



TEACHERS' RESOURCES

RECOMMENDED FOR

Upper secondary (ages 15+)

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KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- **Learning areas:** English
- **General capabilities:** Ethical Understanding; Intercultural Understanding; Critical and Creative Thinking; Literacy
- **Cross-curriculum priorities:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures

REASONS FOR STUDYING THIS BOOK

- Distinctly rural Australian, *The Centre of My Everything* is a story about love and loss, about tragic secrets and the lengths people will go to hide them, about intergenerational pain and desperate attempts to break the cycle, and about finding hope, support and love where you least expect it. Told from multiple points of view, there is plenty to explore in studying voice, tone, character and themes.

THEMES

- Alcohol abuse and binge drinking
- Generational violence
- Sexual assault and consent
- Racism
- Grief
- Family
- Economic disadvantage
- Rural and regional communities

PREPARED BY

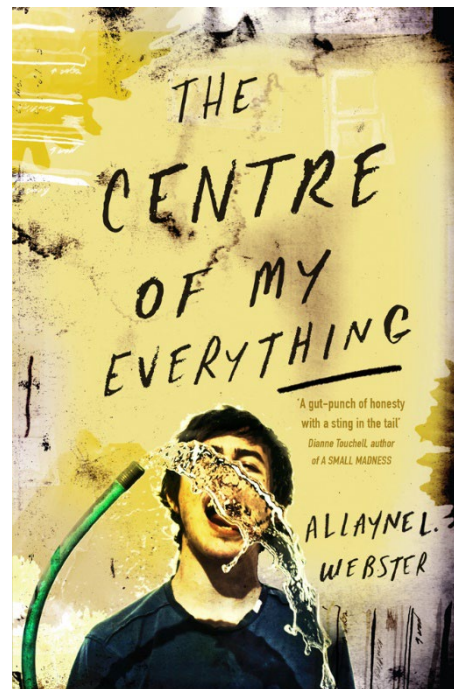
Penguin Random House and Allayne Webster

PUBLICATION DETAILS

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The Centre of My Everything Allayne L. Webster

PLOT SUMMARY

Justin's back, and wants to put the past behind him.

Corey's a footy hero and high-school dropout who can't even find work picking fruit.

Tara wants to be loved. But if her mother doesn't care, why would anyone else?

Margo wants out, and she has a plan to get there.

Plans change. Life happens. Some secrets won't stay buried. Peace isn't as simple as laying bones to rest.

PRAISE

- '*The Centre of My Everything* drives a stake through the heart of teen binge-drinking culture and generational racism. Often funny, sometimes shocking, always real – this is not an easy book, and that's exactly why everyone should read it.' Vikki Wakefield, author of CBCA Honour Book *Inbetween Days*
- 'Both heartbreaking and heartwarming. Allayne Webster navigates the world of young adults living in a regional town with a deft hand and sharp eye. The characters are raw and beautifully realised and stay with you long after reading. I was hooked from

the first page.' Sue Lawson, author of CBCA Shortlisted *Freedom Ride*

- 'The Centre of My Everything is a gut-punch of honesty with a sting in the tail. A heart-rending story about the symmetry of love and pain, and the transcendence of strength and compassion. I couldn't put it down.' Dianne Touchell, author of CBCA Notable Book A *Small Madness*
- 'Told from multiple points of view, Webster's main characters leap from the page. Authentic, raw, and burdened with their own personal anguish, Tara, Margo, Justin and Corey hurtle towards each other, and towards disaster – but also to a greater truth, exposing lies that have poisoned generations, secrets that should never have been kept. Gripping and heartbreaking, *The Centre of My Everything* will draw you in and warm your soul.' Nicole Hayes, author of Children's Peace Literature Award Winner *One True Thing*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Allayne L. Webster is a South Australian children's and young adult author. Her novel *Paper Planes* was a 2014 Children's Book Council Notable Book. A former university administrator and now fulltime writer, Allayne is a board member of the Adelaide Salisbury Writers' Festival and winner of three South Australian arts grants.

AUTHOR'S INSPIRATION

Allayne says:

I grew up in rural South East, South Australia. My stepfather, a Ngarrindjeri man living on Meintangk/Thangal land, raised me from the age of five.

Love is a great motivator, and this novel is a means of reflecting my love for my step-father and all he has done for me. It is fiction, however I've drawn on some personal experience.

Growing up with an Aboriginal stepfather, brother, sister, and extended family, meant that I'd often witness the hurtful impact of racist assumptions and behaviours. I saw people I loved regularly wounded. Seeing them hurt, hurt me.

I wanted to examine casual racism through story – the assumptions my family was subject to, like 'we must get lots of free stuff from the government' or 'your stepfather is a half-caste, so what does he deserve anyway? Isn't he more white than black?' Some comments were more subversive or throw-away 'off the cuff' remarks, but the inference and the impact was

the same. Mud sticks – and the more you pile on, the heavier the load.

Growing up in a rural environment meant that from time to time I'd hear the debate about the need to report (possible) Aboriginal remains found on farming land. I recall an argument against where someone said it was a pointless exercise: why hold up works, building developments, etc., for some old bones that have been buried since who knows when? This attitude riled me. How would they react if someone walked into their graveyard and dug up their ancestors? Wouldn't they be incensed? Where was the respect?

Often what drives me as a creator is injustice or hypocrisy; people's lack of empathy or inability to imagine themselves in someone else's shoes. And so the idea for *The Centre of My Everything* was born – I wanted to address the injustices I'd witnessed that had made my blood boil.

The novel is also about generational grief and violence and the steps people take to self-medicate and survive. It tackles misogyny and male entitlement; a present day rape links to a historical one, and the story portrays the repercussions of those acts on the wider family unit. It also explores binge-drinking culture and alcohol's impact in our communities.

At the heart of this story, though, is a tale of forgiveness and compassion. *The Centre of My Everything* is about putting faith in others, the giving and receiving of trust and, above all else, the power of love.

WRITING STYLE

Allayne says:

The Centre of My Everything is told in first person, present tense, from four points of view – with an important cameo towards the end from one of the minor characters.

I love writing in first person because I want the reader to be inside the character's head, to have direct access to their innermost private fears, hopes and dreams. We'd all like to know the secrets others keep. Writing this way allows for that opportunity.

Telling this story from four points of view allowed me to reveal things to the reader the characters had yet to discover about each other. I like the idea that the reader can know things the characters don't and be privy to secrets before they're revealed.

To me, this puts the reader in a position of control and ownership of the story; they can draw connections between events and understand the reasons driving the character's actions. It allows the reader greater insight and understanding.



Discussion questions and activities:

- Whose voice did you most/least identify with?
- Make a list of what assumptions characters had about each other at the start, and then note how those assumptions had changed by the end. For instance, why did Margo and Tara dislike each other at the beginning? What changed for them?
- Consider the four main characters in terms of how they presented themselves to the world versus how they felt about themselves inside. How did the author convey those differences to the reader and make you realise all wasn't as it seemed? For instance, consider the brashness of Corey's party persona against his insecurity over not being able to find a job.
- Why do you think it was important for Allayne to include a cameo at the end from the point of view of a minor character?

SETTING

Allayne says:

I chose to set this story in Mildura, Victoria, for numerous reasons. First, Mildura's physical location is on the border of three states. I liked the literary implications of this – it reflected how my characters felt about their place in the world and how they were questioning where they belonged.

Mildura is home to what was once the longest bar in the world, entered into the *Guinness Book of Records*. The bar has since been dismantled, the club renovated. But when I was looking for a setting to explore our country's widespread culture of binge-drinking, this famous connection to alcohol consumption was another reason Mildura came to mind.

Mildura is located near Willandra Lakes, a world-heritage archaeological site where the 40,000-year-old remains of an Aboriginal woman were discovered; it's thought to be the world's oldest cremation site. I'd also happened across a newspaper article about the Mildura City Council's rather unusual problem: the local cemetery was suffering the impact of flooding; the water table was rising and, as a result, graves were becoming destabilised. I liked the idea of juxtaposing these things in story – the archaeological site and the cemetery – one was like an echo of the other, though thousands of years apart.

Discussion questions and activities:

- Would Justin, Tara, Margo or Corey's stories have been different if they had grown up in the city, or a different area of Australia? Why or why not? What might have changed for them?

- Is binge-drinking a problem in Australia? Discuss, and find facts to support your answer.

ABORIGINAL CONSULTATION

In order to write *The Centre of My Everything*, I felt it important to consult Aboriginal peoples and elders beyond my own stepfather.

When I first decided to write the story and apply for an arts grant, I pitched the idea to prominent South Australian Aboriginal elder, Uncle Moogy (Major Sumner). He was immediately supportive of a novel that would portray a clean-living Aboriginal girl, like Margo, who is surrounded by binge-drinking white kids. Uncle Moogy also proved inspirational to me in writing this story because in recent years his activism has extended to a quest to bring home Aboriginal bones from British museums, repatriating remains to traditional lands. This seemed to reflect the hopes and desires of the characters portrayed in my novel, where the central thread is about returning bones to the grave before life can move on.

I also consulted Mildura Aboriginal elders, Gloria Clark and Ronni O'Donnell. I sought permission from them to use their heritage/background as Margo's. Within the story, I don't really delve into culture. I don't see that as my place. The only whisper of culture is when Margo's mother, Jessie, is concerned about speaking the name of the dead; she's not aware of who has been dug up from the cemetery and what their ethnicity is, so she's careful not to speak the name out loud. But this is the only time I make reference to something like this. Outside of that, I simply portray a story that includes Aboriginal people.

