

BEFORE THE BEGINNING

ANNA MORGAN

FOUR FRIENDS,
A MYSTERIOUS STRANGER,
AND THE WEEK WHEN
EVERYTHING CHANGED.



TEACHERS RESOURCES

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BY ANNA MORGAN

Teachers Notes by Leonie Jordan

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OVERVIEW

Level: *Mid-Upper Secondary School/Ages 14+*

Subject Area: *This book is suitable for use in English. Aspects of the novel also relate to History, Human Society and its Environment, Studies of Religion, Ethics and Art.*

Before the Beginning is a young adult coming-of-age novel with elements of historical mystery, suspense and fantasy. The story takes place against the backdrop of the annual “schoolies week” in Australia, where students who have just completed their final high school exams travel to the coast for a week of drinking and partying.

Grace decides to join her brother, Casper, and his close friends Ellie and Noah, at their family’s beach shack, taking on the responsibility of driving as Casper has never bothered to get his licence. Grace had intended to spend the week with her church friends, the closely-knit group she has been connected with all her life. However, she has recently been feeling estranged from them as she starts to question the church’s stance on some issues, in particular same-sex marriage, the subject of a recent referendum.

Grace’s faith has always been the cornerstone of her identity, and the thing she has constructed her life around. She had intended to join her church’s youth ministry program after graduating. However, now that her relationship with God is changing, she’s longer sure if that’s the path she wants to take. She hopes the week away from her usual life will give her a chance to get some clarity on these issues, and escape the burden of always having to be the responsible older sister.

Casper hasn’t told his friends that Grace will be joining them on their holiday, somewhat typical behaviour from him. Preoccupied with his art and characteristically oblivious to other people’s feelings, Casper ignores the subtle hostility Ellie directs at Grace, and makes no attempt to help Grace feel more welcome. He is irritated by her not-so-subtle enquiries about the progress of his portfolio, which he needs to have completed for an RMIT art program interview the following week and has yet to start, blithely assuring her it will be fine.

However, Casper’s insouciance masks a deeper unease: he feels that he sees the world fundamentally differently to other people, and it’s only through art that he’s able to make sense of it all. His life up until this point has felt like merely a prelude to next year, when he expects to truly find his place in the world. But what if he’s unable to produce anything truly good so doesn’t get into the program – or even worse, if he loses the unique vision which underpins who he is and becomes like everyone else?

While Grace has religion and Casper has art, Ellie’s focus is on Casper. For the last few years, they have been best friends; his warm, noisy house providing a welcome retreat from the stultifying silence and frosty hostility in her own home. Even though Casper has had girlfriends, it’s always been her that he talks to most: for the last few years, before they’ve gone to bed, they’ve texted each other a colour that sums up their day. Ellie is in love with Casper and thinks that one day he’ll realize that he sees her as more than a friend. Until then, she keeps her secret to herself – or so she thinks.

Meanwhile, Noah has his own battles. Tightly-wound and lacking in self-confidence, he has struggled with anxiety for much of his life. School has never been a problem for him, at least in the academic sense. He has always been a strong student who

has based his identity around his academic success, a tendency exacerbated by his achievement-focused mother. While he's never been popular or felt at ease in social situations, he has found refuge with Ellie and Noah. He's managed to cope with his anxiety up until now; spending time with his two close friends, soothing himself by stroking his cat Ursula, and escaping temporarily into the mindlessness of computer games. However, with the pressure mounting and everything seeming to ride on his ATAR, the mark which will determine which university course he gets into, he's had a panic attack during his final exam and knows he has failed. He hasn't yet confided to his friends.

At a party on the beach, the four teens meet Sierra, a mysterious silver-haired siren playing the guitar. Casper is clearly besotted with her, and the others are also drawn to her, with her bewitching singing offering solace from the questions and fears they've been wrestling with. Sierra invites them to camp with her on Shearwater Island, a nearby wildlife reserve which is closed off to the public and carries a hefty \$15,000 landing fine. Though they have some reservations, they eventually agree to join her for the week, lured by the prospect of a real experience of freedom, unlike the cliched, alcohol-fueled schoolies weeks their peers have settled for. After amassing supplies, Grace, the only one with a boating licence, sails them to the island in the family tinny.

