



# TEACHERS' NOTES

## RECOMMENDED FOR

Secondary (ages 12+; years 9 to 12)

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## KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- **Learning areas:** English
- **General capabilities:** Critical and Creative Thinking; Ethical Understanding; Intercultural Understanding; Literacy
- **Cross-curriculum priorities:** Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia

## REASONS FOR STUDYING THIS BOOK

- Students can consider the conventions and tropes of romance novels, as well as exploring themes including belonging and 'home', ethical dilemmas, friendship and family.

## THEMES

- Displacement
- Identity
- Belonging and 'home'
- Ethical dilemmas
- Romance and the 'fake-dating' trope
- Friendship
- Family

## PREPARED BY

Penguin Random House Australia

## PUBLICATION DETAILS

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## This Time It's Real Ann Liang

### PLOT SUMMARY

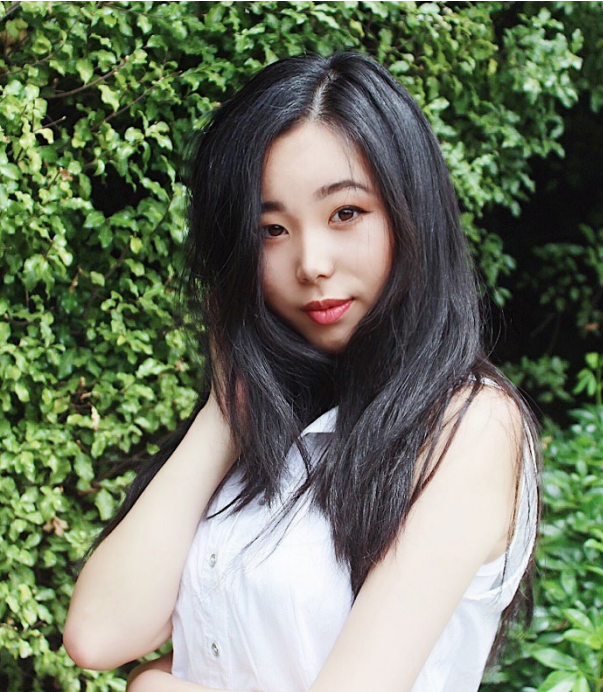
When seventeen-year-old Eliza Lin's essay about meeting the love of her life unexpectedly goes viral, her entire life changes overnight. Now she has the approval of her classmates at her new international school in Beijing, a career-launching internship opportunity at her favourite magazine . . . and a massive secret to keep.

Eliza made her essay up. She's never been in a relationship before, let alone in love. All good writing is lying, right?

Desperate to hide the truth, Eliza strikes a deal with the famous actor in her class, the charming but aloof Caz Song. She'll help him write his college applications if he poses as her boyfriend. Caz is a dream boyfriend – he passes handwritten notes to her in class, makes her little sister laugh, and takes her out on motorcycle rides to the best snack stalls around the city.

But when her relationship with Caz starts feeling a little too convincing, all of Eliza's carefully laid plans are threatened. Can she still follow her dreams if it means breaking her own heart?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ann Liang is a recent graduate of the University of Melbourne. Born in Beijing, she grew up travelling back and forth between China and Australia, but somehow ended up with an American accent.

When she isn't stressing out over her college assignments or writing, she can be found making over-ambitious to-do lists, binge-watching dramas, and having profound conversations with her pet labradoodle about who's a good dog.

## AUTHOR'S INSPIRATION

Ann says:

It's always difficult to pinpoint the exact moment a book idea is formed. Instead, I like to think that the inspiration for *This Time It's Real* was an ongoing process; that the things that make up the story and the characters of Caz and Eliza can be traced all the way back to years ago, when I was still a teenager attending an international school in Beijing, and all the way up until I wrote the very last word of the manuscript.

So it's true that *This Time It's Real* was inspired by my experiences moving from city to city and school to school, by my love for love stories, by my favourite dramas, and by my occasional writer's tendency to exaggerate things for dramatic effect or simply so they sound better. But this book is also the product of the environment in which it was written, and everything that was going on in the world and with my life at the time.

I wrote it on the Notes app in my phone while I was waiting in the car. I wrote it during the quiet, uncertain

days of the pandemic. I wrote it between my Zoom lectures, before I did my readings for my university tutorials, after I finished my assignment for my Marketing Communications subject. I wrote it at the beach over the summer holidays, with the sun rising behind me; in the backyard of our Airbnb while my dog lay beneath my feet. I wrote it listening to the new Taylor Swift album. I wrote it crying to the new Taylor Swift album. I wrote it riding the high of having watched a coming-of-age movie that made my own teen years feel both vividly close and strangely distant. I wrote it happy, sad, hopeful, cynical, and hopeful again.

