

# THE MONSTER OF HER AGE

Danielle Binks



TEACHERS RESOURCES

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**Teachers Resources by Robyn Sheahan-Bright**

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# INTRODUCTION

'It sounds so simple when she puts it like that. And I wonder if that's all I need: to accept that I love Lottie, and I'm still mad at her. Holding two of these emotions in my heart at the same time. (p 146)

In a neo-Gothic mansion in a city at the end of the world, Ellie finds there's room enough for art, family, forgiveness and love. This is a coming-of-age story about embracing the things that scare us from the author of *The Year the Maps Changed*.

How do you ruin someone's childhood? Ellie Marsden was born into the legendary Lovinger acting dynasty. Granddaughter of the infamous Lottie Lovinger, as a child Ellie shared the silver screen with Lottie in her one-and-only role playing the child monster in *Blood & Jacaranda* which became a cult classic horror movie. The experience left Ellie deeply traumatised and estranged from people she loved. Ellie hasn't forgiven her grandmother for her part in the debacle, nor her ex-schoolmates for the bullying she endured at Queen Street Girls as a result of her fame.

Now seventeen, Ellie has returned home to Hobart from boarding school in Mt Eliza, for the first time in years. Lottie is dying and Ellie wants to make peace with her before it's too late. When a chance encounter with Riya, a young film buff, leads her to a feminist horror film collective, Fright Night for Final Girls, Ellie realises that this girl might be someone she is able to show her real self to, and at last comes to understand her family's legacy.

This is a story of love, loss, family and film – a stirring, insightful novel about letting go of anger and learning to forgive without forgetting. And about embracing the things that scare us, in order to be braver.

## BEFORE & AFTER READING THE NOVEL

- Examine the cover of the novel. What does it suggest about the novel's themes?
- After you have read the novel, examine the cover again: what does it suggest to you now?
- After you have read the novel, read about Danielle Binks in reviews and articles and use the notes below to examine the text more closely.

# THEMES & CURRICULUM TOPICS

Several themes relevant to curriculum topics (Studies of Society & Environment, and English Language & Literacy) might be identified in this novel:

## STUDIES OF SOCIETY & ENVIRONMENT (SOSE)

### ABUSE

**KEY QUOTE:** ‘I was a kid! I was eleven. It shouldn’t have been up to me to save myself, when I didn’t even know I could speak up and tell them no!’ (p 124)

**DISCUSSION POINT:** Survivor and activist Tarana Burke’s #MeToo movement speaks out against emotional and sexual abuse, and sexual harassment. What does this novel suggest about such abuse?

**DISCUSSION POINT:** ‘I let out a ragged breath. ‘You know what I found out years later?’ Riya shakes her head. ‘They did the same thing to Shirley Temple. And I’m not comparing myself to her fame or anything. But . . . one of her co-stars revealed that the way directors used to get Temple to cry on cue was to hide her mother on set, and then whisper in Shirley’s ear that she’d been kidnapped by a man with blood-red eyes – and then keep the cameras rolling.’ (p 205) This novel refers to the mistreatment of child stars such as Shirley Temple, Judy Garland and Elizabeth Taylor who suffered manipulation which left a legacy of drug abuse and mental illness. (Such abuse is not confined to women – Michael Jackson and Macaulay Culkin are examples.) How ethical is it to encourage children to act in movies?

**DISCUSSION POINT:** ‘I suck in a sharp breath. ‘She said the scandal would haunt you more than the moment. She said it was just the methods they used to get the best out of child actors.’ She hangs her head. ‘Your dad was insisting on going to the press, telling everyone – but then Lottie said there’d be no repercussions, all the blame would fall on her, and . . . you’d be the story, not what they did to you.’ (p 197) When an adult realises that a child is suffering emotional abuse what should their response be?

### CELEBRITY

**KEY QUOTE:** ‘There were eyeballs on us, and we could both sense the low hum of awareness that comes from somebody recognising you, whispering your name, which could be heard even above the low-level roar that filled the small room, packed to the brim with other patrons chattering. I imagine it must be how hunted animals feel in the wild, but instead of the cock of a gun, it’s the shuttered sound of a camera-phone going off.’ (p 13)

**DISCUSSION POINT:** Lottie spent her whole life in the spotlight of public attention, and had conflicting feelings about that. While such attention was flattering, it was also intrusive and in her last days she shunned such attention. How damaging is celebrity?