Only a few kilometres long and largely untouched by humans, Shearwater Island is abundant in natural beauty, with sparkling beaches and pristine bushland. Sierra has camped on the island before and seems to know it well, but is evasive about her past, preferring to live in the moment. She carries a mysterious book which she writes in, "The Dictionary of Undersea Beings", fragments of which appear throughout the novel. Periodic glimpses into Sierra's childhood and adolescence are also provided throughout the book, adding complexity and depth to events.

The characters grow and change as they spend a week in this serene but isolated setting. Grace and Sierra begin a private romantic relationship unlike any Grace has experienced before. Forced to share a tent, Grace and Ellie eventually become friends, with Grace realizing that in the past she had never tried to connect with Ellie as a real person but had instead treated her as a church project. Grace also gains clarity on her spiritual journey, deciding that rather than suppressing the questions she has about her faith, to explore them authentically by studying philosophy at university next year.

After initially feeling that nobody wants him around, Noah swims out to sea as a storm is breaking and experiences a debilitating panic attack. Rescued by his friends, he reveals the truth about his anxiety and failing his exam, and with their support, is able to contemplate a future where his mental health takes precedence over academic success.

Casper is initially determined to use his time on the island to focus on his portfolio, resenting any intrusions in his creative process. After numerous failed paintings, he witnesses Sierra and Grace kissing, and rather than respecting their privacy, creates an artwork from it. Grace discovers the painting and angrily destroys it, accusing him of not caring about anyone. Casper is forced to examine his behavior towards Grace and acknowledge the way he has distanced himself from her and not been a good brother.

Ellie embarks on a similar emotional journey. After Grace confronts Casper with Ellie's feelings for him, Casper attempts to ignore the situation. When he finally acknowledges it, Ellie realizes that he knew how she felt all along yet still persisted in dating other people. Stunned by his selfishness, Ellie's romantic feelings for Casper vanish. It is only when she accepts that she bears some of the responsibility as well,

that the two can resume their friendship. Finally able to think about what she wants, rather than focusing on Casper, Ellie eventually resolves to be a paramedic, with her time on the island helping her to appreciate her own cool-headedness and her medical skills.

At the end of the week, the group are preparing to leave. However, after witnessing some strange behaviour, Casper starts to suspect Sierra may have other plans. While the others are initially cynical, when they see that Sierra has been stockpiling food, the fuel has been removed from their boat and they have no oars, they believe him. With Ellie taking the lead, they organize a plan to escape, Noah making petrol out of cooking oil and the fuel from their camp stove. When they confront Sierra and tell her they are leaving, she vengefully lets off a flare and disappears, leaving them to be caught by the maritime police. Evading the police, the four teenagers are just able to make it back to shore safely.

They return to the town several weeks later to try to discover what happened to Sierra. They are unable to get any closure, however, Noah produces a newspaper article from 2002 about a girl disappearing on Shearwater Island during a schoolies week camping trick: they speculate that, impossible as it seems, maybe the girl was Sierra.

The novel ends as they prepare to open their exam results, and in Casper's case, an envelope from RMIT telling him whether or not he's been accepted. Their future lies open before them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anna Morgan was born in Sydney, but spent most of her childhood surrounded by mountains in Nepal and Tibet while her parents were part of an international community of health professionals. Navigating this cross-cultural life made her a curious observer of people, although most of her time was spent reading Enid Blyton and dreaming of going to boarding school. This did not cushion the shock of shifting from home-school in Tibet to an all-girls high school in Melbourne when her family returned to Australia. Her previous novel *All That Impossible Space* explores some of the intense and convoluted friendships that thrive in this setting. Anna completed a MA in Writing for Young People at Bath Spa University in 2015, and now lives in Melbourne with her husband. She works as a bookseller.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND PERSPECTIVE

- What are the main questions which drive the novel? Some ideas could be the mystery of who Sierra is, suspense over what will happen to the group on the island and curiosity over how the various relationships in the novel will develop.
- How important is narrative perspective in creating empathy? Do you feel that your reaction to the different characters changes once you have been inside their heads and understood events from their perspective? Which characters do you feel differently about, after reading their sections? Are there any characters to whom your attitude remains unchanged?

