

# Reading Guide

to Christine Love's visual novel

**don't take it personally, babe,  
it just ain't your story**

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## The Author and the Novel

Christine Love is a young author of visual novels, internet serials and independent games. "Don't take it personally, babe, it just ain't your story" appeared in early 2011 and was completed in just one month.

It tells, or rather, lets you play the story of a high school teacher named John Rook and his students in an American private high school in the year 2027. New to the school and the profession of teaching, Rook tries to be a cool teacher, but could hardly be more helpless when confronted with all the teenage drama that takes place in his class. During the semester, one of his students tries to seduce him, one disappears and is believed to have committed suicide, a boy has his coming out and falls in love with a heterosexual classmate, one student is bullied and a broken lesbian relationship needs fixing. What is more, Rook is asked by the school to secretly access and monitor his students' social network activities to prevent bullying. Moreover, the books he has his students read in literature class seem to rub off on the plot of the novel.



## Reading / Playing the Novel in English Classes

There are plenty of good reasons why to read this visual novel with an English class. Not only will students be very familiar with the setting and the many subplots of the story, but they are also likely to relate to many of the themes that are developed throughout the course of the novel, such as homosexuality and homophobia, first love with both its bright and dark sides, jealousy, online bullying, loneliness and shifting concepts of privacy in the age of social networking. Moreover, visual novels offer a very interesting reading experience as in the course of the story you have to make certain important decisions for the main character, which makes it possible that the story of one student takes a slightly different course than that of another.

While the novel can be read at almost any level at Gymnasium, discussions of it will be most fruitful with advanced classes who have some experience with more challenging literary concepts. The novel refers to a number of literary texts, such as Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night", Edgar Allan Poe's ghost stories, as well as Japanese contemporary fiction, and uses motives of those works in its own plot. Moreover, metafiction and foreshadowing are discussed as literary techniques in the course of the story, and are at the same time used by the author to narrate the story. In short, the storytelling is at times rather complex and would be interesting to discuss as well.

"Don't take it personally, babe" will take three to five hours to read/play. It is therefore possible to work with the novel for only a couple of lessons, if time is scarce. However, as discussing plot twists and different courses the plot can take is quite interesting, the novel also lends itself well to episodic reading, say, one or two chapters per week. In the following guide, there are suggestions for what to do in class with each of the chapters.

The novel is available (for free) on

<http://scoutshonour.com/donttakeitpersonallybabeitjustaintyourstory/>

## About this guide

The intention of this guide is not to provide lesson plans or elaborate classroom activities, but simply to give a number of suggestions of what could be discussed, presented or given as writing tasks when dealing with the individual chapters. At the end, however, you will find an overview of the tasks I chose to do with my class, as well as the task sheets I used for them. The guide contains a number of heavy **spoilers**, which is why I strongly suggest to read/play the novel first, before reading through the guide.

## Chapter I: "The trouble with trials"

The first chapter introduces us to the eight characters of the novel as well as to the setting. John Rook, a middle-aged, twice divorced former computer specialist starts his first day as an English teacher for an 11<sup>th</sup> grade class at a private school called Lake City Academy in 2027.

While we are introduced to most of the major conflicts between the students, the climax of this first chapter is Rook's conversation with Arianna, the student who has a crush on him. In case the reader decides that Rook starts an affair with her, the chapter ends with what is probably the most uncomfortable scene of the novel. Therefore, discussing the Arianna sequence must be an important part of dealing with this chapter.

### Discussion Topics and possible Tasks

#### 1. Analysing the Amie profiles

One of the interesting things about reading a visual novel is that you don't create the characters in your imagination, but see them "in person". A few sentences into the novel, you will already be able to have a look at the characters' profile on their social network website (called Amie, but clearly based on Facebook). On there, you will see their profile picture and read a short description of themselves as well as other information:



A useful first task when reading the first chapter is therefore to take notes about first impressions of the seven student characters. What does their online profile say about them? What do they think is important to communicate about themselves? How much information are they willing to share online? Students could either be asked to look at all profiles, or to look at one or two of them in more detail and later report their ideas back to the class. This will also help them to memorise all the names and be clear about who is who.