**DISCUSSION POINT:** Ellie’s early experiences of fame and concomitant bullying have

left her scarred, and distrustful of others: ‘Is it because I expect to be betrayed by the people closest to me, or is it that constantly being betrayed by people I care about has me assuming the worst?’ (p 223) Does she learn to trust by the end of this novel?

## MONSTERS

**KEY QUOTE:** ‘Do you want to know the quickest way to ruin someone’s childhood?’ I don’t wait for an answer, and I don’t look at Riya as I say, ‘You make them believe that they are a monster, and then you tear away the mask.’ (p 202)

**DISCUSSION POINT:** ‘Before I can think of more Riya has an answer. ‘Sure, but I think that love sustains us, while fear reveals who we really are.’ (p 191) Discuss this quote in relation to the themes in this novel.

**DISCUSSION POINT:** ‘I think I’m suddenly getting why you love horror movies so much. The adrenaline of that – of being close to the thing that scares you the most, it’s . . . amazing and intoxicating and I want to jump out of my skin most days. I want to scream. I really want to run, but I think there’s something in sticking around.’ (p 243) Discuss this quote.

**DISCUSSION POINT:** ‘Clearly drawn at a time when you couldn’t just google “panther” and draw from a likeness. But I think he also did it because he trusted that whatever the monster was, the idea in audiences’ imaginations would be so much scarier than anything they could come up with on screen.’ ‘He let their imaginations take over?’ ‘Yeah . . . it’s kind of like, making room for silence because the unknown is where our fears mostly live.’ (p 231) Why do we fear monsters so much?

**DISCUSSION POINT:** On pp 230–231 Ellie and Yael discuss ‘Lewton’s Law’ – ‘to never reveal the monster’, as mentioned above. Can you think of other examples, in film or literature, where the monster is never revealed but left to people’s imaginations?

[See also **ENGLISH LANGUAGE & LITERACY Horror Genre & Monsters in Fiction** below.]

## DYING & GRIEF

**KEY QUOTE:** ‘And it’s not quite true, about there being no rules for dying. We don’t do last rites, but there is the final confessional prayer (Viduy) and we are supposed to find out what the person wants, and if they have any final concerns that can be eased. They’re also not supposed to die alone – which seems like an impossible task, to me – and finally, nothing can be done that might hasten the dying process. And these not-quite-rules for not-quite-living are the whole reason I’m here.’ (p 8)

**DISCUSSION POINT:** ‘Grief is very powerful, and if you let it – it can consume you. And when someone reminds you that you don’t get grief without overwhelming love too . . . well, it can be a lifeline,’ he says.’ (p 82) Discuss this quote and how love can assist us in dealing with grief.

**DISCUSSION POINT:** ‘There are stages to mourning: Aninut, Sheloshim, Shanah,

Yahrzeit, Yizkor.' (p 229) The Jewish faith is referred to often in this novel. Although Ellie doesn't practise the Jewish faith as some family members do, does she appreciate the comfort such rituals provide?

## FAMILY HISTORY & MEMORY

**KEY QUOTE:** 'And I marvel at how loving and missing a place that still holds painful memories is that much harder when your family tree has deep roots in a city like Hobart and your family history and history itself are so deeply entwined . . . I think on this as I walk the hill to home and Lovinger House, which has been in my family for generations.' (p 118)

**DISCUSSION POINT:** Ellie's return to Hobart reminds her of the family legacy she cannot deny. What does she discover about this legacy?

## COMING OF AGE & RITE OF PASSAGE

**KEY QUOTE:** 'I know better than most that some hurts can haunt you. It doesn't matter at what age they happened because they find a way to grow with you and around you, like a weed.' (p 18)

**DISCUSSION POINT:** 'I think maybe we both have to learn that we can still love her, even if we never stop being angry and hurt by her too.' I shrug. 'Death doesn't clean her of that.' Mum lets out a shaky breath. 'When did you get so wise?' (p 196) How difficult would it be to forgive Lottie as Ellie ultimately does?