- While Grace, Noah, Casper and Ellie relate their stories in the first person in discrete sections of the book, Sierra never tells her story directly. Instead, we get tantalizing hints about her past from the Shearwater Island “Summer” fragments interspersed between the other sections of the text. These fragments, written in the third person, are printed in italics against a faded background, giving them a feeling of historicity which distances Sierra's voice from the present. Analyse the way the structure of the book creates suspense by gradually revealing Sierra's backstory.
- Discuss the importance of mystery and uncertainty as driving forces in the story. Would you like the author to have included an additional section of the book from Sierra's perspective or would you have found this ultimately unsatisfying and prefer some aspects to remain ambiguous?
- Entries from the fictive “Dictionary of Undersea Beings” are also interspersed throughout the text. Each entry is accompanied by a brief narrative passage, presumably written by Sierra, imaginatively exploring the feelings and motivations of the mythical beings. How do you interpret these passages? Are they confessional, imaginative or something else? To what extent might Sierra be using them to comment on the people around her and their actions?
- Discuss the title of the first chapter, “After the End”, in relation to the novel's title. How does this position us to view the story? In what other ways does the author play with concepts of time and chronology throughout the novel?
- Intertextuality is a feature of the text, with carefully chosen literary quotations used to introduce each section. Discuss the quotations which are used at the start of each section. Why has the author chosen these particular quotations to accompany each section? Think particularly about the way they relate to the characters in the book and highlight key themes in the novel.

LANGUAGE AND STYLE

- What do you make of the title of the novel? Why do you think Morgan has chosen this as her title? Think particularly about the biblical resonances and their connection to Grace's journey (“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” - Genesis 1.1.31; “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” - John 1.1.) Also consider the title in relation to the students' graduation and the notion of “real life” beginning once you've left school.
- “And she gave it up for this poor thin edge of land: where the wind rasps sand against your skin and all that protect you from the sun are thin strips of zinc across the nose, flimsy cotton hats drooping with sweat.” (p. 74) The narrative fragments added to the “Dictionary of Undersea Beings” are written in a lyrical style which unites the mythical with the distinctly Australian and parochial. Using these sections of the text for inspiration, choose another myth or legend and use it as the starting point for a piece of narrative writing which reflects the place and time you live in.
- Find examples of the way imagery is used to consistently link Sierra to the ocean; for example, “Sierra. The whole week lies coiled in her name, like a seashell.” (p. 7); “A cold shiver runs through me, like a tendril of seaweed dripping down my back.” (p.230)

- Examine the use of literary techniques in the novel, including:
 - Alliteration, e.g. “sitting squat against the sky, where the stars stop” (p. 21)
 - Analogy, e.g. “the division is like an old-fashioned scene change in a play, where they slide the backdrop over from blue to black, sun to moon; (p. 97)
 - Metaphor, e.g. “starbursts of pain” (p. 96)
 - Personification, e.g. “the sonorous heartbeat of the sea” (p. 19)
 - Repetition, e.g. “the flash of blue with sun-specks of diamond, the gold of the rocks, the sea, the sea, the sea” (p. 39)
 - Sensual imagery, e.g. “a bird with a robotic call that rises and falls, an insistent whirring sound” (p. 43)
 - Simile, e.g. “A bird calls out and slowly takes off, like a messenger giving warning” (p. 24)
 - Syllepsis/zeugma, e.g. “throwing clothes and compliments at each other. (p. 43)

SETTING

- The novel takes place during the annual Australian ritual of “schoolies week”. How does this ground the novel in a distinctive sense of place? What other features of the setting create a strong sense of place and time that might be particularly resonant to a contemporary Australian audience?
- Try to identify the real-life island which Shearwater Island might be based on. Present your hypothesis to the class, using visuals and evidence from the book to support your ideas.
- Consider the symbolic significance of Shearwater Island. How important is the island setting to the events that take place in the novel? Consider the way that the island operates as both a peaceful sanctuary affording reflection and self-discovery and a site of potential isolation and entrapment after the group start to question Sierra's motives.
- In many books where characters are trapped together in an isolated and confined setting, there is often a breakdown in social order and a descent into a more primal and brutal state. In *Before the Beginning*, however, the characters both grow in self-knowledge and develop more authentic and genuine relationships with each other as a group as a result of their experiences. Discuss.
- Compare *Before the Beginning* to another novel set on an island; for example, *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, *We Were Liars* by E. Lockhart, *Wilder Girls* by Rory Power and *And Then There Were None* by Agatha Christie.