That's why I wouldn't be exaggerating at all – not this time, in this instance – to say that *This Time It's Real* is incredibly close to my heart, and even if it can't mean everything to readers the same way it means everything to me, I really hope it means something.

## PRE-READING QUESTIONS

1. Have a look at the cover and the blurb. See if you can identify any elements of the romance genre. For instance, the cover's colour scheme, the positioning of the two main characters and the fake-dating trope mentioned in the blurb.
2. By dissecting the blurb, pinpoint what you think the story will be about and the concepts that it might explore. What seems interesting to you about the story before reading it?

## KEY STUDY TOPICS

### Displacement

*Ma nods, well prepared for this, and launches into the usual script: born in China, moved when she was five, went to this school and that school and moved countries again . . . I try not to fidget, to flee. Being talked about this way makes my skin itch.* (pp. 16–17)

A key theme explored in *This Time It's Real* is displacement: the idea of feeling out of place, or feeling a lack of belonging. With Eliza's mother's job causing her family to move around all the time, Eliza has moved between six different countries and twelve different schools. As a result, Eliza struggles to properly settle into new schools and places she moves to. Her latest move back to Beijing should be somewhere she feels she *should* fit in, because she is Chinese and was born there, and yet Eliza's experiences growing up in other countries mean that even in China she doesn't feel like she is 'home'.

### Questions and activities

- Throughout the story, Eliza struggles with figuring out where exactly is 'home', and what it means for



her. On p. 241, Eliza recounts a time where she had to write an essay on the topic of home. Her teacher, not understanding Eliza's upbringing, says her story about fragmentation is wrong and not the correct definition of 'home'.

Eliza further reflects: *"Thinking of all those rooms I walked through at eight, ten, fourteen years old and all the people I met in them . . . if maybe I left a piece of myself in them and took a piece of them with me too; isn't that what homes are made of? A collection of the things that shape you?"* (p. 242). Do you agree or disagree with Eliza's statement? Do you think home must be a physical place, or do you think we build a sense of home amongst the people in our lives, experiences we've had and things that we've learned along the way?

- *"Of course we came home," I tell her in my clumsy, childish Mandarin. "You're here."* (p. 240)

Identify something or someone from your life that you believe has shaped who you are today. Why did they/it have an influence on you?

- *When did Beijing become mine to defend?* (p. 167)

At what point does Eliza realise that Beijing could be her home? What happens on p. 167 that makes her realise her growing attachment and sense of belonging to Beijing?

- Picture yourself in Eliza's position. You've just left your home and friends behind in another country, having to start afresh. How would you feel leaving behind everything and everyone you knew? Write a short letter addressed to a close friend of yours discussing what you will miss about them and your hometown.

### Navigating a hybrid cultural identity

*. . . but sometimes it just hits me hard: this horrible, crushing sense of wrongness, of otherness, regardless of whether I'm the only Asian kid at an elite Catholic all-girls school in London or the only new kid in a tiny cohort at a Chinese international school. Sometimes I'm convinced I'll spend the rest of my life this way. Alone.* (p. 18)

*Except I've heard it before, so many times. Every possible version of it: Are you American? British? Are you from around here? Are you actually Chinese?*

*I don't know.*

*Sometimes it just gets really exhausting having to explain your identity to everyone'* (p. 152)

Moving around during her formative years has also meant that Eliza has grown up balancing different cultures, ultimately having to form a hybrid cultural

identity. This leads to a further disconnect for Eliza, and a confused sense of self.

- What is 'culture shock'? Write down the definition. After you've done this, read the opening chapter. Even though Eliza was born in China, coming back to Beijing years later doesn't feel the same. What aspects of culture shock does Eliza experience here? What aspects of her old home feel different and unfamiliar to Eliza?
- Have you ever experienced culture shock when you've travelled or moved places yourself? How did you go about settling into the different norms of a new place?
- Can you identify some of the places Eliza has lived?
- How do you think Eliza comes to reconcile the beauty of her cultural hybridity by the end of the story? Do you think she's more accepting of herself? What/who helps her feel more comfortable in her own skin?