**DISCUSSION POINT:** Ellie's love affair with Riya is her first public acknowledgement of her sexuality. She is supported in this by the acceptance of her family. How difficult might it have been if she didn't have that acceptance?

**DISCUSSION POINT:** 'But if watching a small selection of horror movies has taught me anything, it's that you don't get to fearlessness or to be the Final Girl by waiting in the car. You get it by actually confronting the things that scare you and accepting the possibility that you could lose.' (p 238) Is Ellie fearless by the end of this novel?

## AUSTRALIAN FILM INDUSTRY

**KEY QUOTE:** 'And for as long as I can remember, I've been obsessed with Drew Barrymore and her family dynasty – as well as the history of Australian female filmmakers like The McDonagh Sisters and Lottie Lyell.' (p i)

**DISCUSSION POINT:** This novel is a tribute to Australian film and a lament for the many decades when it was virtually non-existent (pp 255–8). Binks imagines an earlier era when Australian films did actually flourish instead of being stifled by imports from Hollywood. For, despite the fact that the first feature film in the world was made here in 1906, it was another six decades before the industry really took off in the 1970s, with the support of government funding. Research and discuss the development of Australian film using the cues embedded in this text.

**DISCUSSION POINT:** Some Australian actors, filmmakers and other film professionals became famous in Hollywood in its Golden Age, from the end of the silent film era to the late 1960s. Research and write a short biography on an Australian who transitioned to Hollywood in this period, such as Orry Kelly (costume designer), Errol Flynn (actor), Peter Finch (actor) or Mary Maguire (actor).

## **ENGLISH LANGUAGE & LITERACY**

Study the writing style employed in this narrative, and examine the following sub-topics:

### **NARRATIVE PERSON, NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE & TENSE**

**DISCUSSION POINT:** Written in first person, present tense by Ellie, this novel offers her perspective of the action. Re-write a scene in Riya or Yael's voice and observe how that alters the narrative.

### **HORROR GENRE & MONSTERS IN FICTION**

**DISCUSSION POINT:** This novel dwells on the genre of horror fiction and film and thematically employs analysis of the genre to underline character development. 'You're among friends and family, and people who understand that horror is the one genre that puts women's fears and insecurities under the spotlight, only to be overcome.' (p 247) Riya recommends Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) to Ellie, as one of the pioneering examples of the genre (pp 100-1). [Popular culture has continued to reference this narrative in productions such as Richard O'Brien's *The Rocky Horror Show* (1973) and subsequent film, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975).] Discuss what this novel reveals about horror as a genre.

**DISCUSSION POINT:** Read and discuss Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818).

**DISCUSSION POINT:** 'Blood & Jacaranda put an old spin on new frustrations; different topics, but the same battle – essentially generational. It was iconic having Lottie Lovinger in a clash with her own granddaughter, refusing to do what is right for her. Killing her slowly instead. Lots of people have read modern-day child activists into that, from climate change to gun control – the whole idea that the film is a "coming of rage" from the point of view of the monster really spoke to people. And to have Little Mate survive – not be killed or sacrificed like so many other monsters . . . it made audiences reconsider who the real hero of the story was. That maybe a monster could be both.' (p 217) Discuss this quote in relation to horror fiction in general.

**DISCUSSION POINT:** 'Ah, the final girl is a familiar trope in horror. She is the sole survivor, the one left standing at the end of a film. She alone will confront the monster or killer at the end of the movie and live to tell the tale – or else appear in the sequels to create a film franchise.' (p 102) Discuss this trope in relation to horror films which you have seen.

**DISCUSSION POINT:** ‘... the point of fables and fairy tales was to mostly keep young women in line. Hello? *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* is literally telling young, curious women not to go jumping into strangers’ beds. The Brothers Grimm were passing down tales to keep ladies in check and fairy tales were really the original horror stories.’ (p 132) Discuss this quote in relation to fairy tales you know.