CHARACTER

- Create a graph or visual representation depicting the relationships between the different characters in the novel and the way these develop over the course of the story.

- Do you feel that the story is told equally from the perspective of all characters, or is there one character's perspective who dominates? If the latter, which character is this and how is this achieved?
- Which character do you empathise with most strongly? Why is this?

GRACE

- "How can anyone stand it, without something there to make meaning of it? It was like I'd had a frame I could use to see the world, a wooden picture frame that I carried around with me everywhere. I could move it to look at different things a bit at a time, always seeing them through the outline of my faith. But now, it's broken into splinters and I'm surrounded by the pieces. And without the frame, the world has exploded into three dimensions and I don't know how to look at it anymore." (p. 37) Discuss the way religion operates as a lens through which Grace can understand the world. When she comes to question her spiritual faith, in what other ways does her life change?
- "What if I was the one living a life so blinkered and focused on one thing that I couldn't even have a normal conversation with the person in front of me?" (p. 49) In what way has Grace's religion prevented her from developing authentic relationships with others? Discuss the ways that religion can sometimes create a sense of community and connection, and in other instances, can create barriers and obstacles to true connection. Can you relate to this personally in any way?
- "They were all so focused on *options*. All I wanted was purpose." (p. 44) How does the decision to study philosophy help Grace to regain a sense of purpose previously provided by the church? How does this decision illustrate her growth both as an individual and a person in relationship with others?

SIERRA

- "'What if that girl never left the island? Not completely, anyway.' ... she definitely looked our age. The age the girl was when she died,'" (p. 230) The novel is deliberately ambiguous on the question of whether Sierra is an ordinary human girl or some type of mystical being. Do you feel the mystery of Sierra's identity is ever definitely resolved or does it remain open-ended? Find quotes in the novel to support your perspective.
- "Eyes the colour of eucalyptus, a voice that made my whole body feel like I was floating, the way she looked at me in the cave and told me she wanted to know me more. 'I'm still glad I met her,' I say. 'Whoever she was.'" (p. 231) Overall, do you find Sierra more empathetic or sinister as a character? What elements of her personality or behaviour help create empathy, or even sympathy? What elements are more alienating?
- Write an additional section of the novel from Sierra's perspective. This could take place either during or after events in the book. Think particularly about her motivations and desires.

CASPER

- “I got into trouble for not paying attention when, really, I felt like I was paying more attention than anyone else. Just to different things. Like, sometimes I think the gap between reality and fantasy is smaller for me than for most people. Most of the time I like this, but there are the times when the gap gets too small, even for me.” (p. 144-145) In what ways is Casper’s perspective different to other people’s? How important do you think seeing the world differently is to creating art? Consider this idea in relation to the picture book *Luke’s Way of Looking* by Nadia Wheatley and Matt Ottley.
- After discovering the exploitative portrait of herself and Sierra kissing, Grace says to Casper, “You don’t care about any of us at all, do you?” (p. 157) Do you feel that Casper is fundamentally a selfish or thoughtless character? In what way does his behaviour evolve over the course of the novel?
- “Sometimes it feels like making art is all that’s holding me to the rest of the world.” (p. 146) In what ways is art more than just a skill or pastime for Casper? Can you think of any parallels from your own life?

ELLIE

- ‘You’ve always had a thing, right? Yeah, it was weird to me and I didn’t get it, but it was yours. Casper has art. Noah has marks... But I’ve never had a “thing”. I like lots of stuff, but there’s nothing I’m really good at.’ (p. 179-180) Does Ellie discover her “thing” by the end of the novel? How does Grace coming to value her as an individual help her to gain a stronger sense of self?
- “She found everything else so easy – being confident, making jokes people actually understood, having friends, making people like her – that it didn’t matter.” (p. 106) Explore the disjunct between Ellie’s own perception of herself, and the way the other characters view her.
- Ellie steps into the role of leader in order to manage the group’s escape from the island. In your opinion, is it necessary for a group to have a leader to be effective? If so, in what circumstances?