### Friendship

*Even though school started almost a month ago, I haven't really gotten to know anyone. All the names and faces and classes kind of just blur together. The way I see it, we'll be graduating in less than a year anyway. There's no reason to put myself out there, as my past teachers all loved to recommend, and get attached to people only to grow apart months later. With Ma's job moving us around all the time, it's already happened too many times for me to keep track: that slow, painful, far-too-predictable transition from strangers to acquaintances to friends back to strangers the second I leave the school behind me.* (pp. 12–13)

*Generally speaking, I try to stay off social media as much as possible. Every new post from an old friend serves as a painful reminder: This is their life now, without you. This is their group of best friends, their boyfriend they didn't tell you about; this is them moving on completely. This is proof that when they said they'll remember you, stay in touch with you, they were lying. Sometimes I'll stare at an Instagram photo of someone I was close to in London, New Zealand, Singapore, at their fresh-dyed hair and wide grin and the kind of cropped jacket they wouldn't have been caught dead wearing years ago, and get the odd sense of seeing a total stranger on my feed.* (p. 42)

*And this, I think, is my ultimate fatal flaw. Missing people who don't miss me back. Clinging on to strands of string that shouldn't mean half as much as they do. It takes so little for me to love someone, yet so long for me to move on.* (p. 187)

Friendships are a big part of our lives. For Eliza, moving around and falling out of touch with her friends from each place adds to her feeling of disconnect and



displacement. It's difficult to maintain friendships long-distance, and as a result, Eliza is apprehensive about making close friends.

### Questions

- Eliza's relationship with her best friend Zoe from her previous school suffers once Eliza moves. Identify instances in the story where we start to see this. One example might be when Eliza notices her joint Spotify playlist with Zoe has had its name changed to 'recs for divya' (Zoe's new friend) (p. 187). How does Eliza respond when she starts to sense Zoe and her growing apart? What would you do in a similar situation?
- *But aren't small things exactly what friendships are made up of? Frayed string bracelets and late-night texts and compilations of your favorite songs? When you take those things away, what do you have left?* (p. 187)

Think about your friendships. What do you think about them makes them special to you? Is it the gifts or the fun activities you do together? Or is it the smaller (however by no means less significant) things Eliza mentions, like late night texts, frayed string bracelets and compilations of your favourite songs? Or perhaps it's both? Write your thoughts down and share them with your friend!

- *And maybe hope isn't so terrible after all. Because we spend the next hour chatting and catching up, and even though it's not exactly the same as it used to be—there are more pauses, and those small hints of awkwardness—I don't think I've lost her.* (p. 302)

How does Eliza open up and repair the distance between herself and Zoe? Does their friendship return to what it once was, or is it different? Do you think it's a good thing for friendships and relationships to naturally evolve and change as life happens? Is it sustainable to expect a friendship to always stay the same?

- *And that's the thing. That's always the thing: It might not go well. It might go terribly. I might wake up one day having given my heart to the world, revealed all those vulnerable and embarrassing parts of me, spelled out my innermost thoughts, and discover that no one likes them. Or worse, that no one cares in the first place.*

*But certain joys, I'm discovering, are worth the potential pain.* (pp. 336–337)

Towards the end of the story, Eliza becomes more open and willing to be vulnerable with the people in her life, even if that may mean eventual heartbreaks. Pinpoint moments in the story of Eliza's growth.

- How does Caz make Eliza feel comfortable to open up? (For instance, when he helps her find the bracelet that Zoe gave her.) How does he teach her to trust again? Why is being vulnerable a good thing?

### Ethics

*Writing is simply a form of lying; I've always known this to be true. But to tell a good lie, a convincing lie, one that is both logically constructed and consistent and emotionally resonant—that takes time and effort. Attention to detail. And in this particular case, it also takes cooperation.* (p. 110)

The essay that's thrown Eliza into stardom is founded on a lie. When it goes viral, Eliza is forced to deal with an ethical dilemma: should she come clean and admit the truth or should she keep the lie going? And is it possible to keep the lie going? This moral problem shapes the events of the rest of the story.

### Questions and activities

- Do you think Eliza is in the wrong for making up her essay? Is it ethical? Write a couple of paragraphs explaining your answer. Make sure to have a different point in each paragraph, discussing the moral implications. Have a go at discussing your points of argument with someone with a different answer to yours. You may even want to have a friendly debate!
- Eliza's plan to keep the lie going is to engage in another life and fake-date actor Caz Song. How is this a publicity stunt? There are various moments in story where people poke holes in Eliza's relationship with Caz. How could it impact Eliza, Caz, their careers and the people around them if they had been exposed by the media?
- Zoe: *"You realize personal essays shouldn't be made up, right?"* (p. 4)

... *"But maybe, if you told the truth—"* ...