#### 2. Internet Identity vs. "Real Life" Identity

After looking at the profiles, students will see all characters in "real life", as they enter Rook's classroom. They will immediately notice that it is hard at first to recognise some of the faces that they have just seen on the profile pages. One question students could think about is therefore for what reason the author chose to make the students look different on their social network pages. In addition, students may be asked to reflect on their own social network profiles. How did they choose their profile pictures? What do they want to communicate with their online profiles and is their internet identity different from how they see themselves in real life?

### 3. Kendall, Charlotte and Taylor

One of the first things the main character and the reader get to know about the students is the break-up of Charlotte and Kendall, which Taylor is commenting on online. The conversations regarding the relationship of the two lesbian girls are a good way to analyse the three characters.

### 4. Metafiction, foreshadowing and 12channel

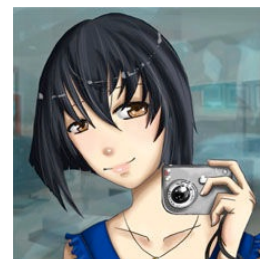
The concept of metafiction is introduced in one of Rook's first literature classes. He explains the concept to his students by referring to the novel "Chain Mail", which the class reads. Without having read the novel, this might be a bit hard to follow and should be illustrated with another example.

It makes sense to discuss the idea of metafiction as early as chapter one, because it helps explaining the *channel12* episode. Before the climax of the chapter, Rook reads a thread in an online forum called *12channel*, where students discuss a visual novel that contains a sex scene with a teenager. About an hour later, Rook will have the possibility to start an affair with one of his students, which suddenly gives the *12channel* episode meaning and suggests the discussions on the forum function as a Greek chorus to the events in the novel. Thus, it is also an early example of how the novel uses the literary technique of foreshadowing, which will become important later on.

When preparing the first chapter for class, students could be asked to make notes of their initial reactions to the *12channel* episode. They could try to summarise what it is about and think about why the author chose to make the reader read that particular thread in the forum at that particular point of the story. However, the episode could also be re-read (or rather: re-shown) in class and discussed in hindsight.

### 5. Arianna

The chapter closes with Rook talking to Arianna, who has a crush on him, in his office. When they leave, the reader has to make a first and important decision; he can try to ignore Arianna's advances and leave on his own, or accept her offer to share an umbrella with her and walk home together. If he decides for the latter, he will have to make another decision soon after: whether to kiss her or not.



It is crucial to deal with this scene in some detail, not only because the topic of a teacher starting an affair with a student is delicate, but also because part of what makes reading "Don't take it personally, babe" interesting is to reflect on why one makes which decision for the main character. When discussing the first chapter, therefore, ask who in your class allowed the kiss between Rook and Arianna to happen and who didn't. Afterwards, put two students who allowed it in a group with two who prevented it. Then, let them discuss what made them choose one or the other, and whether (and how) their decision was based on their personal views on such a relationship.

Quite probably, some students who allowed for the kiss to happen will have regretted it afterwards. Discuss why that is as well, and make sure to make them aware that the unsavoury picture of the kiss was a result of their decision. Reflecting on how far you are responsible for uncomfortable or unethical plot twists will be important later on.

### 6. Interactive storytelling and literary "hypertext"

As "Don't take it personally, babe" is likely to be the first visual novel that students read, it might be useful to reflect on the genre and the difference to regular novels. One likely early response will be that clicking on the new messages that constantly interrupt the

main story is confusing and tiring. It could be interesting to address this in class and analyse how exactly the genre challenges traditional reading habits. Some students might also start to see the allure in the, at least partly, non-linear, hypertextual storytelling.

Another typical characteristic of visual novel is its interactivity. Find out whether students liked taking decisions for the main character, and how they reacted when they first had to choose a response for him. Later on, it will be important to realise to what extent you are making the decisions in the role of the character and to what extent you are making your own decisions.

## Chapter II: "Nolan is an Island entire of itself"

Nolan is the focal character of the second chapter. Rook overhears a conversation between him and Taylor early on in the chapter, and at its end has to decide what advice to give to him regarding Akira's proposal to Nolan to be friends and maybe more.