## SYMBOLISM

**DISCUSSION POINT:** What examples of symbolism did you notice in this novel?

## LITERARY DEVICES

**ACTIVITY:** Find examples of the use of literary devices in this novel, using the table below to identify examples.

<b>Simile</b>	‘It looks like something Carol Brady would sit in front of,’ (p 49)
<b>Metaphors</b>	
<b>Personification</b>	
<b>Other</b>	

## HUMOUR

**ACTIVITY:** Identify techniques by which humour is provoked. Add quotes to the following table:

<b>Sarcasm</b>	
<b>Iront</b>	
<b>Exaggeration</b>	
<b>Black Humour</b>	
<b>Other</b>	

## STRUCTURE

The structure of the story can be analysed in terms of key narrative features used to engage the reader's attention and to shape the work:

a) *Strong beginnings and endings to chapters* are one way of structuring a narrative, for example:

Beginning: 'We're hurtling over a bridge of light tonight.' (Ch 9, p 55)

Ending: 'Come on – we want to beat the dawn!' (Ch 26, p 176)

Which other opening or closing sentence was particularly gripping, in your opinion?

b) *Suspense* is the key to any narrative's structure. What aspects of this narrative were suspenseful?

## SETTING

**DISCUSSION POINT:** Hobart is celebrated in this novel in the beautiful descriptions of Ellie's walks, eg. 'Each step feels like it is grounding and giving me a firmer hold on being home. And it's why I want to take the long way from the hospital back to Lovinger House now. I take the scenic route past the Maritime Museum, Constitution Dock, Franklin Square, Parliament House and St David's Park. I walk up and down the old winding streets of Battery Point with their little cottages of Old Hobart Town, sitting alongside new and old colonial and revival homes with three-million-dollar views.' (pp 17–18) What other description was particularly evocative in your opinion?

**DISCUSSION POINT:** 'Setting also provides insight into character in some descriptions, eg. 'I deliberately arrived twenty minutes late to the Tea Rooms in the Block Arcade, with its emerald-green leaf wallpaper, shaded chandeliers, blackwood panelling and rows and rows of cakes lit up for display in the large front window. My grandmother was sitting among all this 128-year-old cramped opulence, at a table in a back corner of the room. She was facing away from the many fellow diners, with the greater chance of privacy the far wall afforded.' (p 11) Lottie is presented here in a setting which befits her extravagant nature. Where else in the novel does setting reflect a character in this way?

## CHARACTERS

**MAJOR CHARACTERS:** Ellie Marsden, a secondary school graduate and former child actor; Louise Marsden, her mother; Lottie Lovinger, Ellie's grandmother, an ageing movie star; Uncle Jasper Felman, a tax lawyer; Michael Marsden, Ellie's father, a theatre director, absent working in London; Yael Felman, Ellie's cousin and daughter of Jasper Felman and his divorced wife Constance; Poe Tuhana, a NZ costume designer, and Lottie's second ex-husband; Riya Vaidhyanathan, co-convenor of the Fright Night for Final Girls, a feminist horror film club.

**MINOR CHARACTERS:** Corinne, Lottie's palliative care nurse; Mags (Margaret), the Head of House at Ellie's former boarding school; Kaleb Felman, Lottie's third and ex-husband; (Harvey Hutton, Lottie's first husband, an actor, died at 27 and was Ellie's

grandfather); Shane, Lottie's fourth ex-husband (only mentioned in passing); Tobin and Seth, Jasper's and Louise's half-brothers; Arin, Riya's cousin; Jen Jones, co-convenor and Deaf member of the Fright Night for Final Girls; Ah-Pei, Kate and Maria, the other three members of the film group; Brinda, Riya's mother; Ryan Longford, a former actor colleague of Lottie's.

**ACTIVITY:** Draw up a character chart and find key quotes which give a clear picture of any of these characters, and isolate events that demonstrate their natures. Then write a brief character study of the person using the quotes and events to illustrate the points made in your summary.

**QUESTION:** Which character was most intriguing and why? Which character would you like to have heard more about? For example, Corinne, the palliative care nurse, plays a small but significant role in this novel.

