told frequently as a child that you would be dead before you were twenty-five?
- You had open heart surgery in your teens?
- You got pregnant, had a termination and were told that you should never have a child?
- You survived into your thirties?
- You had no qualifications?
- You worked in the sex industry?

Working in groups, students can consider each of the questions above or groups can be allocated several questions randomly and asked to respond. This will develop an understanding that life is not always able to be planned.

Scientists have long argued about the relative importance of nature and nurture. Research the topic and present your findings in poster form.

Most of us have a genetic propensity to one or more disorders. Whether these disorders develop or not can be due to luck or good management. Discuss your genetic inheritance with your family.

- Jabe doesn't know her father so half of her genetic inheritance is a mystery. How does this affect Jabe? This situation is not uncommon, many people don't know about their mother or father. What impact do you think this might have on their lives?
- Jabe says several times during the film that her choice of career is due to both Marfan syndrome and the circumstances of her upbringing. What do you think?
- What is Jabe's view on genetic testing? What is your view? For a fictionalized account of the dystopian future that genetic testing might bring watch *Gattaca* (Andrew Niccol, 1997). This film, set in the 'not too distant future' paints a bleak picture of the possibilities of this newly available technology.

I was under the impression that I would be dead before I turned twenty-five so I kind of took that in my stride and did everything I wanted to do.

- During the course of the documentary Jabe learns that much of what she has been told about Marfan syndrome is out of date. This information is significant in the way she must now view her life. What do you think is likely to be Jabe's future? Support your views using information from the documentary.

My life didn't start off with a lot of care and love but I have had some extraordinary people in my life who have really shown me love and nurturing.

- Jabe is clearly of the view that with love one can overcome life's difficulties. What do you think?

From the age of seven until seventeen I had eight foster families … I never fit in with anybody's family because I don't know how to fit in with a family.

- *Jabe Babe* has much to say about family. Study the film and note all the references to and representations of family. What do these reveal about Jabe's view of families. How does her view compare with your own?

Filmic structure

- The stylistic elements of Jabe Babe are vital to the success of the documentary. They do not just construct her story but shape the way the audience is positioned to read what they see and hear. How are we as the audience positioned in relation to the characters, events and point of view of the text?

Visual elements

View several minutes with the sound turned down. Write down your impressions about how the visual elements of construction shape our understanding of the text. You may like to consider the following:



- Colour
- Sets and setting
- *Mise en scène*
- Framing
- Camera angles
- Lighting
- Rhythm and pace of editing
- Costume

- Colour is used to mark and contrast different segments of the film. Jabe is shot with very soft and warm lighting and also using a high contrast blue filter. Why does the filmmaker choose to each of these effects? What is the intention of the saturated paint palette colours used in the model suburban and city sets?
- Analyse the construction of the scenes in which Jabe removes the roof of the model houses to reveal a screen within the screen. What does this device reveal about Jabe's view of her life and childhood? Jabe is 'playing' with her surroundings, why?
- Camera angles are an important tool in constructing meaning. How are they used in this film?
- The film consciously contrasts fantasy and real life settings, what does this say about Jabe?

Several scenes are reconstructions or fictional accounts of Jabe's experiences. In addition historical footage from the middle of the 20th century is employed as a storytelling device.

- These scenes are shot in black and white, why? What is the effect of this on audiences?
- In the scenes where Jabe meets her geneticist framing, lighting, colour and tone construct Jabe the geneticist as very similar in appearance. What is the message that the filmmaker is trying to make and how do these scenes contrast with the reconstructions of medical procedures?

Sound design

- Close your eyes and note the construction of the soundtrack. How do dialogue, diagetic sound, music, sound effects, build our sympathy for and understanding of Jabe?
- The dialogue is mainly in monologue form employing a combination of direct address to camera and voice over. Listen to several segments to note the effect of the deliberate manipulation of sound quality in each. What is the effect of this construction on the audience?

Further topics for exploration or writing

- *Jabe Babe* asks its audience to consider their views about the nature of normality and abnormality. What do you think? Conduct a class debate on the topic that 'We are all both normal and abnormal.'
- It is not only the medical profession that has a professional interest in abnormality, over the past 100 years the entertainment industry has demonstrated the commercial success of films that deal with the differently abled. Research the history of such films. How has the representation of disability changed over the years? To what do you attribute these changes?
- *Jabe Babe* shows us that we can never know the truth in documentary, all lives are constructed for film. Does this matter?
- Education, entertainment or voyeurism? Texts such as *Jabe Babe* reveal as much about the audience as they do about their subject. Evaluate the motivations of *Jabe Babe's* audience.
- The science of genetics is a two edged sword. With reference to *Jabe Babe* discuss the benefits and costs of knowing one's genetic makeup.
- Some would argue that the visual design of Jabe Babe is a more important storytelling device than Jabe's monologues. What do you think?

