

A GUIDE
TO
Falling Off
the Map



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TEACHERS RESOURCES

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TO
*Falling Off
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SYNOPSIS

What would happen if you started having romantic feelings for your best friend, someone you've known your entire life? Would it ruin your friendship irreparably? Is it best to keep these feelings to yourself and bury them deep, back where they came from?

Vinnie has her life all mapped out. Vision boards of her future in New York City adorn her room, a life of acting, friends and vintage furniture. But when multiple sclerosis enters from stage left, her plans begin to unravel. To make matters worse, her dreams of being Drama Captain in Year 12 seem to have evaporated as well.

To flee her rapidly spinning world, Vinnie turns her attentions to Roo, making it her mission to fix his messy life and set his dreams of being a photographer back on track. When she convinces Roo to embark on a week-long pilgrimage to their favourite childhood camping spots in her mum's old Kombi, little does she realise the impact that fear, grief and unexpected love will have on their relationship.

In *A Guide to Falling Off the Map*, Roo stifles his love for lifelong friend, Vinnie, the effervescent and sparkling girl destined for greatness. Supporting from the wings, he has always been Vinnie's rock, but helping her deal with the death of her mum is the hardest role he's ever played.

THEMES

- Love
- Grief; Healing
- Fear
- Relationships
- Responsibility
- Courage; Confidence; Hope
- Suicide; Mental Health
- Coming of Age
- Multiple Sclerosis
- Dyslexia

WRITING STYLE

Told in a dual narrative, *A Guide to Falling Off the Map* shares the first person, present tense perspectives of childhood friends, Vinnie and Roo. Nearing the end of Year 11, Vinnie is eagerly anticipating her selection as Drama Captain, having successfully starred in many plays and musicals throughout her schooling. Besides, being on the stage is something she inherited from her mum, Aggie. But that was before. Before she became a doctor. Before her MS diagnosis. Before she took her own life.

Roo, meanwhile, who left school after Year 10, is lying about his photographer training and secretly working for pittance to help keep his mum afloat. He feels utterly useless and out of his depth. And now that he has discovered his true feelings for Vinnie, things are well and truly messed up.

Told in three parts, *A Guide to Falling Off the Map* is at times funny, at others deeply tender, and shares the intense and genuine connection between two friends who have always been each other's person. One is ambitious, vivacious and erratic. The other is quiet, self-deprecating and loyal. Both, however, have been truly scarred by Aggie's suicide, and Roo will do anything to help Vinnie heal and accept the loss of her mum. In a coming-of-age story that retraces their most important and at times most painful memories, Vinnie and Roo discover just how important their relationship is. Beautiful and original figurative language enriches the storytelling, while the narrative voices of both Vinnie and Roo are relatable, arresting and authentic. It is suitable for YA readers.

