

*In this YA novel we follow David Hickman, an aspiring teenage author who seems to attract enemies despite (or because of) his good nature. He has already been beaten up by a teacher (Mr Daltrey) for losing him his job and in this end-of-term scene has to cross swords with his nemesis, the gorgeously evil Rebecca Fletcher.*

“Haven’t done a stroke of work today.” Nicola Hasty was pulling a never-ending string of gum from her lips and winding it round her forefinger.

“No change there.” Emily Marr continued scribbling something very black on her folder.

“Oi, cheeky.” Nicola gave her a light slap on the shoulder.

“Class!” Seventeen heads popped up. Emily made a very deep, very important line and joined them.

Miss Dixon dropped a stack of papers onto the front table, dislodging a puff of dust. Her hawk-like gaze swooped through the class, settling on Nicola who was munching her gum. Miss Dixon’s left eyebrow raised and a bulge moved along Nicola’s jaw line and down her neck. The teacher shuddered and let her eyes find the middle distance.

“Because of the impending festivities, we’ll be doing things differently this session. Mr Jacobs is absent until next year, spending Christmas with his wife and children in Canada.”

Nicola leaned over to confide in Emily. “He’s bloody selfish. I’d get a bollocking from Mr Kelly if I tried that.”

“... will be joining us today, so please make them welcome.” Miss Dixon opened the door and left the room.

Joe Speedie had a corpulent smile. He pulled a cardboard box out of his bag and laid it on the desk. It looked like some kind of board game but the writing was in German.

A few pupils wandered in: Justin Pang, Andy Howarth, Tom Purdy - Mr Jacob's English class B. Which meant ...

Rebecca sidled into the room. She glanced at the empty desks behind David, made some signal to Nicola and Emily, then sat at the front next to Joe Speedie. He greeted her arrival with some excitement, bouncing his wide backside on the spindly plastic chair. He held up the game and passed it to her. For a few seconds, Rebecca studied the bright graphics of trains and whiskery signalmen. In one smooth motion, she swung around and dropped the whole thing into the wastepaper bin. A sharp metallic clang harmonised with Joe's anguished screeching, a noise silenced by Miss Dixon's reappearance.

"If you could oblige me by readying your copies of *Much Ado about Nothing*." A low groan circulated.

"Thought that was too good to be true," whispered Emily.

"I am aware that Mr Jacob's class are not as advanced through the text as we are." Miss Dixon smoothed her frizzy grey hair, a condescending smile on her lips. "I'm sure you'll catch up. We're mid-way through Act Two, Scene One - the masked ball." There was a furious riffling, followed by a few confused faces. "Page thirty five for those of you still lagging." The teacher manoeuvred her tweed-clad bulk onto the front table.

"Any volunteers to read?" Only Joe raised a hand. "Excellent, Joseph, you are Don Pedro. Anyone else?" She surveyed the array of downcast faces. "Emily, you have the role of Hero, our beautiful leading lady." Emily arched her fingers and tossed her mane

of red hair. “David, you will make a fine Benedick, I think.” He flipped a few pages forward and was not pleased by how frequently his character appeared.

Miss Dixon rubbed one elbow pad. “Who will be our Beatrice, to engage in linguistic combat with Benedick?”

Nicola ventured her hand up. She glanced back at David with a grin on her face, but it was definitely a smile, not a smirk.

“Miss Hasty, you may be Margaret.” Nicola responded with a shrug.

There were a lot of characters and Miss Dixon made great ceremony of it. Finally, she seemed satisfied. “Before we begin, I’d like to discuss the themes and . . .”

“Please Miss.” Joe Speedie was pushing his hand as high as his shoulder allowed, despite the teacher being right in front of him. “You haven’t cast Beatrice.”

“I haven’t?” A few shaken heads. “Perhaps another of the newcomers.” Her eyes strayed to Joe’s left. “Miss Fletcher, you’ve been unusually quiet. Would you oblige us?”

Rebecca gave a solemn nod. As Miss Dixon began her analysis of the scene, Rebecca opened her notebook and placed it next to her well-worn text. She began to take furious notes.

“David, how does Shakespeare use this device?” The teacher’s gaze was stern but friendly.

“Ah . . . device. He . . . Which of the numerous dramatic devices is this?”

The friendly aspect of her manner faded. “The masks, man, the masks.”

“Oh.” He gawked at the page in front of him and read a list of Shakespeare titles available in paperback. “He uses . . . he uses the masks . . .”

“To let the characters say mean stuff with no comebacks.”

“Exactly, Rebecca. We see that most clearly in the dialogue between Beatrice and Benedick.” Rebecca licked the tip of her finger and notched a mark in the air. “There is more at work here, however. Every character except Claudio is well aware who is behind the mask. Beatrice does not express her true feelings for Benedick. She has her own private mask of spite that protects her fragile ego.”

Miss Dixon droned on about motivation and duality and dramatic construction. Some of it might have been interesting or even useful for David but he struggled to maintain his attention. Rebecca continued to take notes, stopping on occasion to offer smug answers to Miss Dixon’s questions. He’d never taken her for a teacher’s pet.

