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# ***WHERE YOU LEFT US***

## Rhiannon Wilde



### Teachers' Notes

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**SYNOPSIS**

Halcyon House sits high on the cliffs of a seaside town, shrouded in mystery and stories of the unstable Prince family. Nineteen-year-old Cinnamon tries to ignore the gossip surrounding her family as she supports her father during his latest breakdown. Apart from her best friend/ex-boyfriend, Will, she keeps others at a distance, including her sister and mother. But when Daisy Leung enters her life, Cinnamon's resolve starts to falter.

Scarlett Prince has just finished year twelve. Plagued by panic attacks and anxiety, she returns from boarding school to face Cinnamon's disdain and a father who is completely withdrawn. Preferring to lose herself in Brönte novels and other classics, no-one is more surprised than Scarlett when she and Will start noticing one another.

As the sisters start to unravel the truth behind the disappearance of their Great Aunt Sadie, Scarlett and Cinnamon begin to understand that the town's stories are nothing close to the truth.

*Where You Left Us* is a part-gothic, part-romance coming-of-age novel that explores themes of love, hate, rejection, belonging and crippling mental illness. Above all, it is a story of hope and 'what ifs'.

**THEMES**

- Love; Sexuality
- Belonging; Home; Family; Siblings
- Mental Illness (Anxiety, Depression); Gossip
- Ghosts; Hauntings
- Truth

**WRITING STYLE**

*Where You Left Us* is a dual narrative told from the third-person, present-tense perspectives of Cinnamon and Scarlett. Both sisters are struggling with their father's breakdown as well as their own issues: Cinnamon is angry with a fearless facade, while Scarlett is navigating panic attacks and her sister's wrath. Their voices are distinct, each dealing with their demons in a way that is realistic and relatable. When Cinnamon falls for Daisy, she is nevertheless unable to reconcile the burgeoning relationship between her ex-boyfriend, Will, and her sister. Awkward moments of first love set against the gothic-mystery of Sadie Prince's disappearance make for an evocative story about love, truth, belonging and moving on. Rich figurative language and intimate inner dialogues combined with sensitive inclusion of mental illness and sexuality creates a text that is vital. Due to its themes and occasional use of explicit language, it is best suited to older readers.

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## STUDY NOTES

- The opening pages of *Where You Left Us* act as a prelude to the rest of the narrative. Discuss why the author has chosen to write this section in second person. How does this help create a sense of connection between the reader and the text? What are you wondering after reading the first few pages? Why is it important that authors invite readers to ponder and speculate? Return to this prelude once you have finished reading *Where You Left Us*. Discuss the use of foreshadowing as a literary tool. What can we tell about the relationship between the narrator and her father from these opening pages?
- Why does Cinnamon like her brain best 'when it goes almost quiet' (p. 3)? How does running help her achieve this?
- What is clouding Cinnamon's mind? Discuss the symbolism of the clouds that 'scud across her vision' (p. 3)?
- Using the description of Halcyon House on pp. 3–4, sketch the setting for this novel. Discuss the language features used on p. 12 that describe the bohemian vibe of the Victorian house. Why is this description so effective? In what ways is Halcyon like a character in *Where You Left Us*? How has this been achieved?
- Why do the locals refer to Halcyon House as 'notorious' rather than 'infamous' (see p. 4)? What is the difference?
- Cinnamon feels she must take responsibility for Ian's wellbeing. How is this important to the storyline?
- Why does Cinnamon see herself and Scarlett as being like 'chalk and air' (p. 6)? Why does she describe Scarlett as 'different and walled' (p. 6)?
- Using evidence from the text to support your thinking, describe the way Scarlett thinks about herself.
- Why is Cinnamon so angry? Why does Scarlett see her as both angry and fearless? Is Cinnamon fearless? Discuss.
- Why is Scarlett uncomfortable when she feels a 'Cinnamon kind' of anger rising in her chest (p. 13)?
- Why does Scarlett hate the 'explosive part of living near the ocean, of being in her family' (p. 14)? Have you ever felt like this? Share with a friend.
- How is Ian's depression described in the text? What support does he receive from his family? What is it that helps him to reconnect with his family later in the text?
- Why is Cinnamon so confronted by the return of Scarlett? Why does she feel as though everything looks worse now that Scarlett is home (p. 15)?
- What role does Will play in Cinnamon's life? Why does she need Will, even though she broke up with him? How would the story be different without him?