Eliza: *"... the truth gets out, I'll probably be fending off hate comments and death threats for the rest of my life—"* (p. 92).

Eliza's mum: *"God, no. Of course not." Ma actually laughs, like the very idea is absurd. "No, we've been trying to get this investor on board for years. We'll just have to work in reverse: reach out to SYS and forge a connection and act like we've been close all along. Maybe if we approached one of their marketing teams first, or that guy from the Cartier campaign ..."* She gets this distant, almost-zealous gleam in her eye, the way she tends to whenever she's puzzling out a work issue. Then she remembers



who she's talking to. "But lying is bad," she adds hastily, shooting Emily and me a stern look. (pp. 29–30)

Zoe: "Well, I mean, you can't just keep lying to the world, can you?" she pushes on. "Like, at first, I thought it'd only be this super-temporary thing. A joke. But it's been entire months, and it's just . . . It just seems like the kind of thing destined to blow up in your face."

"And I'm all for opening yourself up to opportunities," Zoe says. "Except when your career's founded on a literal lie. I mean, how do you expect to retain your readers or earn the respect of any publication out there if they find out—" (pp. 252–253)

From the beginning, Zoe is apprehensive of Eliza publishing an essay that isn't real, while Eliza's mum's actions show that part of her corporate role involves what might be called lying (all the while saying it still is a bad thing to do). Do you agree with Zoe and Eliza's mum, or do you agree with Eliza's mum's tactic? Or is it a bit of both?

- 'Cancel culture' can be career-destroying. Do you sympathise with Eliza in this situation? How might you be feeling in a situation like this? Would you be scared too?
- Do you think the way Eliza handles this moral dilemma at the end was the right way to approach it? What would you have done? As the story doesn't tell us what happens, what do you think the immediate aftermath might be, and the long-term implications for Eliza and the people in her life? If it's largely negative, how long do you think public perception would stay this way? What would have happened if Eliza had handled it the opposite way? Do you think she could have kept the lie going?
- *It's a confession and an apology and a love story all wrapped in one, and the more I write the more I realize that I was wrong before. Writing isn't a form of lying—not the good kind anyway, the kind that makes you feel something. Writing is a means of telling the truth. Both the beautiful and the ugly.* (pp. 332–333)

Eliza ends up writing her final article for Craneswift about what really happened; the truth. Since we don't get to see Eliza's final piece, have a go at writing your own. Remember to pinpoint the main points in the story and try to embody Eliza's voice in your writing. Think about how Eliza felt during these moments, and see if you can incorporate it within your article. Do you think Eliza would have included a public apology?

- Have a look at the title. What about 'real' do you think the story might be referencing? And what

does it physically end up being in the end? Is it more than one thing? Do you think there's an element of foreshadowing at play here? How so?

## Tropes

Different fiction genres often come with their own tropes – recurring themes, motifs or plots that are common across many books in that genre.

For instance, the 'fake-dating' scenario in *This Time It's Real* is a trope in the romance genre, in which two characters pretend to be in a romantic relationship for reasons that suit them both.

### Questions and activities

- Identify other novels/movies/stories you have come across that explore the fake-dating trope. (For instance, *To All the Boys I Loved Before* by Jenny Han or *Frankly in Love* by David Yoon.) What are the reasons for the characters to fake-date? What is the typical path that follows in these stories? Draw a flowchart describing the natural progression you identify.
- Once you have done this, compare to this to how the trope plays out in *This Time It's Real*. Is it similar? Do the characters realise they have fallen for each other around a similar point in the narrative?
- Pinpoint moments in the novel that indicate Eliza beginning to fall for Caz. How does the author make this an authentic, believable progression? An example might be when we see Eliza's hesitations with Caz befriending her sister – Eliza likes how much they get along and doesn't want her sister upset when their publicity stunt is up.
- What other romance tropes can you name?
- If you read other genres, what other tropes or recurring plots have you spotted in those genres? For instance, fantasy novels might include tropes such as 'the chosen one' or a quest or an evil overlord; crime novels often include red herrings or a big reveal featuring all the suspects; horror stories might include a haunted house.
- Why do you think those tropes have become popular, and why do you think readers often choose to read multiple books featuring the same trope? What is it about the familiarity of a trope that appeals to readers?
- Writers need to work hard to make sure a story feels fresh and original if the plot includes a trope. Name some of the plot points that Ann Liang has added to *This Time It's Real* that deepen and enrich the story beyond the 'fake-dating' concept.