Eventually, they began reading, though their progress was slow, with the teacher interrupting constantly to add “colour”. Sarah McLellan stumbled over every line as Ursula - the massed eye-rolling was almost audible.

At last, David’s moment approached. Rebecca had ceased writing and was paging back and forth through her notes, lips moving soundlessly. He remembered a rumour that she once lost her voice for a week after too much oral sex.

“Will you not tell me who told you so?” Rebecca seemed to be reading his mind. Oh, wait a sec – she was actually reading her lines.

“No! You shall pardon me.” Though he didn’t care if she did or not.

“Will you not tell me,” she turned her head and delivered a piercing stare, “who you are?”

Who was he again? Oh yeah, Benedick. David pretended to yawn. “Not now.”  
Rebecca pored over her notes. “That I was disdainful, and that I had my good wit out of the ‘Hundred Merry Tales’.”

Miss Dixon butted in. “This is of course referring to a collection of bawdy stories published in 1526.” Rebecca glanced back at David, a feline smirk betraying the predator within. “The implication that she derives her humour from such a source is deeply hurtful to Beatrice, who is in many ways Benedick’s intellectual superior.” Miss Dixon raised a faded brown handkerchief to her nose and blew hard.

Rebecca took this as a signal to restart. “Well, this was Signor Benny-**dick** that said so.”

“What’s he?” David replied.

Rebecca pointed towards him. “I’m sure you know him well enough.”

“Not I,” David showed his hands, palms up, “believe me.”

“Hah! Did he never make you laugh?” Her voice was thick with sarcasm.

There was delight on some of the faces around him and he tried to keep his own tone light and jokey. “I pray you, what is he?”

Rebecca stood, notes in hand, and went behind the teacher. She leaned back against the whiteboard and eyeballed him. “Why, he is the Prince’s jester. A very... Dull. Fool.” She counted these points off with the fingers of one hand. “Only, his gift is in devising impossible slanders: none but libertines ...”

“This refers to questionable ...”

“None but libertines delight in him; and the commendation is not in his wit, but in his villainy; for he both pleases men ...” She curled her fingers in a circle and shook her hand up and down. “... and angers them, and then they laugh at him and beat him.” She snatched up a red marker and scrawled, “Mr Daltrey rules K.O.” on the board. This got a

huge laugh - David felt it as much in his kidneys as his ears. Miss Dixon, chuckling but looking confused, glanced across and found Rebecca's chair empty.

"I am sure he is in the fleet. I would he had ... boarded me." He watched the hard syllables forming, the B and the M, every possible ounce of emphasis behind them. In case there was any doubt, she flicked a tongue over her red lips. The moment stretched out, elastic. She stared at him. He stared at her. Everyone must be staring at them.

Someone began clapping, the blows hefty and hollow. "Very impressive, Rebecca, very fluid." Miss Dixon shifted on her perch. "We aren't auditioning for RADA, dear, so you can dial down the intensity." David broke Rebecca's gaze and looked back at the text. The words wouldn't stay still. "You may sit." Rebecca rubbed the slogan off the board with the heel of her hand and minced back to her seat. "Benedick?"

David watched the letters dancing; reels and pirouettes. "When I know the gent ... the gentleman, I'll tell you what ... I'll tell him what you say."

"Do, do: he'll but break a comparison or two on me; which, perhaps not marked or not laughed at strikes him into melancholy; and then there's a partridge wing saved, for the fool will eat no supper that night." Rebecca whisked the page of notes away and continued with barely a pause. "We must follow ..."

The bell interrupted her. Half the class stood up, the others lingering, unsure if the show was over.

Miss Dixon held up her hand. "The bell is a signal for me."

This was the cue the rest of them needed. Pupils piled out of the classroom door, while the teacher sat back with resignation. Joe Speedie stopped at the exit and dragged the bin into the corridor, keen not to let Rebecca anywhere near his beloved game.

“I’ll leave you to it.” Miss Dixon made her exit.

Rebecca and David were seated, the room empty. Rebecca slid the text into her bag and got up, one A4 sheet of her notes in hand.

“We must follow the leaders.”

“Eh?” She was between him and the door. It was maths next, he didn’t want to be late.

“We must follow the leaders.”

“Oh.” She was still in character. He inched towards her, thumb held in the margin of the play. “In every good … ah - ah …” As he’d reached the door she had tucked in behind him. Close. He felt the shape of her hips as they pressed against his buttocks, the weight of her breasts nestling below his shoulder blades. She breathed onto him, a beautiful zephyr turning cartwheels through his soft neck hairs. His eyes closed. She spoke, a stronger breeze caressing him.

“We must follow the leaders.”

“In every good thing.”

“Nay, if they lead to any ill, I will leave them at the next turning.” The pressure on his back lifted. The sharp clack clack of her footfalls reverberated along the corridor, until he could no longer tell what was real and what was echo.