### Discussion Topics and possible Tasks

#### 1. Nolan

Apart from Taylor, Nolan is the student Rook dislikes the most, due to his lack of interest in the books the class is reading. In the first chapter, Nolan was one of the characters the reader got to know least about. Therefore, discussing Nolan's conflict in some detail after having read chapter two makes a lot of sense. Taylor should be part of the discussion, as the relationship with her is Nolan's largest piece of baggage he brings into the friendship (and later relationship) with Akira.



It is likely that students will be much more understanding and sensible to Nolan's problem than Rook is. Discussing how readers' perception of Rook changes could therefore be an interesting part of discussing Nolan as well.

#### 2. Akira

Akira has his coming out early on in chapter two and is the second most important character of chapter two. Having two female parents, his family situation could be a good starting point to address interesting questions about homosexual couples: What do students see as advantages or disadvantages of having to parents of the same sex? What prejudices are there about homosexual parents? Will having homosexual parents influence one's sexuality?



#### 3. 12channel Episode

Chapter two's *12channel* episode has Rook read a forum thread in which two characters of manga series are discussed, and the question is raised as to how important it is for readers to identify with a character in order to like him or her. Having found in chapter one that *12channel* acts as the novel's Greek chorus, one question that needs to be answered is in how far that thread is commenting on the events in chapter two. When reading the *12channel* discussion, students could therefore be asked to think about who the characters discussed in that thread resemble in the novel and whether identifying with them is important to enjoy the reading.

## Chapter III: "Your real problem iz ..."

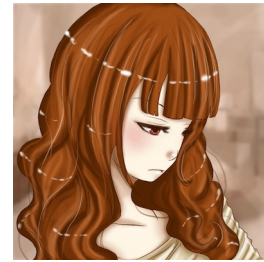
The third chapter is rather short and apart from Isabella's story, there is little to discuss. However, Isabella's disappearance and supposed suicide come as quite a surprise to first time readers, who are likely to regret the loss of somebody who was just about to become a very interesting character and has so far been rather mysterious.

### Discussion Topics and possible Tasks

#### 1. Isabella

One of the few things we know about Isabella is the story of her first love. Not much can be made of the story itself, but students who will want an explanation for her suicide are likely to try to find one there. To make her reappearance in chapter seven all the more surprising, it is not a bad idea to speculate about Isabella's suicide quite actively.

Isabella's story might also be a good starting point for writing exercises. Her story could be expanded to a short story or even a short play, or a farewell letter of either Isabella or her childhood friend could be written. It could also be interesting to guess what she had wanted to talk about with Rook during the meeting that never took place.



#### 2. The Art of Dying and 12channel

The *12channel* episode of chapter three discusses ways to let characters die and thus offers another great example of the novel's flirting with metafiction. If here is time, a lesson on dying in literature or film might be interesting here; examples of character deaths could be shown to the class and effects on the audience of different "stagings" of death could be discussed. If students are not yet familiar with Aristotle's idea of *eleos* and *phobos* (pity and fear) as the necessary effects of tragedy, there may also be time for that here.

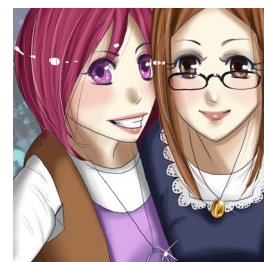
## Chapter IV: "A whole Lotte of Love"

In chapter four, the reader has to decide whether Rook should encourage Charlotte to get back with Taylor. This is an important decision, because by encouraging her, the reader will experience one of the most touching moments of the novel. In chapter five, Rook starts reading "Twelfth Night" with his class, and a number of similarities between the play and the events in the chapter can be found and discussed.

### Discussion Topics and possible Tasks

#### 1. Kendall and Charlotte

While the love story between Nolan and Akira has its touching moments, the one between Charlotte and Kendall feels more heartfelt. The two could hardly be more unlike; Charlotte is quiet, restrained and ambitious, Kendall impulsive, loud and eccentric. Still, the two just seem to belong together, and helping them finding back together is one of the things readers will be proud of having done. Using their story as a starting point for a discussion on whether and why "opposites attract" could make for an



interesting lesson; a writing exercise seems also possible (e.g. retell their story as a fairy tale or write out the scene of Charlottes declaration of love from Kendall's point of view).