## Writing

*But once I do manage to tune out all unwanted distractions, the words come in a flood. My mind sharpens. My fingers find a natural rhythm over the keys. Because I might be clueless about dating and hand holding and dancing for fun in a crowded classroom, but this—this right here, stringing words together to mean something—is my element. This, I could do all day for the rest of my life. (p. 117)*

Writing for Eliza is both a passion and a career aspiration. It's also what ties her to people; it's how she meets and starts relationships with both Zoe and Caz. Writing is an outlet for Eliza, a confessional medium to better understand herself and the world around her.

### Questions and activities

- Art (e.g. writing, reading, music) and being creative is known to be a therapeutic, enlightening experience. Can you identify artistic or creative activities within your own life that help you relax and get your creative juices flowing? What is it about your chosen medium that you like?
- How does writing and the act of writing help bring people together? What about it is so universal and enduring?
- On the flip side, reading fiction has been shown to help people develop empathy. What have you learnt from reading *This Time It's Real*? How did Eliza's or Caz's dilemmas make you feel? Did you relate to any of the situations or emotions they were experiencing? Discuss your answers with the person next to you!



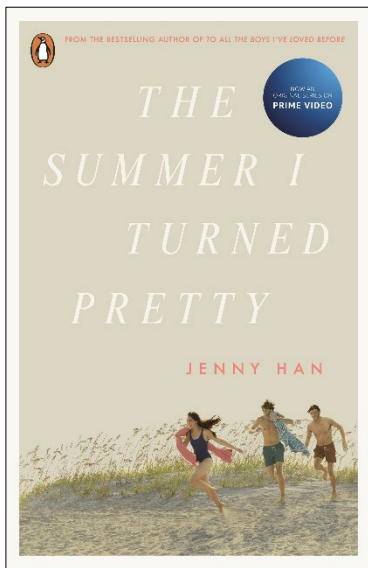
## READING GROUP QUESTIONS

*This Time It's Real* is a gorgeous story about love, belonging, identity, moral dilemmas and the importance of friendship. It's perfect for readers who are into the fake-dating trope, or want a warm and beautifully written tale about falling in love and finding yourself! Here are some questions to get you started:

1. What are your favourite romance novels or stories that explore the fake-dating trope? Some examples might be *To All the Boys I Loved Before* by Jenny Han or *Frankly in Love* by David Yoon. Did you like how the fake-dating trope was explored in *This Time It's Real*?
2. Which plot points or narrative beats did Ann Liang add to *This Time It's Real* to deepen and enrich the story beyond the 'fake-dating' concept?
3. In the story, Eliza is faced with a moral dilemma: dealing with the consequences of a made-up essay that has gone viral. Do you think Eliza was in the wrong for the decision she made? What would you have done, and do you think Eliza handles it well at the end of the story?
4. "Except I've heard it before, so many times. Every possible version of it: Are you American? British? Are you from around here? Are you actually Chinese? I don't know. Sometimes it just gets really exhausting having to explain your identity to everyone." Eliza struggles with feelings of displacement and not belonging. Have you experienced similar feelings in your own life, whether making a big move to a new place, experiencing culture shock, exploring your identity or navigating between different cultures? Even if you haven't had the same experiences or don't have a similar background to Eliza, in what ways did you have empathy for her, or what did you learn about the challenges she faces?
5. Have you visited any of the places Eliza has lived in the story? Which place in the book would you most like to visit? Why?
6. The power of friendship is a vital theme explored in this story. How did the story remind you what is special about the friendships and relationships you have formed in your own life? What do they mean to you?
7. Ann speaks about how *This Time It's Real* is semi-autobiographical, in that it is loosely based on her own experiences moving between cities and schools when she was a teenager. Do you think writing, to an extent, is autobiographical as we draw on our own experiences and our perceptions of the world? Is writing a product of our environment?
8. Much like for Ann, who wrote *This Time It's Real* during many waking moments of her life while also studying at university, Eliza is also a writer at heart. What do you think writing means for Eliza? What does reading/writing mean for you?
9. There are several moments in the novel that tug at your heartstrings. What emotional scene (or any other scene!) was your favourite and why?
10. What are some quotes that stood out for you while you read the story? (For instance, 'But certain joys, I'm discovering, are worth the potential pain'.) How did it affect you? Was it perhaps relatable or inspiring?
11. Do you see yourself (even a past self) in any of the characters in the story? How so?
12. Ann listened to Taylor Swift while writing this book. What music has been the soundtrack to different times in your life?