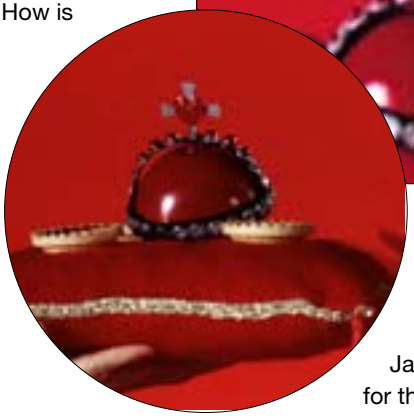
A SCIENCE AND HEALTH AND PE APPROACH TO *JABE BABE*



Before Viewing

1. Discuss the following issues related to body size.

- What is a normal body size?
- How have body sizes changed over the centuries?
- In what ways does having an unusual body size affect a person? At what stages of development is this most critical?
- What is dwarfism? How is it caused?
- What is gigantism? How is it caused?



2. Discuss or research the meanings of the following words:

- Genetic disorder
- schizophrenic
- connective tissue
- aorta
- surrogacy
- gene
- Marfan syndrome
- chromosome
- mitral valve
- embryo
- syndrome

3. Pre-implantation Genetic Diagnosis

- This medical procedure is raised in the film. Research what it means and discuss its use in different situations.

After Viewing

Genetically inherited characteristics

There are a number of genetically inherited characteristics that cause faults in the way our bodies work.

Jabe is a carrier for the genetically inherited disease, called Marfan Syndrome.

Some inherited characteristics are regulated by a single gene, some by several genes, and others by whole chromosomes. The inherited 'faults' can range from almost harmless (such as colour blindness) to life threatening (such as Marfan Syndrome).

- Explain Dominant/Recessive inheritance, and explain how Jabe could have got Marfan Syndrome.
- Marfan Syndrome is said to be an 'autosomal dominant disorder'. What does this mean?
- On which chromosome is the gene that causes Marfan Syndrome found?
- What are the possible genetic implications for Jabe's children if she were to have any?
- Marfan Syndrome affects about 1 in 3000 people in the population. Research other genetically inherited diseases such as sickle cell anaemia, cystic fibrosis or Huntington's disease. How common are these in the population compared with Marfan Syndrome.
- Recent studies have shown that some people may have a genetic make-up that makes them more likely to get certain forms of cancer. Find out more about genetic links to cancer, in particular colon and ovarian cancers.

Your body's glue

In the film, Jabe says that she is missing a 'glue gene'.

- Discuss what she means by the term 'glue'.
- Fibrillin is the protein that the missing 'glue gene' codes for. What is the role of fibrillin in your body?
- Research and list the symptoms of Marfan Syndrome that arise from



having a missing 'glue gene'.
- Which of the symptoms can be treated and how?
- Discuss the seriousness of each symptom and decide which (in your opinion) is the most serious and why.

Your heart

- At seventeen, Jabe had open heart surgery. Many Marfan sufferers die from sudden heart attacks at an early age. (Refer to the interview on Radio National at the link below).
- An interactive cross section of the heart can be found at **http://www.tmc.edu/thi/anatomy.html**
- Use this or other references to find out more about the heart defects that are found in people with Marfan Syndrome.
- Where is the Aorta and what does it do?
- Where is the mitral valve; and what is its function?
- What happens to both of these parts of the heart in people with Marfan?
- What surgical procedures can help in these cases?
- What lifestyle changes can also help their survival?

Jabe's Baby

Today it is possible to diagnose embryos for virtually every gene that is known to cause disease.

There are two difficulties Jabe must overcome if she is to have babies. Firstly, she may pass the disease onto her children and secondly she may not be able to withstand the strain on her body of a pregnancy and childbirth.

- Why did Jabe terminate a pregnancy?

Jabe is considering surrogacy as the only way she can have children.

Pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) could also be used to ensure her baby does not have Marfan.

- What is meant by the term 'surrogacy'?
- Explain how Pre-implantation genetic diagnosis takes place

Genetic Screening

Read the interview on the *Health Report* website (see References).

- Are all cases of Marfan Syndrome obvious?
- Name one or two famous people who have had Marfan Syndrome.
- What is genetic screening and when is it used?
- Many people have concerns about genetic screening. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of this process.

References

http://www.marfan.org The National Marfan Organisation (USA)

http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/bv.fcgi?call=bv.View..ShowSection&rid=gnd.section.247 The National Center for Biotechnology Information (USA)

http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Marfan_syndrome?OpenDocument Better Health Channel (Victorian Government)

http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/8.30/helthrpt/stories/s139985.htm An interview on the *Health Report* on Radio National (Australia) featuring a mother whose child died as a result of Marfan Syndrome, and also a medical expert in the field.

http://supportmarfan.com/about/marfan-syndrome.php A personal account from a person with Marfan Syndrome

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