STUDY NOTES

- Using the front cover and blurb, make predictions about the characters, settings and events of *A Guide to Falling Off the Map*. What are you wondering about the story?
- Part One of *A Guide to Falling Off the Map* is entitled *A Map of Our Universe*. Describe this universe in a mode of your choice, using evidence from the text to support your thinking.
- What can we tell about Vinnie and Roo from the first few chapters of *A Guide to Falling Off the Map*? How do their characters grow and change as the novel progresses? Create Character Profiles of both Vinnie and Roo. Include quotes or excerpts to show your understanding of their characters as the story unfolds.
- On p26, Vinnie describes why she and Roo are so close. How does their relationship strengthen even further as the novel progresses?
- Why does Vinnie believe that Roo will never leave Murwillumbah (see p26)? Do you think this will still be the case at the end of the novel? Why?
- Lilah and Vinnie believe in manifesting their futures, dreaming of their two-bedroom apartment in New York City. Why do the girls think this will result in their dreams coming true? How is this idea challenged in the story?
- Roo has a special interest in collective nouns. How and why is this woven into the text?
- Discuss Roo's dislike for social media. What are his arguments against it? Discuss your take on his opinions.
- Why does Roo describe himself as a 'faulty sperm donor kid' (p39)? How does this view influence his actions? What are Roo's strengths? Why is he unable to see these for himself?
- Roo's photos are described as 'arty shots', including 'shadows on pavements. Grates [and] Drains' (p36). In the role of Roo, use your phone to take similar shots to those Roo takes in *A Guide to Falling Off the Map*. Create your own exhibition to showcase your work.
- What does Roo mean when he says he and Vinnie are 'eons apart – she's Venus and I'm the little planet that got booted out of the solar system' (p39)? Have you ever felt like this? Share in a reflection.
- Describe Roo's imagined 'alternate reality' at high school (see p46). How does he view 'normal teens', and why does he set himself outside of this group?
- Discuss the complexity of Vinnie's penchant for acting and her inability to 'drop the act' when she needs to (p53). How is this damaging for her?
- Roo says that 'Vinnie's usually fireworks' (p54) and is concerned that she is not being herself. Why does he find it so hard to talk to her about this, and about Aggie's death? What would you do in Roo's situation?
- Why do you think Roo is so reluctant to stand up for himself, especially to people like Pavlović? What is it that finally makes him crack?
- Discuss Roo's comment that 'Mum is so trying sometimes. Like, literally trying to make me be a different person' (p60). Have you ever felt this way? Share with a friend.
- How does seeing Vinnie with Freddie intensify Roo's feelings for her? Would he still feel the same without Freddie on the scene? Discuss.

- Why is Vinnie so devoted to acting and the stage? Do you think this will ever change? Why?
- Describe the narrative voices of Roo and Vinnie. How do their voices help you to connect with each of them?
- Discuss Roo's motivation for leaving school. How is his dedication to helping his mum both a strength and weakness in his character?
- When Lilah is selected as Drama Captain, the principal speaks about leadership as follows: 'A good leader is not a boss. Nor the most popular student. A good leader is someone who listens. Who cares. Who pays attention' (p81). Why is Vinnie overlooked for this position?
- Vinnie often talks about *shining for others*. What does she mean by this? How is this sometimes detrimental to her own wellbeing?
- Why does Roo describe herself as 'a rotten coward' (see p87)?
- Although Brad Whitelaw, the school counsellor, misleads Roo, why does Roo say, 'It was my fault. I let him draw me in. I let myself fall down a rabbit hole of apertures and shutter speeds' (p89)? What would you like to say to Whitelaw if you had the chance?
- Discuss Roo's comment that 'there's no such thing as a predictable life ... and if there was, you wouldn't want it. You'd be bored' (p101). What of your future would you like to know? What are you glad is not as predictable? Share in a reflection.
- In what ways are Vinnie and Roo like Jo March and Teddy from *Little Women*? How are they different?
- What does Roo mean when he says, 'It's so painful whenever Aggie dips even a toe into my memories' (p110)? How does his grief over her death bring him even closer to Vinnie?
- Why hasn't Vinnie 'looked at pictures of Mum in forever. I close my eyes to her, wherever she is' (p111)? How might looking at Roo's photos of her on his phone start to chip away at her anger and hurt?
- Vinnie describes her dad as being 'as bad as I am at Mum conversations. We leave them on the floor like dirty laundry, stepping over little piles to get to where we're going' (p119). Why has the author decided to make both Vinnie and her dad this way?
- Roo is jealous of Lilah's and Vinnie's manifestations, as 'they have a map and they know where they're going' (p124). Is this true? Discuss.
- Describe the dilemma that Vinnie faces when Freddie shows an interest in her. Use evidence from the text to support your thinking.
- What does Vinnie mean when she accuses Lilah of 'secretly ... squirrelling away nuts while I wasn't looking' (p158)? Is this a fair comment? Discuss.
- Why, when Vinnie kisses Freddie, does she say, 'I rip us apart, conscious of the hole we've just torn through the universe' (p172)? Does this only happen as a result of the kiss? Discuss.
- Why does Vinnie resent it when her dad 'glows with the memory' of an Aggie moment (p176)?
- Why does Roo feel that his mum is 'puppeteering my life' (p187)? Have you ever felt this way? Share in a reflection.
- What is meant by the term 'falling off the map' (p190)? Why does Vinnie describe it as feeling 'like damp, sticky sheets and [smelling] like stinking socks'? Why does she feel her future is already mapped out, 'courtesy of Mum' (see p192)? Is this true? Discuss.
- Vinnie says she 'can't bear the cavity that is Lilah's silence' (p191). Describe a time when you felt the impact of a friend's silence.
- Why, when looking at her vision board, does Vinnie think of her 'naive stupidity' (p191)? Discuss the metaphor of her vision board igniting 'so easily', taking 'only seconds to turn to ash'.
- Vinnie wonders 'how ... people do life without a vision board and a best friend' (p193). How would you respond to this?
- How do Roo's photos '[make] manifestation irrelevant' (p194)? Why is this a good thing?
- Roo says, 'the best thing about being a loser is that I get to give Vin a purpose' (p205). What would you say to Roo given the chance?
- Why does Carla give Vinnie money from the envelope for the trip? Why doesn't she want