FURTHER READING FROM PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA



*The Summer I Turned Pretty*  
by Jenny Han

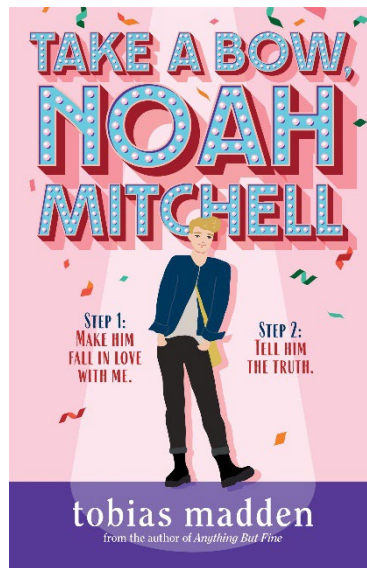
**Everything that happened this past summer, and every summer before it, has all led up to this. To now.**

Every year Isabel spends a perfect summer at her favourite place in the world – the Fisher family's beach house. It has everything a girl could want: a swimming pool, a private stretch of sandy beach . . . and two boys.

Unavailable, aloof Conrad – who she's been in love with forever – and friendly, relaxed Jeremiah, the only one who's ever really paid her any attention.

But this year something is different. This year, the boys seem to really notice Isabel for the first time.

It's going to be an amazing summer – and one she'll never forget . . .



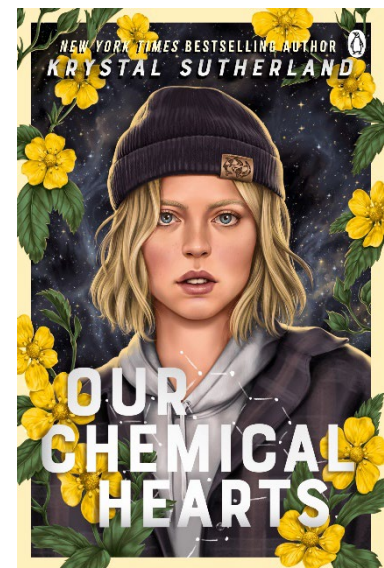
*Take a Bow, Noah Mitchell*  
by Tobias Madden

Noah is in love with his online best friend. Which is a huge problem, for the following reasons:

1. His crush has no idea.
2. Noah only knows him as his gaming avatar.
3. There's zero chance they'll ever meet in real life.

So, when Noah sees an opportunity to secretly meet his crush, he takes it. Even though he'll have to join the cast of a local production of Chicago with his self-obsessed mother. Even though he'll need to lie to his best (and only) friend. And even though he'll have to sing and dance in front of actual people.

Because love is worth the risk. And, really, what could possibly go wrong?



*Our Chemical Hearts*  
by Krystal Sutherland

Henry Page has never been in love. The slo-mo, can't-eat-can't-sleep kind of love he's been hoping for just hasn't been on the cards – at least not yet. Henry's too busy trying to get into a semi-decent college and become editor of his school newspaper, a dream three years in the making. The rest of his spare time he spends with his best friends, Lola and Murray, playing video games and advising them on their own sordid love lives.

Then he meets Grace Town, the elusive new girl in school, who wears oversized boys' clothing, walks with a cane, rarely seems to shower, and is hiding crushing secrets. She's hardly who Henry expected his dream girl to be, but when the two are chosen to edit the paper together, sparks fly. After all this time, Henry's about to learn firsthand just how disastrous the road to first love can be – and that sometimes it's the detours that end up mattering much more.

*Teachers' notes available.*





## ORDER FORM

TITLE	AUTHOR	ISBN	SCHOOL YEAR	RRP	QTY	TOTAL
This Time It's Real	Ann Liang	9781761049804	8-10	\$19.99		
The Summer I Turned Pretty	Jenny Han	9780241599198	8-10	\$19.99		
Take a Bow, Noah Mitchell	Tobias Madden	9780143777397	10-12	\$19.99		
Our Chemical Hearts	Krystal Sutherland	9781761048760	10-12	\$19.99		
<b>TOTAL</b>						

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