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- Why, in her own bedroom, does Scarlett feel 'like an interloper, sitting among the debris of someone else's life' (p. 21)?
- Why does 'following codes' make Scarlett feel better (p. 22)?
- What does Scarlett miss about the city? How is she torn between her past and future when returning home? Why does she say the sea holds 'her whole childhood' (p. 23)?
- Why, when Cinnamon and Will broke up, was it 'the end of them, and also the beginning' (p. 26)?
- Why does Cinnamon tell Will 'it's okay to be sad' (p. 28)? Discuss the importance of letting oneself feel sad at times.
- How does Cinnamon feel towards her dad and his depression? Why does she get a 'falling feeling' (p. 29) when Ian retreats within himself? Describe how she feels when she doesn't want to be angry with him, but it 'rises sticky in her throat' (p. 29) regardless. Have you ever felt like this? Share in a reflection.
- Why does Cinnamon often feel as though she is 'standing on a rock, alone, while waves crash hard around her' (p. 30)? What could she do to feel less this way?
- Discuss the formatting and sentiments on p. 33, in which Scarlett reminds herself that she exists. Why are there teardrops on this page?
- Discuss the description of a storm building then subsiding below:  
     'Sheets of grey rain slap at the windows, building momentum: *let me in, bash-bash-bash, I'm coming, I'm here ...* Then it's over: the drumming rain dies like a light globe switched off' (p. 34)  
 How might this be a metaphor for the waves of depression, anger, fear, doubt and anxiety that the Prince family experience?
- What does Scarlett mean when she wonders how Halcyon feels about being a home 'for both the living and the dead' (p. 36)?
- Why does Scarlett describe Sadie's painting as having a 'face like a secret' (p. 38)? Why were Cinnamon and Scarlett 'a little bit in love with Sadie' when they were younger (p. 38)? Why did Sadie move from past to present tense, then back to past tense, for the girls (p. 40)? Why does Cinnamon lose interest in Sadie?
- Explain why the text is called *Where You Left Us*.
- On p. 41, Scarlett sees Sadie as 'ripples of a legend that fans out in low waves to wrap around and cover them all'. Does she still think this way by the end of the text? Discuss.
- Why, sometimes, do the 'months of Broken Up collapse inwards like wet paper' when Will and Cinnamon are together (p. 42)? How does this become problematic later in the text?
- What does Cinnamon mean when she says of the empty grave that it reflects the 'Prince-ness of burying things so well there's nothing there' (p. 42)? What other examples are there of this throughout the text?

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- Why, when looking at the empty grave, does Cinnamon feel 'entangled in it, like being lied to, like being buried too' (p. 43)?
- Why is missing Will sometimes Cinnamon's 'favourite feeling in the world' (p. 45)? Have you ever felt like this? Share with a friend.
- Why does Cinnamon initially see Daisy as 'dangerous' (p. 48)?
- What is it about Brönte novels that is so appealing to Scarlett (p. 49)? How is this evident in the way she lives her life?
- What impact does Ian's depression have on Scarlett? How is it different from its effect on Cinnamon?
- Why hasn't Cinnamon gone swimming since the death of Grandma Maggie? What is it that prompts her to swim with Daisy?
- Discuss Amy's character. Why does Cinnamon treat her so poorly? How and why is Amy's relationship with Scarlett different?
- Discuss the significance of the soles of Daisy's shoes digging into Cinnamon's skin 'just enough to leave a mark' (p. 81).
- What were your initial thoughts when Scarlett found Sadie's hospital records? How did your predictions change as the text progressed?
- Discuss the importance of Will and Scarlett's Sherlock and Watson subplot. How does this help weave the strands of the narrative together?
- What does Cinnamon mean when she says 'she's not the male gaze' (p. 125)?
- Why does Cinnamon feel that if she wants something, she 'can't have it' (p. 125)? How does this affect her relationships and future? What instigates a change to this mindset?
- Why does Scarlett describe herself as 'half agony, half hope' (p. 130)? Give examples from the text to support your thinking.
- How does Will help Scarlett to manage her panic attacks? How does the story of Orpheus and Eurydice help Will and Scarlett become closer?
- Why does Scarlett second-guess ordering a hot chocolate when at the coffee shop with Will? What does this share with readers about her?
- What does Doctor Marnie mean by 'worry postponement' (p. 162)? How does this impede Scarlett?
- Why does Cinnamon worry about feeling 'happy-warm' (p. 165)? Why does being 'scarily happy' make her forget who she is?
- What is it, really, that prevents Cinnamon from allowing herself to be happy?
- What can you learn about managing anxiety from Marnie's sessions with Scarlett? (See p. 174.)
- What evidence is there in *Where You Left Us* that the relationship between Scarlett and Cinnamon will eventually heal?
- What is so different about Cinnamon's relationship with Daisy that she actually wants to 'be careful' with it (p. 177)?