Roo to know?

- What is the difference between 'fulfilling [and] finding your potential' (p239)?
- Discuss the connection between the 'daisy in the rock. An impossible situation' (p240) and the storyline of *A Guide to Falling Off the Map*.
- Why does 'being seen by Vinnie Smith [feel] really good' (p242)? What does it mean to 'be seen' by someone? Who 'sees' you? Share in a reflection.
- Kylie describes Vinnie as 'a fixer' (p259). What does she mean by this?
- Discuss Kylie's comment about Aggie that 'she always was pretty gutsy. Even her choice to die took a truckload of courage, if you ask me' (p260). Why does Vinnie whisper, 'Not courage,' in response?
- When they revisit Merindah Farm, Vinnie says, 'like lots of places I've visited as a kid, it's shrunk' (p270). Describe a time when you too have had this same realisation.
- Vinnie describes her mum as 'the torn-off limb everyone knows about but no-one talks about, because where do you even start' (p275)? In the role of Vinnie, respond to this comment in a monologue.
- Why does Vinnie resist telling Roo how she feels about him? Why does she encourage his dalliance with Maeve?
- Why does Roo say, 'Vinnie looks like someone put her inside a Barbie doll and told her to put on her best show' (p308)?
- Why does Vinnie accuse Roo of 'self-sabotaging' (p319)? Do you agree with her? Discuss.
- Why does Vinnie think that 'loving Roo means letting him go' (p321)? Is this the case? Discuss.
- Why does Vinnie say that 'going home means putting a pin in our lovely bubble ... On this trip, Roo and I float in a liminal space only we understand and don't need words to explain. When we go home, who are we? I'm scared to find out' (p337)?
- Why, when Roo ties his shoelace to the wire where couples place their padlocks, does he say, 'I've basically signed a contract that ensures we have no future' (p341)?
- Discuss the significance to the storyline of the following scene at the end of Part Two:
 'I sweep my arms wide like a crucifix, close my eyes and face it all. The wildness.
 My mum's suicide. Her illness. My illness. My fragile future with Roo.' (p345-346)
- Why are Vinnie and Roo so reluctant to let others help them? How and why does this eventually change?
- Vinnie describes her dad as 'the balancing weight on every cantilever that ever existed' (p361). Why does she take so long to seek his comfort?
- Vinnie says that 'a good play needs a theme – something to hang the imagery from' (p362). What are the themes of *A Guide to Falling Off the Map*? How are they used to synthesise the big ideas in the text?
- Explain what Vinnie means when she says, 'the exhibition isn't just about the landscape ... it's also about people forming the landscape' (p371).
- Vinnie composes a poem about her mum's death and all the ways it's changed her (p372). Before reading hers, write and perform this poem in the role of Vinnie.
- Until now, Vinnie has been 'worried about cutting myself open and being exposed in front of all these people' (p372). How have her ideas about this changed by the end of the novel?
- How do both Vinnie and Roo develop courage in *A Guide to Falling Off the Map*?
- In what ways is *A Guide to Falling Off the Map* a book about hope?
- What is the role of nature in this text? How is it used to help tell this story?
- Which characters in *A Guide to Falling Off the Map* are you most and least like? Share in a reflection.
- Imagining *A Guide to Falling Off the Map* is being made into a play, work in small groups to complete the following:
 - Design wardrobes for the characters. Either sketch their outfits or create vision boards to reflect their personas.
 - Create a playlist suitable for the stage adaptation, linking your choices with respective scenes.
 - Design the set for one of the play's settings such as Jack's Shack, the Citadel

