



RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA
READING GUIDES

Ads R Us by Claire Carmichael

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Reading Level: Teen Readers 12+

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COVER BLURB

If you think life is intense now, for Barrett and Taylor it's, like, totally dire.

Ads R Us is set in a modern city in the near future, where advertising is a constant stream of noise and information, and corporations sponsor everything from music to schools.

Teenager Barrett Trent has been raised in total isolation from mainstream society in an eco-cult called Simplicity, but after the death of his uncle, he must now live in the city with his rich and powerful Aunt Kara and Uncle Adrian, and spoiled cousin, Taylor.

As Barrett finds out, his aunt and uncle have a hidden agenda – there is a lot to gain from finding out the effects of advertising on an untouched mind. Barrett is the perfect guinea pig for their experiments.

But Barrett may prove harder to crack than they think – and Taylor is certainly not the cousin he expected ...

ABOUT THE BOOK

The novel is set in the near future, where advertising has become an inescapable assault on one's senses 24/7. It is not only a weapon of mass persuasion for commerce, but is also covertly being employed to shape and control the thoughts and beliefs of the general population for political purposes.

Ads R Us is told in alternating points of view:

(1) Barrett:

Orphaned when a baby, Barrett has been brought up by his Uncle Paul, leader of an eco-cult called Simplicity, a self-supporting, closed community who reject the modern world and all its electronic buzz. Members rarely interact with anyone from the scathingly named Chattering World. Barrett's education has been directed toward practical skills and maths, science and language.

(2) Taylor:

Taylor is Barrett's cousin. She is the daughter of Barrett's aunt, Kara Trent, and Professor Adrian Stokes, a specialist in the psychology of persuasion. Taylor's mother is the head of the hugely influential Ads 4 Life Council.

When Barrett's Uncle Paul is killed by lightning while working in the fields, Barrett's only living adult relative is Kara Trent. She comes to Simplicity to take him back to the city. Barrett is wary, as his dead uncle often warned him that Barrett's aunt and her husband are guilty of promoting advertising – an abomination, blighting human society.

Barrett is forced to leave behind him everyone to whom he's ever felt close, and is catapulted into a world stranger than he could imagine. His cousin Taylor looks at him with scorn. He'll never be one of the in-crowd, she decides. Having been brought up in isolation, Barrett doesn't know slang terms, or anything about popular music and fashion. He's never watched TV, listened to a radio, used a computer, gone to a movie. He's a total outsider.

Taylor has her own worries. Secretly, she's convinced she's adopted. Her father usually indulges her, but Taylor's mother is a cold woman, who has always used withdrawal of affection as a punishment. Taylor is half right – her father is her biological parent, but Kara Trent is not her mother.

Neither Taylor nor Barrett realise that they are human guinea pigs. From early childhood Taylor has unwittingly been part of a study probing her susceptibility at each developmental stage to various forms of advertising and persuasion. Now Barrett, a blank slate as far as the

modern world is concerned, has become a valuable research property.

While having a checkup at the dentist, Barrett is given an anesthetic so that tiny electronic instruments can be installed in his teeth to track his movements and record his reactions. All advertisements are made with an electronic signature, which instantly identifies them, so it will be possible to chart the specific ads to which he's exposed.

Although she doesn't know it, Taylor has been wired the same way for years. Now Barrett's reactions can be compared to hers. Not only will he provide data, unsullied by prior experience, for on-going experiments on receptiveness to marketing techniques.

A close friend of Barrett's parents is Maynard Rox, an increasingly powerful and charismatic politician who has won wide financial support in the business community because of his attempts to gut consumer laws and remove mandatory government standards that impede private enterprise's ability to sell products and services. Secretly Rox has larger ambitions. With Kara and her husband's expert assistance, he intends to use all the resources of persuasion to subvert the electoral process and destroy individual freedoms. His ultimate aim is to seize power and become virtual dictator of the country.

ADA (Against Deceit in Advertising) is a grassroots movement devoted to exposing the hidden political and economic influences wielded by the purveyors of advertising. In particular, ADA has in its sights the activities of both Ads 4 Life (the organization Barrett's aunt heads) and influential politicians such as Maynard Rox.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When she was eight, Claire decided that one day she would become a published writer, although it took rather longer than she anticipated. While attending Macquarie University in Sydney she took two creative writing courses and was awarded the university prize for playwriting. This led to her selection for the inaugural National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) playwriting program.

She then began her career as a high school English teacher, during which time she wrote a series of comedy plays, published under the title *Is That A Muffled Shriek?* This was followed by six English textbooks and two playbooks.

Leaving teaching to become a full-time writer, she wrote her first children's novels, both mysteries for young readers, *The Mystery of the Haunted Dog* and *The Mystery of the Alien Spacecraft*.

Since then Claire has written 15 children's books ranging from picture books to young adult mysteries and science fiction.

ON WRITING ADS R US

Author motivation

The author writes:

I have a deep interest in the impact of technology on society and the often unexpected effects that are generated by new products and processes. The ubiquity of the personal computer was never envisaged. The astonishing growth of the Internet was not predicted, nor were the benefits and very real dangers this pervasive technology provided anticipated.

There is more and more 'noise' in our world as frantic attempts are made to catch and hold our increasingly fragmented attention. A ceaseless rain of information impinges on us every day from a wide variety of electronic sources. It takes a real effort to resist and isolate oneself from the barrage of words and sounds and images.

As writers for young adults, some of us choose to highlight the possible dangers and examine the future challenges that may face the new generation as they negotiate a rapidly changing world. In my novels I explore the meaning of personal identity, the impact of technology upon the individual and the directions in which our society may go.

Writing process

The idea for each of my books always begins a situation or state of affairs where there is the potential for much conflict. Once the background world is established, two or more main characters spring into being and begin talking to each other.

I don't plan ahead although I know how the story will end. I have a first scene and a last scene, but everything in between is fluid. I discover the plot as it unfolds.

THEMES

- the role of advertising/persuasion
- the stranger in a strange land – outsiders and their impact on society
- cliques in school (the 'in' crowd and the roles people play)

- power, authority and responsibility
- the ultimate treachery – betrayal by one's parents
- the nature of personal freedom

DISCUSSION POINTS

- In the nineteenth century, Lord Acton famously wrote: 'Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely'. Looking at the world you live in, do you find this statement is as true today as it was over a hundred years ago?
- Would YOU be corrupted by absolute power?
- Some people say that privacy is dead, that it is almost impossible to keep secret personal information. If this is true, is a bad thing? After all, unless you have something to hide, what does it matter what other people know about you?
- Should parents have special rights as far as tracking where their children are through GPS in vehicles and mobile phones? Who else, if anyone, should have that right?
- Is it wrong to manipulate people if the aim is for good? Should advertising always be absolutely true? Doesn't everyone know that ads exaggerate, accentuate the positive and ignore anything negative about the product?
- What do you see is the role of education? To indoctrinate society's standards? To turn out people with the same values and goals? To prepare each person for a successful life as a member of society? To develop individual skills and talents? Something else?
- Barrett is an outsider in what is to him an entirely foreign society with different values, different experiences, different measures of success. What does Barrett bring from Simplicity that will help him in this brave new world? What will hinder him?
- If Taylor were to find herself abruptly placed in the eco-cult of Simplicity, what would she miss most from her modern world? What would she hate the most? Is there anything she would appreciate and value?