NOAH

- “I’ve always thought that there are two Noahs: the first impression Noah, who comes across as a walking disaster – full of nervous energy, his head bobbing and long arms and legs sticking out awkwardly. This Noah hardly ever talks and looks shocked every time someone notices him. When he does speak it often comes in abrupt spurts of information. He doesn’t volunteer anything but if you want to know something and you push him, he always, always knows the right answers. / Then there’s the Noah that Elsie and I know, outside of school. The Noah who comes up with inventive swear words when we’re playing video games. Who gets so excited he knocks a bowl of chips off the table and doesn’t care. Who cried when the Mars Opportunity rover finally shut down. The one who is adored by every animal he meets, and who will never walk past a stray cat without saying hello, even if he’s running late.” (p. 140) Noah is a different person in different parts of his life. Discuss the ways that you present

different faces to the world, depending on the situation. What might our true self be, in relation these various roles we play. Is it one of these roles, the sum of all these roles, or something beneath them?

- “School was always easy for me, it was the people that were hard. Until one day it was the other way around.” (p. 72) Like Grace, Noah finds himself confronted with losing the things in life that had previously felt stable and certain. Can you relate to this situation in any way?
- “I liked it. Because each time I learnt something new I felt like here, now, was the heart of the thing. So much of science was learning useful lies as scaffolding to get to something greater. And even if it turned out not to be the whole truth, it was building to one theory that would make sense of everything. One day I’d get there, and it would all fall into place.” (p.77) In your own words, what does Noah enjoy about learning things? Do you think this is the same for everyone? Do you enjoy learning, and if so, what is the source of pleasure for you?

THEMES

- Create a mind-map depicting the key themes of the novel. Draw a picture or icon to represent each theme.
- Discuss the way certain themes are connected to different characters in the novel; for example, religion and spirituality is explored primarily in relation to Grace while anxiety is connected with Noah’s story. Are there themes which resist this categorization?
- Locate quotes to illustrate each of the themes. Use these to write an essay exploring the main ideas of the novel.

RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

- Part 1 is prefaced with two quotations: “What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?” (Mark 8: 36) and “Then I must also die and float as foam upon the sea . . . Can’t I do anything at all to win an immortal soul?” (“The Little Mermaid”). How does these quotations frame the story as an exploration of spiritual identity and its link to humanity?
- “But then the politicians who lost the vote on Marriage Equality decided to try and claw something back. There was a push to give religious schools – schools like mine – the right to fire any teachers and possibly expel any students for being gay.” (p. 37) The novel takes place in the time leading up to the referendum on same-sex-marriage held in Australia in 2017. Discuss the ways religion and politics intersect in life. Is it possible to keep the two separate?
- Write a letter to the editor in response to the following statement: “Religion should have no place in schools.” Then, write a response to this letter arguing the opposing viewpoint.
- It could be argued that while Grace’s religious identity has declined throughout the novel, her spiritual identity has become stronger. Are religion and spirituality often viewed interchangeably? In what ways are they different?
- “‘This is perfect.’ He flips further on, where some pages have runnels of ink

down the page. 'These will be my last pieces. I'll call it mixed media: saltwater and pastel. A collaboration with the sea.'" (p. 221) When Casper's notebook falls into the ocean, instead of being ruined, the pictures gain a power and beauty that comes from something beyond his endeavours. This serendipitous event could be interpreted as an act of grace. Discuss the way grace underpins the text. Some examples might be the significance of Grace's name, the cloud of butterflies on the highway and the breathtaking bioluminescence in the ocean.

PRESSURE AND ANXIETY

- "Results next week. It will come in a text message. It will come in a letter. I'll log in to see it. Those four digits that will determine my future. Those four digits I've been working towards for thirteen years, practically my whole life. What will Mum and Dad say?" (p. 94) Like many high school students, Noah feels that his future success and happiness is determined by his exam results. In what way do you see this attitude perpetuated in your own life and more broadly in society? What are the inherent dangers to subscribing to this idea?
- "I didn't know why they put that sign outside asking for silence when the clocks in the exam room were ticking loud enough that I wished I'd brought in earplugs. The fluorescent lights above me stuttered and I couldn't believe I hadn't noticed it before, because the lights are loudest of all, all those strips across the ceiling buzzing out their aggressive waves over the whole room." (p. 100) Explore the way sensual imagery is used to vividly evoke the pressure Noah feels during his exam.
- "After a while I figured out which things helped with the attacks: avoid parties, avoid sport. Spend each morning before school petting Ursula until she fell asleep, and if I got cat hair all over me that was even better, since I'd have a reminder to take with me to school that she was waiting when I got home. Talk to Casper. Talk to Elsie. And when they weren't there, go to the bathroom and play games on my phone til the world of the screen numbed my mind." (p. 86) Make a list of things you can do to help relieve stress and anxiety in your own life.
- "'Noah,' Elsie interrupts me. 'You might still have anxiety. But you don't always have to feel like you do right now. And it doesn't have to get worse.'" (p. 106) While Noah develops strategies to temporarily keep his panic attacks at bay, he is only able to truly confront his anxiety once he has reached crisis point and confided to his friends about failing his exam. In your opinion, was it necessary for Noah to fail in order to be able to seek help? What role does communication play in coping with anxiety?
- Research anxiety on the internet. Then, create a poster encouraging people experiencing anxiety to seek support. Aim your poster at a specific audience such as teenagers, seniors, men or members of a particular cultural or linguistic group.