- Theatre or Kylie's crystal shop.
 - Create a poster to promote the play.
 - Create a programme to capture the essence of the play.
 - Write a script for one of the scenes of this play. Perform this scene.
- In the role of Roo, write a letter to Vinnie that shares your true feelings for her.
- Like a stage play, *A Guide to Falling Off the Map* is told in three acts. Use a graphic organiser to show what happens in each of these three parts of the story, including the story arc of each.
- Locate Murwillumbah and the surrounding district on a map. In addition, locate images of the places in northern New South Wales and Southwest Queensland mentioned in the text. Using these images, create an annotated photo journal that shares Vinnie and Roo's journey.
- In what ways is the road trip to their favourite camping spots a journey of self-discovery for Vinnie and Roo? What do they learn about themselves and one another on this trip?
- Why is Vinnie so reluctant to share her symptoms and seek medical advice? What instigates her change of attitude towards the end of the story?
- Conduct further research into multiple sclerosis. How are its symptoms different for different people? What inroads have been made into the management of this autoimmune disease?
 - www.msaustralia.org.au
- What warning signs does Aggie give about her mental health? Why do Mike and Carla blame themselves for her death? Why do they react in this way? Visit the following sites to discuss this aspect of the text further:
 - www.beyondblue.org.au
 - www.lifeline.org.au
- Although not specified in the text, Roo most likely has dyslexia. How has this affected him? How would his life be different had this been diagnosed and managed? Likewise, Vinnie's MS diagnosis is not formally disclosed. Why has the author deliberately left these diagnoses unconfirmed? Is there a risk that people are defined by their diseases and syndromes, rather than as people? Discuss.
- The character of Freddie provides an interesting point of tension in the narrative, breaking some stereotypes but adhering to others. Analyse his place in the plot and discuss the importance of his inclusion. How does the chemistry between Vinnie and Freddie perhaps help her recognise her later attraction to Roo?
- Make connections between the plays and musicals in the text such as *The Wizard of Oz*, *Cats* and *The Great Gatsby* and the characters and storyline of *A Guide to Falling Off the Map*. In what ways, for instance, could Vinnie be likened to Daisy Buchanan?
- Create a map of Vinnie and Roo's road trip, including images of the locations they visit. Annotate this map to share important plot points along their journey. Keep a list of the locations that Vinnie and Roo visit on their trip (such as Crystal Shower Falls, Ebor Falls, Iron Peg, Minyon Falls, Rummery Park, Merindah Farm, Girraween, Bald Rock, Maron Falls, Lennox Heads, Lake Ainsworth, Woody Head, Never Never River and Bellingen). Locate images of these places online or use Google Earth to observe these settings. Create a Photo Journal that shares the importance of these places to Vinnie and Roo.
- If you and your best friend were to embark on a journey in your local region, where would you go? What nature reserves or national parks would you make a point of visiting? Why?
- Discuss the contribution of figurative language to the text. How do the excerpts below help engage readers and connect them more deeply with the story? Examples include:
 - I'm a puppet p3
 - But missing her is a punch in the throat, so I snap the memory closed p3
 - Lilah and I ride the audience wave toward the lobby p4
 - If I'm not mistaken, the floor is rising up to punch me in the nose p15
 - Friendly as cream cheese on crackers p38
 - Her grey hair bunched on her head like a bao bun p38
 - A thread of guilt weaves through me p42
 - Freddie hauls me back onto the dance floor and whips me around like clothes