LANGUAGE

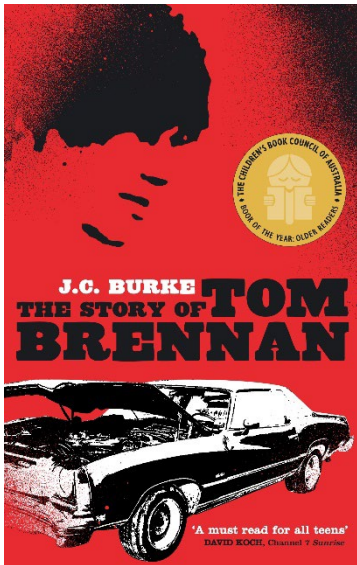
The Centre of My Everything is peppered with Aussie slang, Aussie-centric sayings and swearing. It utilises laconic, laid-back speech, representative of Australian country life. It doesn't take itself seriously.

Discussion questions and activities:

- Find some examples in the book of language or slang that only Australians would use.
- Note the differences in the slang used by different characters. Who uses most slang words? Who uses the least amount of slang words? Did the characters' language use and level of swearing tell you something about their personality?
- Find other examples of how the author has used language such as word choices or sentence structure to convey different characters' voices.



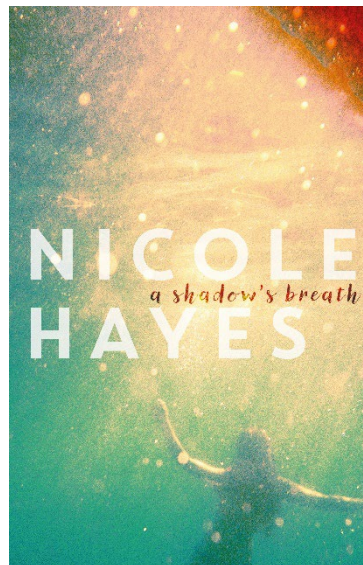
FURTHER READING FROM PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA



The Story of Tom Brennan
by J. C. Burke

A powerful story of love and loss, secrets and revelations – and making sense of a past that once seemed perfect.

For Tom Brennan, life is about rugby, mates and family – until a night of celebration changes his life forever. Tom's world explodes as his brother Daniel is sent to jail and the Brennans are forced to leave the small town Tom's lived in his whole life. Tom is a survivor, but he needs a ticket out of the past just as much as Daniel. He will find it in many forms . . .

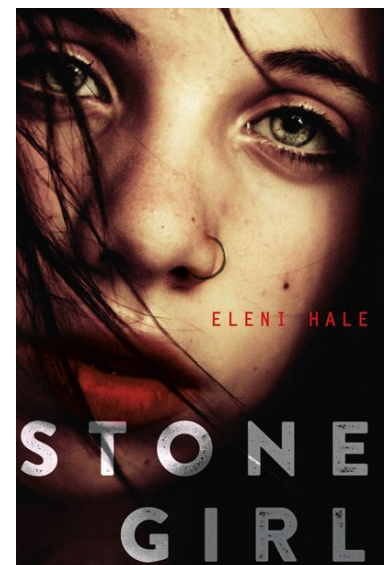


A Shadow's Breath
by Nicole Hayes

A compelling story of heartbreak, courage and forgiveness from the award-winning author of *The Whole of My World* and *One True Thing*.

Then, things were looking up for Tessa. Her mum was finally getting back on track. Tessa had started seeing Nick. She was making new friends. She'd even begun to paint again.

Now, Tessa and Nick are trapped in the car after a corner taken too fast. Injured, stranded in the wilderness, at the mercy of the elements, the question becomes one of survival. But Tessa isn't sure if she wants to be found. Not after what she saw. Not after what she remembered.



Stone Girl
by Eleni Hale

A heartbreaking story of raw survival and hope, and the children society likes to forget.

An unspeakable event changes everything for twelve-year-old Sophie. No more Mum, school or bed of her own. She's made a ward of the state and grows up in a volatile world where kids make their own rules, adults don't count and the only constant is change.

Until one day she meets Gwen, Matty and Spiral. Spiral is the most furious, beautiful boy Sophie has ever known. And as their bond tightens she finally begins to confront what happened in her past.



ORDER FORM

TITLE	AUTHOR	ISBN	SCHOOL YEAR	RRP	QTY	TOTAL
The Centre of My Everything	Allayne L. Webster	9780143783336	10+	\$19.99		
The Story of Tom Brennan	J. C. Burke	9781741660920	10+	\$17.99		
A Shadow's Breath	Nicole Hayes	9780143781097	9+	\$19.99		
Stone Girl	Eleni Hale	9780143785613	10+	\$19.99		
TOTAL						

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