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

- “I know siblings often take on different roles in the family: the sporty one, the studious one, the arty one. Casper and I divided the roles very traditionally: the fun one and the responsible one. It’s my fault, I guess, since I’m older and could have picked first.” (p. 30) Discuss the roles that different member of your family have taken on.
- Casper and Grace have each carved out very distinct identities for themselves, a situation which means they have rarely had to compete with each other. However, an element of sibling rivalry is introduced when Grace embarks on a physical, and potentially romantic relationship, with Sierra, who Casper is besotted with. What impact does this have on Casper and Grace’s relationship?
- “She’s still sensitive though, to brothers who betray their sisters.” Debate the following statement as a class: Casper is not a good brother to Grace.
- Compare Casper and Grace’s homelife with Ellie’s. How might the situation between Ellie’s parents relate to the development of her feeling for Casper?

ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

- “It feels great to have someone just want me here, and her eyes are so green and so close that before I know what I’m doing, I lean over and kiss her. I’ve been kissed a few times before. Mostly on church camps, usually aware that everyone else knew it was happening (which often felt a bit like the whole point of the kissing, to give us something to talk about). The key adjective I’d use to describe any of those kisses was sloppy, and I’d never been up for a repeat performance with any of the boys. This time felt different.” (p. 57) What do you think is the source of Grace’s attraction to Sierra?
- In what way does the discussion of same-sex marriage law reform provide a background to Grace’s relationship with Sierra?
- Create a timeline of key events in same-sex marriage law in Australia.
- “Each night for the last two years, no matter if I had a girlfriend or not, Elsie and I would message each other: stories from the day, things we had forgotten to tell each other, whatever. The messages always ended with one word: a colour to sum up our days. ... Even though I see her every day here on the beach, without our phones to anchor each day with the message at the end, I feel strangely distant.” (p. 138) Do you feel there’s any possibility Casper and Ellie might become romantically involved in the future? What aspects of their characters and relationship would make them a good couple? What aspects might be problematic?
- “‘You knew this whole time?’ It was all unravelling, falling around me in pieces. Everything I’d thought about our friendship.” (p. 186) Why is Ellie so devastated when she discovers that Casper always knew that she liked him? Does she have any culpability, as Grace asserts when she tells Ellie to “share the blame around”, or is it all Casper’s fault?
- While many young adult novels are preoccupied with romantic relationships and typically end with a couple “getting together”, *Before the Beginning* ends with the two incipient romantic relationships in the book dissolved. How might

this go against readers' expectations? What reassuring messages might this be giving young people?

FRIENDSHIP

- “‘She did seem lonely,’ I say. ‘What if she’s spent all that time, waiting . . .’” (p. 231) Do you feel that Sierra is ultimately motivated by loneliness and the desire for friends, or by something more malevolent and controlling?
- Grace has always enjoyed close friendships with her friends from church, however, she has started to feel herself growing apart from them as she’s begun to question her faith. Write a journal entry about a time when a friendship declined or changed in some way.
- “‘I always tried to talk to you –’ ‘That’s it – key word: tried. You never actually wanted to talk to me. I was just your non-church project.’” (p. 48) While Grace thinks of herself as a friendly person, there is an element of deviousness in her behaviour which has prevented her from developing a true friendship with Ellie, even though they’ve grown up together. What are some of the barriers to genuine connection between people?
- “‘Hey, if you didn’t leave the island with a girlfriend at least you’ve gained a wing-woman?’” (p. 223) Create a diagram charting the evolution of Ellie and Grace’s friendship. Include key quotes from the novel.
- Discuss the various ways that friendship enables characters in the novel to solve problems and grow as individuals.