- drying on a windy day p44
- I drive grandma-speed through Murwillumbah p52
- Vinnie's house conjures the memory of Mum and I watching the ambulance lights painting the night blue and red as two big men walked the stretcher to the van, a sheet covering Aggie's face p52
- Somehow, we octopus it upstairs (p54)
- I'm the Titanic and this ship's sinking fast p57
- Blackness hems me in like closing walls. I'm tiny, distraught, on the floor p57
- Pavlović is like one of those cartoon characters with steam piping out of his ears p58
- I feel her hyperactive energy change the cellular construction of my bedroom p60
- She's making me look like I've escaped from a palliative care unit p61
- I stop. Wipe my glasses. Bend at the hips to let my burnt-up brain hang between my wobbly legs. p62
- I haven't eaten, made clear by the announcement echoing from my stomach p65
- I grip every word like it's a handhold on a terrifying cliff face p67
- I feel Lilah also turn to stone beside me p68
- The envelope is fattening like a pig at Christmas p79
- Lilah and I tip forward, clutching each other like connector pens p81
- The knot of nerves tumbles in my belly p83
- She claps like he's won an Oscar p8
- A wonky cactus fights for its life out front p87
- My school attendance record is so spotless you can see through it p91
- The town centre is stone quiet with everyone doing their thing p92
- I bristle, mama-hedgehog style, hating his tone p94
- I open a bottle of milk and nearly throw up; chunks float to the surface like icebergs. There's a banana on the back shelf that's so small and black it could be a leech. p98
- You okay? You look like yesterday's tacos p100
- Rage flickers through me p116
- The ingredients make a Venn diagram on the chopping board p118
- My arteries ice over, protecting themselves p136
- My eyes pool p137
- She's every emotion under the sun p137
- The sun is setting over St. Martha's chapel; the sky streaked peach. A cloud of bats forms overhead, then disappears. p138
- She's fluttering like a Ulysses butterfly p139
- The old man eyes me like I'm a street rat and he's imagining the trap he's going to set for me p142
- But tonight, all I see is the love heart emoji imprinted on the back of my eyelids like a dangerous scar p147
- I flame with jealousy p152
- My stomach curls like a burning leaf p157
- Sweat paints my legs p160
- The words are Play-Doh in my mouth p166
- Then there was Iris from Summer Stars, who kissed me like I was a block of sandpaper p172
- Freddie is like swimming in the ocean on a hot night. Huddling behind a waterfall. Clean night air. p172
- I feel myself sink into the Persian rug p174
- Wow, he really knows how to charm my dad, who by now is melted honeycomb butter p174
- Mum's still there, like gum on the sole of your sneaker p179
- The flowers stood erect in the fence, like sentries looking out for people on the brink of dangerous decisions p181
- She's back to Elmer-Fudd-just-got-outwitted-by-Bugs, steam curling out her ears