## 2. Twelfth Night, cross-dressing and blurring sexual identities

Rook's students react surprisingly well to the movie version of "Twelfth Night" that he watches with them in class. The students, three, or three and a half, of whom live their homosexuality very openly and especially Kendall and Akira like to play with gender stereotypes and seem to enjoy the idea of cross-dressing, while Nolan seems comfortable not having to decide whether he is gay or straight and later on decides to even be both. This could be taken as a starting point to as discussion of whether femininity and masculinity are still important as concepts of identity, how far homosexuality is accepted an why homophobia is still a widespread, persistent problem even in otherwise very tolerant, multicultural societies.

## 3. Arianna and Rook

Readers who have allowed Rook to start an affair with Arianna in the first chapter will read the second (slightly less) uncomfortable scene of them spending time together as a couple. If there are students in the class who have read this scene, it seems useful to have them report on in and discuss what the two seem to get out of their so far rather chaste relationship. As Taylor and Arianna will have a rather explicit and slightly shocking conversation about sex later on, it is worth noting that the reality of Arianna's affair with her teacher is a lot more innocent.

Readers who made Rook reject Arianna's advances in chapter one will see Arianna begging Rook for some kindness in this chapter, as the loss of Isabella, who was her best friend, weighs heavily on her. Here, deciding what is the right thing to do for Rook is a lot harder than it was before; hugging and comforting his student seems just as wrong as refusing to help her in such difficult times. Maybe, a third kind of reaction could be found in discussing this further.

## 4. Romantic Comedies and 12channel

This chapter's *12channel* thread discusses romantic comedies and their value. While some commentators lament the formulaic structure of classic romantic comedy, other try to justify it by arguing that they function as escapist entertainment, which probably needs to be formulaic. This might be a starting point for a discussion on the function, value and merits of trivial literature and lowbrow entertainment.



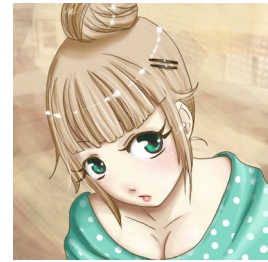
## Chapter V: "Desu on two legs"

Chapter Five focuses on Taylor and her last, desperate attempt to win Nolan back as her boyfriend. While the class and Rook are shocked and deeply angered by her selfishness and cruelty, her violent self-defence (in case the reader decides for Rook to approach her gently) makes the reader wonder whether there isn't a tragic side to her character as well.

### Discussion Topics and possible Tasks

#### 1. Taylor

Taylor's scheme to convince Akira that Nolan is not really interested in him but pretends to like him in order to spite her is almost successful, despite the fact that it was not well thought through. Taylor, who is likely to never have had the reader's sympathy, is finally revealed as the baddie of the class. While the abuses she gets from her classmates for her attempt to separate Nolan and Akira seem understandable and justified, Rook's harsh treatment of her seems inadequate, considering he is her homeroom teacher. Whether Taylor is a villain or an unfortunately tragic figure is a good question for a debate, in which some students could defend and some accuse her. Taylor's self defence, however, will only be triggered if the reader let's Rook talk to her. If he decides for the harsh approach during which she is not allowed to tell her side of the story, she simply leaves.



#### 2. Twelfth Night

At the beginning of the chapter, Rook asks his students whether the end of "Twelfth Night" is funny or uncomfortable. This undoubtedly refers to the role of Malvolio, who leaves the stage angrily at the end of the play. Like Taylor, he can be seen as a misunderstood character, and Rook's question concerns her as well as it does him. If students know the play or have informed themselves about it, the two characters could be compared in more detail, and the role of jealousy in the novel and in the play discussed in detail.

#### 3. Ghosts and Edgar Allan Poe

Chapter five also sees the appearance of the ghost that tortures Rook with the question of whether he could have stopped Isabella from killing herself. Fittingly, at the time the ghost appears, Rook's class is reading stories by Edgar Allan Poe. If there is time, it might be interesting to read one of Poe's stories to point out connections, ideally one of the texts where guilt is personified (e.g. "William Wilson") or a person starts to imagine things as a result of guilt (e.g. "The Tell-Tale Heart").