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- Why does Cinnamon become uncomfortable after meeting Daisy's parents? What advice would you give her?
- Why does Cinnamon describe Christmas as a 'non-event' (p. 189), while Scarlett says 'Christmas is an Event' (p. 195)? How does this typify their differences?
- Even though she says she doesn't know what she's doing, why does Cinnamon spray herself all over with Daisy's perfume at the shops (p. 202)?
- Why, when discovering Will and Scarlett together, does Cinnamon feel 'the kind of angry where you feel like if you scream, pieces of you will fall out' (p. 227)? Why does she 'kind of want them to' (p. 227)? Does Cinnamon have a right to feel this way? Discuss.
- Why, after discussing their break-up properly, does Cinnamon say to Will that she may need him not to be there for her for a while (p. 231)?
- What is beneficial about Cinnamon's stay at Phe and Mattie's place after she fights with Scarlett? How might this help her imagine a different kind of future for herself?
- Why does Cinnamon ghost Daisy? What would you say to Cinnamon about this?
- Why does wearing her sister's clothes make Scarlett feel 'inexplicably brave' (p. 262)? How does Scarlett show courage on her own merit?
- Discuss why the author has used different formatting in the chapters narrated by Cinnamon and Scarlett to reveal more about their characters? Why does Scarlett 'keep her thoughts in list form' and separate her thoughts into 'Sherlock things' and 'Scarlett things' (p. 269)? How are Cinnamon's inner thoughts captured? How does this help readers to connect with each of the protagonists?
- Re-read the last paragraph on p. 270. Why is there a lack of punctuation? Discuss the formatting and words on p. 271. What is happening at this stage of the narrative?
- What did Maggie mean when she said 'the past was a place in the same way the future is, only backwards' (p. 274)? How does this help the girls?
- Why does Scarlett feel like crying 'in a way that's not at all bad' when she hears Cinnamon speaking softly to Daisy (p. 283)? What does this tell readers about their relationship?
- Why does Cinnamon watch old video interviews of her father on YouTube? How do his views on truth help her (see p. 299)?
- What does it mean for Cinnamon to become 'full of velvety hope' (p. 300)? How might she feel about this?
- What does Marnie mean when she tells Scarlett to be 'vulnerable sometimes with people who deserve it' (p. 302)?

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- Why, after their journey to Wonderland, does Cinnamon feel her hometown 'looks different' (p. 321)? In what ways is it different? What is Cinnamon letting go of in Chapter 51?
- Write an explanation about the theme of 'home' as explored in *Where You Left Us*.
- What does Scarlett come to realise about the importance of acceptance? How will this help her in the future?
- What do you think is the main message in *Where You Left Us*?
- How does discovering the truth about their family help Cinnamon and Scarlett to heal and move forward with their lives? How are history and truth central themes of *Where You Left Us*?
- Discuss the gothic nature of *Where You Left Us*. How does this shape the mood of the text?
- Compare Cinnamon's and Scarlett's personalities. How are they similar and different? Why don't they get along? What do you think they admire about one another? What would help strengthen their relationship?
- Using details from *Where You Left Us*, create a 'vision board' that captures the settings of either Halcyon House or Wonderland.
- What comment does *Where You Left Us* make about gender as a construct? How do the relationships formed reveal the true nature of love?
- How do Cinnamon and Scarlett develop and change from the beginning to the end of the text? In what ways is *Where You Left Us* a classic coming-of-age story?
- Choose a part of the story to rewrite from Will's or Daisy's point of view. Alternatively, write a passage from Sadie's point of view.
- Create a story map that outlines the main plot points of this story.
- In pairs, create a monologue that demonstrates your understanding of the characters, settings and themes shared in *Where You Left Us*.
- Discuss the contribution to the text of Rhiannon Wilde's use of figurative language. Some examples include:
  - the waves lap at the rocks below and ... hiss-crash over each other onto wet sand (p. 1)
  - It's bright tonight, the ocean a greenish hue, as if a torch is being shone from underneath (p. 1)
  - Outside the window, the sun slips into bruises on the horizon (p. 9)
  - The car coughs loudly into life, as though it knows this is the last of the welcome-y words they have for each other (p. 11)
  - Halcyon House sits where it always has – hunched on its cliff and staring out to sea (pp. 11–12)
  - all her maybe-futures flowing through her limbs in a hot nervous flare (p. 21)

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- the storm is finally hissing into being, wind running rough hands through the tree branches and rain landing in fat drops on the roof (p. 30)
- he was standing in her front yard with a smile on his face that was like an open door (pp. 43–44)
- Sleepy shops become overwhelmingly busy, the baking heat inside and outside like a hug from an overzealous relative (p. 57)
- rinsing her hair in the outdoor showers afterwards while toothpaste-in-your-mouth-cold water splashed the rocks at her feet (p. 62)
- A trailing coral-coloured shawl hugging her arms like a spider web (p. 68)
- The opaque night-sea with its froth of white foam kisses the sand (p. 80)
- Scarlett's mind is moving fast, thoughts like wispy clouds on a clear day (p. 85)
- It gives off nostalgia like perfume (p. 101)
- Scarlett feels Will's words the way she felt his eyes in the hallway – warm, everywhere (p. 103)
- Awkwardness clamps hot hands around them again (p. 107)
- Storm clouds are brewing on the horizon, dark as a day-old bruise. Whitewash slaps at the rocks below. (p. 123)
- beading on top of her make-up like dew (p. 124)
- Rain batters the windscreen, droplets trapping light and racing each other down the glass (p. 125)
- Streetlights are switching on behind him, yellow beams casting their glow on the hazy salt hanging in the air like smoke (p. 162)
- all the coping she's been doing lately is ice-cream-melting away (p. 172)
- Guilt is in your body, though, wet like rain or dread (p. 233)
- Outside is green green green too, with a sweet floral smell hung on the air like an old lady's bathroom (p. 238)
- Daisy's ... wearing a light-blue silk dress that slips down her hips like water (p. 252)
- Her voice is betraying her, swaying and wavering like the leaves in the wind above their heads (p. 255)
- It feels like collaboratively making art (p. 257)
- Cinnamon is a lightning bolt of glad (p. 279)
- Guilt rushes over Scarlett monsoon-fast (p. 306)
- It's hot in a way that flattens the world into a haze, the horizon hung with dusty blue-gold humidity (p. 322)



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**AUTHOR MOTIVATION**

*Where You Left Us* is a story that started way back when I was nineteen. I was anxious and depressed to the point of barely leaving the house, and I wanted to write characters who were going through similar things, but give them a journey towards acceptance and healing. Anxiety and empowerment are two things that don't always go together (or at least they didn't when I was younger and being diagnosed with symptomless glandular fever because that seemed the only reason I couldn't get out of bed or go to school). I also wanted to write a story about mental health in a way that honoured the other people I know who suffer greatly and still 'get things done' because they have to, or because they want to. I wanted to write about the fierce feelings between sisters and families and first loves – and I wanted to write something gothic, because as an anxious teen I loved classic gothic stories that were *just* haunting enough to make us think. I didn't have glandular fever (spoiler!) but I will always be prone to depression and anxiety, and *Where You Left Us* is about all the bright-sparkling life that happens anyway.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Rhiannon Wilde is a writer and former Brisbane high school teacher. Her debut novel, *Henry Hamlet's Heart*, won the Queensland Literary Awards Glendower Award for an Emerging Queensland Writer, was shortlisted for the NSW Premier's Literary Awards – Ethel Turner Prize for Young People's Literature, longlisted for an Indie Book Award and was a CBCA Notable Book. She can usually be found drinking coffee dressed like a slightly subdued Elton John, and lives with her partner on a hill near the sea.