- p188
- She knows any reference to my intelligence or lack thereof will inflict a scorpion-like sting p196
 - My failure to turn up to work on time drips away p197
 - I contort my face in mock horror and clutch the lapels of my robe, which by now probably smells like the back of someone's fridge p202
 - She grins like an alpaca p213
 - I hear and see the shutter curl on itself like an armadillo p241
 - By eleven o'clock, the day's fry-pan hot p244
 - I swim next to him, our skin touching intermittently and electricity turning on the central heating in my gut p247
 - Roo picked up a new and improved physique. Not thick and solid, like Freddie's. Sinewy, like a strong vine that can carry you between canopies. p248
 - Since then, if anyone drops Aggie's name into conversation, Vin changes the topic so fast, you get whiplash p261
 - His breath is a breeze across the desert, cooling and comforting p267
 - We pass eucalyptus forests, and paddocks where sheep look like rocks p270
 - My skin lights up like a lava lamp p277
 - Roo's smiling at me, which floods my entire body p278
 - The van's quiet, apart from Joy's heaving lungs p283
 - The world is a white canvas behind her p288
 - All I can see is Vin lying in the centre of their worried flower p290
 - I lock my arm into his and drag him up the path toward the car park, confident and as steady as freaking Uluru p292
 - It takes me a line or two to recognise the song, like it's an image gaining focus p298
 - Aggie wasn't my mum, yet I feel every organ unstitch p298
 - Now, she's just striped socks scurrying back up the stairs p300
 - Her face is puffy and raw, her hair slicked to her skin like she's a seal p318
 - A man looks over at us and lifts a caterpillar-shaped eyebrow p318
 - Roo smells like butterscotch and tastes like home p321
 - Tingles shoot up my arm p329
 - Melaleuca trees are fallen soldiers on the sand p329
 - The sound of our breath is swallowed by the ocean heaving beside us. The sky glows marmalade and fades to violet p330
 - We watch the sun melt against the ridge p341
 - A flame licks my insides p345
 - I'm as close to the black ocean as I can get. It's a monster, reaching for me. p345
 - I swear the words have welded to every cell in my body p372
 - Flying foxes perforate the peach sky p377
 - Her arms are like fabric beside her p383

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zanni L. Arnot has published over forty trade books for kids under the moniker Zanni Louise, including bestselling board books, picture books, chapter books, and middle grade. *A Guide to Falling off the Map* is her first young adult novel. Zanni tours the world, visiting kids in schools and running writing retreats for grownups. She's also a proud ambassador for Room to Read, an organisation that gives kids access to books. In her free time, you'll likely find Zanni trail running in forests. Zanni lives with her family of four on the east coast of Australia. To find out more, visit www.zanniarnot.com.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

A few years ago, my family was on the exact same road trip Vinnie and Roo take in the book. I was running in the Promised Land behind Bellingen when these characters formed in my mind. Their voices were so strong, as was their relationship to each other.

Writing *A Guide to Falling Off the Map* felt like stepping aside to let the characters live on the page, which was one of the most creatively fulfilling experiences I've had. It was like the manuscript was alive; like the characters were actually living!

The only times I looked away from the page were to research MS and suicide. It was so important to me that I represent the complexities of these experiences as authentically as possible, which are so different for so many people. I spoke to quite a few people who have MS, as well as experts who work with people who have the disease. Although I have trained as a suicide counsellor and have lost people to suicide, I understand that the loss of someone to suicide is a different journey for each person who experiences it.

It was important to me to make Vinnie's experience as authentic as possible to her unique circumstances. My story was read by several experts for their unvarnished input, at various stages. Getting these difficult experiences just right was hard, and my great hope is that readers will feel I've done so deftly, with both humour and love. I know there are people who shy away from difficult subject matter for teens, but I don't think we do readers any favours by shielding them from sad, hard to discuss topics. Doing that just leaves them unprepared for their own inevitable life challenges.

Thank you for reading and being part of Vinnie and Roo's journey. I hope that your own journey is bright and fulfilling. But on days that it's not, know that your people are there for you.

If you or anyone you know is struggling with mental health illness or in crisis, please reach out for help.

www.beyondblue.org.au

www.lifeline.org.au

If you are looking for more information about living with multiple sclerosis, you can visit:

www.msaustralia.org.au