#### 4. 12channel and Taylor's redemption

The *12channel* episode of this chapter has Rook read a thread which discusses whether a fictional character can be forgiven and how it could possibly redeem itself. It is quite obvious that this discussion is a comment on Taylor and the reader's attitude towards her. Taylor's conflict is never really resolved, although she comes back in the next chapter with good intentions. If students are interested in Taylor's tragic side, some room could be given to the question of if and how she could redeem herself and change her life to her satisfaction. Writing exercises also seem like a good way to explore Taylor, for example by writing her diary.



## Chapter VI: Flowers before boys

Depending on whether the reader has encouraged Nolan's and Akira's or Kendall's and Charlotte's relationship more, chapter six has either of the two couples going to a school dance, spending the night together, and arriving late in class. There is little to discuss here, especially if the couple the chapter focuses on is Nolan and Akira.

In case the reader has brought Charlotte and Kendall back together, however, this chapter contains one of the most interesting moments of the novel: Charlotte's photo shooting. In any case, this should be discussed, even if the majority of students has not read/played it.



### Discussion Topics and possible Tasks

#### 1. Charlotte's sexy photos

At the beginning of the chapter, Rook reads a conversation on Amie between Charlotte and Kendall, in which Kendall suggests to Charlotte to take erotic pictures of herself and send it to her, something which she apparently has already done at some point. Charlotte does so and sends Kendall a link to the pictures, which is, however, password protected. The password, Charlotte says, is Kendall's middle name, which we don't come across anywhere in the game.

If the reader searches the internet, he will find a very brief blog entry on Christine Love's homepage: "Kendall's middle name is Morgan. Kendall Morgan Flowers". Typing in 'Morgan', the reader will be able to see "pictures" of Charlotte posing, the last of which shows her bare-breasted. This is interesting because while all other uncomfortable decisions in the novel can be excused by arguing that one was "in character" and thus doing what they thought Rook would do. Here, the responsibility lies with reader alone; he or she decided to see pictures of a nude 16-year old, not Rook. This makes the question why Christine Love decided to place the password "outside" the game pretty interesting.

## Chapter VII: Pawn captures Rook

The final chapter brings three big revelations: Isabella did not commit suicide, the ghost that haunted Rook was part of a practical joke played on him by Kendall and Akira, and the students knew all along that Rook was reading their Amie conversations. All those revelations deserve to be dealt with in some detail, though the last one may be the most interesting one to discuss.



## **Discussion Topics and possible Tasks**

### **1. Kendall's and Akira's presentation and practical joke**

Kendall's and Akira's end of term presentation on a literary topic turns out to be about foreshadowing, a literary technique Rook has explained to his students during his classes, and Christine Love has used throughout the novel. While the presentation itself may not be as clever as Kendall and Akira think it is, it still is a first climax of the chapter because it reveals that Rook has greatly underestimated his students, as well as that the reader's perception of the students was probably blurred quite a bit as well by focalising through Rook as the main character.

The two other revelations also contribute to this fundamental change in perception. Many readers may have stopped to identify or sympathise with Rook long before chapter seven, but the finale makes it clear that at the end of term, they all get the better of him and make him appear pretty pathetic. If Rook has not been discussed so far, it is high time to do so. If he has been discussed, the discussion might focus more on how the story has manipulated the reader's perception and much of what Rook thought was probably received too uncritically.

### **2. Privacy in the age of social networking**

This is, of course, one of the main themes of the novel. Many statements made in the conversation between Rook Akira and Akira's mother are worth discussing in some detail. Whether or not the novel's claim of privacy being a fading concept is true is for the students to decide, and therefore they should lead the discussion, not the teacher.

### **3. Evaluation**

There are many reasons why the final discussion of the novel should end with a thorough evaluation of the novel by the students. After all, it is, although set in the future, a novel about their generation, their world, their social environment, about the fears we adults have about their generation and about the age they will grow up in and give shape to. In short, nothing seems more interesting than knowing if students could relate to the novel or not.