HUMANS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

- “I feel sick. I look down, at the dam, all that water trapped in between our walls. It looks sinister now, so mechanical – we’ve contorted something natural all out of shape. ... ‘Who knows what kind of damage we’ve caused. We should never have come.’” (p. 182-183) When she hears of the penguin burrows on the island, Ellie becomes distressed by the impact their camping may have had on the natural ecosystem. In contrast, Sierra remains nonplussed while Noah seems less concerned, claiming they are unlikely to have caused any lasting harm. Do you see their presence on the island as benign or deleterious?
- Research ways people can reduce their “environmental footprint” when camping or enjoying nature. Present your ideas in a brochure aimed at National Park users.
- “What if she was dreaming, before those ant-like creatures scrambled over her, ripped off parts of her skin and lit it on fire against her back? Can you blame her, really, for sinking under to cool the pain?” (p. 32) In what ways might the aspidochelone, an entry from “The Dictionary of Undersea Beings”, operate as a metaphor for the way humans exploit the natural world? To what extent might Anna Morgan be drawing on ideas from the Aboriginal dreaming in her depiction of this creature?

COMING-OF-AGE AND IDENTITY

- Each of the characters in the novel originally constructs themselves around a

certain idea or value: for Grace, her Christianity; for Casper, his art; for Noah, his academic success; and for Ellie, her relationship with Casper. What are the dangers of constructing your identity around a single thing? Is there anything which you consider central to your identity?

- Casper says of schoolies week: “‘I mean, why is it even this week? We could celebrate any week. And why the focus on alcohol and the beach? It’s meant to be wild but it’s so ... conventional.’” (p. 9) For some, schoolies week occupies a special place in Australian culture as a coming-of-age ritual. Others see it merely as an excuse for drunkenness and wild behaviour. How do you view it? Brainstorm other coming-of-age rituals, both formal and informal.
- “‘What do you want, then, from this week?’ ‘To feel something real,’ says Casper immediately. *To feel free*, I think, surprising myself with the clarity of the thought.” (p. 21) Do you intend to celebrate the end of school in some way? If so, what would you like to do and what do you hope to gain from the experience?
- “‘I don’t worry about my destiny, like Grace, because I already know what I want to do. But I do worry about losing myself. I worry that I won’t see the world in the same way. That I’ll end up like everyone else – a job, money, and only memories of the time before my life locked inescapably in to place.’” (p. 122) Casper has a clear need to see himself as different or superior to everyone else, with the other characters in the novel gently mocking him for this: “‘You cannot pretend to not know who incredibly famous people are because you’re above popular culture.’” (p. 135) Why do you think “normalcy” is so frightening to Casper? In what ways might all of us have a need to be special or unique?
- Imagine the different characters in the novel one year from now. What do you think they will be doing? How might their relationships have changed?
- “The wave builds, holds suspended in the air for an extra second – I want it to stay, I want to not-know for a moment longer, and then I don’t, I’m ready, I want it to fall – and it crashes into a flurry of foam.” (p. 233) The author chooses to end the book at the point before the protagonists have learnt their final exam results and in Casper’s case, whether he’s been accepted into his art program. Why do you think she does this?

VISUAL LITERACY ACTIVITIES

- Create an alternative cover for the novel. Present your cover to the class, explaining how you used visual elements such as colour, contrast, composition, framing, font and symbolism to engage readers and convey the key ideas of the novel.
- Create a map of the island, based on the descriptions provided in the novel.
- Ellie and Casper sum up their days by texting each other a color before they go to bed. Keep a visual record of your week, filling in each day with a shade or hue which reflects your experience. Explain your color choices to a classmate.
- Create a portrait of Sierra, using whatever medium seems appropriate.
- Create a visual gallery of works by artists mentioned in the novel.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THESE NOTES

These resources were created by Leonie Jordan. Leonie Jordan is a former Secondary School English Teacher and Children's & Youth Librarian who has presented at the State Library of NSW on numerous occasions. She has worked for a number of publishing companies including Walker Books Australia and Allen & Unwin, and has reviewed and created test material for Educational Assessment Australia, writers of the NAPLAN, ICAS and GAT assessments.