## WRITING TASKS

**ACTIVITY:** Write a diary entry by Yael about her family.

**ACTIVITY:** Write a book review of this novel.

**ACTIVITY:** Write a letter as if by Ellie to her father, Michael, detailing the events leading to Lottie's death.

## VISUAL LITERACY

**ACTIVITY:** Create a graphic novel interpretation of an incident in the novel. [See **Bibliography**.]

**ACTIVITY:** Design a new cover for this book.

**ACTIVITY:** Create a book trailer for this novel. [See **Bibliography**.]

## FURTHER QUOTES FOR DISCUSSION

1. 'We don't talk about funerals and what comes after when someone is still with us, and has not yet died. Instead and when we can, we talk in euphemisms, taking care to verbally walk around the subject . . .' (p 51)

2. 'Everything that brings people together, and lets them connect with each other, whether they know it or not, is art. And if you take that away, people tend to lash out.' (p 56)

3. 'You know, tomorrow isn't guaranteed to be another day - not for everyone.' (p 113)

4. 'If grief feels like emotional jetlag, then waiting as someone slowly dies and fades away is like being in a perpetual airport terminal - waiting and waiting for someone

else's flight to depart, a limbo that pressurises time until it has no meaning. I've only been home in Hobart for two weeks, but it's starting to feel like another lifetime entirely.' (p 140)

**5.** 'Your grandmother used to get compared to Hepburn a lot,' Mr. Longford says, pulling our attention away from the TV. 'Oh yeah?' Yael asks, politely. He nods. 'Yeah, and it used to really piss her off.' 'Seems like a flattering comparison to me!' 'Nah, she always said male stars get called revelations, heralded as game-changers. But women always get compared to other women, which keeps them in boxes and the same prototypes running around.' (p 149)

**6.** 'Studying and pursuing a career in the Arts, it . . . well, it tends to be a luxury only a few people can afford - and only certain types of people.' (p 163)

**7.** 'Jen says she'll respect comic-book movies as soon as studios employ more than one female director at a time,' Maria says, and then she nods as though to say - fair point.' (p 166)

**8.** 'Besides, the thing that people most cling to isn't the product of art, but the messages it instils.' (p 214)

**9.** 'this feeling and fear I had that my withholding forgiveness was a tether. Like my anger was keeping her here, and maybe just moving on was a sacrifice I had to make for her sake.' (p 213)

**10.** 'You shouldn't be made to feel bad for other people's actions, even the people you love. You are not defined by other people's mistakes.' (p 238)

## FURTHER ACTIVITIES

**1. Compare this novel to other young adult novels** which deal with a rite of passage.  
[See Bibliography.]

**2. Design a poster to advertise this book.**

**3.** The **title of this book** refers to the part Ellie played in the film but also refers to other thematic aspects of the narrative. What other title might the book have had?

**4. Debate any of the topics** covered in these notes, or suggested by the novel.

**5. Locate, watch and discuss some of the classic films** referred to in this novel.

# CONCLUSION

This is a complex coming of age novel which canvases confronting one's sexuality, dealing with past trauma, resolving family tensions, forgiveness, grief, death, and making decisions for the future.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Danielle Binks** is a writer, reviewer, agent and book blogger who lives on the Mornington Peninsula. In 2017, she edited and contributed to *Begin, End, Begin*, an anthology of new Australian young adult writing inspired by the #LoveOzYA movement, which won the ABIA Book of the Year for Older Children (Ages 13+) and was shortlisted in the 2018 Gold Inky Awards. *The Year the Maps Changed*, Danielle's debut middle-grade novel, was a CBCA Notable Book for Younger Readers 2021, longlisted for the ABIA Book of the Year Award for Younger Children 2021, shortlisted for the Readings Children's Book Prize 2021 and longlisted for the Indie Book Awards 2021. *The Monster of Her Age* is Danielle's debut YA novel. Visit her website for further information: <https://daniellebinks.com/>

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE NOTES

**Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright AM** operates *justified text* writing and publishing consultancy services, and is widely published on children's literature, publishing history and Australian fiction. Her publications include *Paper Empires: A History of the Book in Australia 1946–2005* (co-edited with Craig Munro) (UQP, 2006). In 2011 she was recipient of the CBCA (Qld) Dame Annabelle Rankin Award, in 2012, of the CBCA Nan Chauncy Award for Outstanding Services to Children's Literature, and in 2014, the QWC's Johnno Award. In 2021, she was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia.