

Skin Deep

Author

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Synopsis

Scarlett is not the girl she used to be. The car crash that burnt her so horribly also ended the life that she knew, and cast her into a new life filled with pain and loss. For over a year she has fought to survive, and struggled to come to terms with what has happened to her. Now her burns have healed, and her surgeries are over, and she realises that this is as good as it gets and she does not know how to keep on going. The looks from strangers and the sympathy from friends are interminable and all Scarlett wants is to run away and hide somewhere where she can just exist without having to deal with other people, and can ignore how dreadfully scarred she now is. The holiday in a remote cabin in the mountains was meant to be exactly that, a chance for Scarlett to exist for a time without the constant pressure of other people's regards, so the last thing she wanted was to meet local boy Eamon and his family. But Eamon is different from the kids at school, he never knew Scarlett before her accident, and he has a way of accepting her as she is that she finds she doesn't mind, so when he suggests a hike up the mountain together she uncertainly agrees. And as it turns out Eamon, his sister Cat, and his mother Claudia are exactly the people Scarlett needed in her life, and the combination of the solitude, ragged beauty, and danger of the mountains with Eamon's undemanding and perceptive friendship, helps her realise that she herself is the only person who can define who she is.

About the Author

Hayley Lawrence has been writing since she learnt to hold a pencil. She is currently a lawyer in coastal NSW, where she lives with her five beautifully wild daughters and writes novels. Hayley's work is haunted by the stories she encounters as a lawyer, through her daughters and in the incredible people who lay their souls bare to her. Hayley's novels have won fellowships and been shortlisted for the Vogel Literary Award. Her work has also received critical acclaim with the Children's Book Council of Australia and the Sisters-in-Crime Davitt Award.

Themes

Key Themes include: Family; hope; disability; disfigurement; danger; friendship; perseverance; bravery; self-identity; isolation; community; love; support; and overcoming challenges.



Writing Style

Written throughout in the first person from the point of view of fourteen year old Scarlett, the narrative shares with the reader both the inner landscapes of emotional turmoil and the outward events that form Scarlett's world in her own voice. The narrative is chronologically sophisticated, with the main action of the story progressing in a straightforward manner while the events leading up to and surrounding Scarlett's accident are gradually revealed through flashbacks and personal disclosures. The narrative revolves around Scarlett's inner monologue, self-perception, and personal opinions of herself and others, and every sequence of activity ties back into how she thinks and feels about events. As more is gradually revealed of the details of her accident, so too does the reader see more of Scarlett as an individual, and how and why she has the perspective that she does.

TEACHER NOTES

- 1) Before reading the story, as a class look closely at the cover and title, and discuss what you can learn about the novel from them. Some things to include in your discussion might be:
 - What does the phrase 'skin deep' mean, and when do people use it?
 - What might this book be about? Why do you think so?
 - What is the imagery on the cover - what is it showing and how does it make you feel?
 - What genre do you think this book is likely to be and why?
 - Who do you think might be the intended audience for this book and why?
- 2) After reading the first chapter, as a class discuss how the author has set the scene for the novel. In small groups discuss what you have learnt about the setting and characters from this first chapter - and what you have not learnt but now want to know.
- 3) Scarlett's father is central to her life, and consistently kind, supportive, and encouraging. But he is also a fallible human being with his own flaws, inconsistencies, and struggles to overcome. In small groups discuss the role her father plays in Scarlett's life, and how his influence affects her actions, choices, and self-perception. Individually write a character description of Scarlett's father, noting at least three physical features, three socio-emotional attributes, and three items of note about his life and lifestyle. Use evidence from the text to support your comments and assertions.
- 4) Write a description of the accident and aftermath, and how it affected Scarlett from the point of view of another character in the novel. You can write your description in diary form, as a letter to a friend, or simply as an undifferentiated monologue.
- 5) The time in the mountains away from the regular pressures of daily life, the isolation, the chance to explore new places, and her growing friendship with Eamon and his family all have an effect on Scarlett's self-identity and perspective on life and her place in the world. As a class discuss how these things all affect Scarlett in different ways, and what the impact on her is of each aspect of her holiday. Write 500 words exploring the importance of these different things to Scarlett's emotional healing. Be sure to use evidence from the text to support your assertions. Some things to consider before you start writing are:
 - Is one specific factor or experience more important than the others in helping Scarlett come to terms with her life? If so, which one and why?
 - How do these different aspects of Scarlett's time in the mountains work together to help her?
 - How much does Scarlett's attitude to life and sense of self-identity change during the two weeks she spends in the mountains?

- Which events have the most profound impact upon Scarlett's understanding of the world, in what way, and why?
- 6) As a class discuss what some coping strategies might be which people commonly use to help themselves when they are finding it hard to cope with life. Brainstorm to create a list of possible strategies, and in small groups use the list to create a poster sharing helpful strategies.
 - 7) Write 800 to 1000 words exploring the idea that, for Scarlett, how she perceives herself has a greater effect on her quality of life post-accident than any possible change in outside influences or conditions realistically could. Use evidence from the text to support your arguments.
 - 8) Near the beginning of the story, Scarlett talks of the details of her accident as *Details I keep locked inside the vault of my mind where nobody is allowed entry, not even me*. In pairs or small groups, discuss the meaning of this statement, and the imagery used by the author. Consider what impact the choice of descriptive words has on the reader, and how it affects our understanding of Scarlett's state of mind and her emotional response.
 - 9) What do you think the phrase *YESTERDAY MATTERED YESTERDAY* means? What does it mean to Scarlett? What do you think the writer meant by it at the time of writing? Write a paragraph sharing what you think the underlying meaning of this phrase is, and how and why it might be important to people to keep in mind.
 - 10) Scarlett states that *The perfect confident self only exists in the online space. The one we move around in on Earth, that's the real self*. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why, and in what way? Write a brief (200 to 300 word) response to this assertion, drawing from your own life and experiences where relevant to support your argument.
 - 11) When Scarlett first thinks of leaving the city and living somewhere remote and rural, she says that she could *live surprisingly simply off the land. If I could just give up lollies and chocolate*. What are three things you would find hardest to give up if you were to relocate to an isolated life of self-sufficiency?
 - 12) When she first sees the yellow quilt in the cabin, Scarlett says that *Yellow here seems like the colour of happiness. It is sunlight and wildflowers and butterflies*. As a class discuss this statement within the context of the human propensity to assign emotion and attributes to colours. Individually, choose another colour and write a description of it using the same format as the description of yellow in the novel. Use acrylic paints or watercolours to create an artwork illustrating your description.
 - 13) Scarlett's art teacher encourages her students to sit and silently stare out a window, observing the world outside. She says it is *a time of dreams, thoughts, visions, the neurons firing*. Choose a window and spend five minutes silently observing what you can see through it. Use your observations to help you construct a creative response. Your response might be a painting or drawing, a written or spoken story, a descriptive writing passage, or a piece of music or even a dance. After completing this exercise write a brief (50 to 100 word) reflection on the activity, being sure to include mention of how looking out the window affected you and your choice of creative response.
 - 14) How much does Scarlett's attitude towards herself and towards life in general change over the course of the novel? Identify three key moments that reflect her different attitudes throughout the novel, and for each moment summarise what she is feeling at the time, what has triggered this current state of being at each point, and what its effect on her is in the long run.

- 15) Go on a bush walk and observe the landscape and natural environment. When you return to class, write a descriptive paragraph sharing your experience of one section of your walk. You might want to reread the passages in the novel where Scarlett first climbs the mountain, or when she goes into the cave, to give you ideas on how to form your description so as to paint a picture using your words.
- 16) Scarlett says of her grandmother that she learnt from her that *Pretty was more important than sad or angry or hurt. Always be pretty.* How do you think it would affect someone to grow up with this attitude towards life? How much importance does society in general place on prettiness? Do you think that this is harmful or simply reality? Why and in what way?
- 17) Eamon points out to Scarlett that pretty is not the same as beautiful, and later on Scarlett sees the beauty in things that are decidedly not pretty at all. What do you see as the difference between pretty and beautiful, and why is it important that we are aware of this?