

The Incredible Adventures of Cinnamon Girl

Written by Melissa Keil

Published by Hardie Grant Egmont,
September 2014



SYNOPSIS (PLOT)

Sarah Jane Albany (Alba) lives in Eden Valley, a small town in rural Australia, where she works at her mum's bakery and draws comic art in every spare moment she has. Alba and her small band of friends are reaching the end of high school and contemplating their next moves in life. Alba's best friend, (Domenic) Grady, is planning to move to the city to study, but Alba finds herself wishing nothing had to change. Although Alba is brash, confident, and happy in her small pond, she is not sure how she will cope in the inevitable big sea of the adult world.

Meanwhile, a YouTube video predicting that Eden Valley will be the only place to survive an oncoming apocalypse results in the unexpected influx of a wide variety of newcomers – surfers, Buddhists, nudists, hipsters, and eccentrics of all sorts. Among them is local boy Daniel Gordon, now the star of a D-grade soap opera. Alba finds herself wondering when her childhood friend grew so hot – and became so full of himself.

As the predicted End of Days draws closer, Alba feels increasingly unsettled. She's fighting with Grady, her friends keep asking her about her future and she's haunted by memories she's tried to push aside, as well as ones she doesn't want to let go of. If this is their last summer together, how will the friends spend it?

Metaphorical storm clouds are gathering, the shadows are darkening and Alba finds herself wanting to sort things out with Grady – and Daniel – and her past – even if she feels like she hasn't put all the pieces together yet. She continues to draw her favourite character, 'Cinnamon Girl', even if she isn't completely clear on the plot that her story will have yet. Regardless, it's going to be kick-arse: she just has to trust her gut.

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THEMES

Despite the whimsical premise, this book has very strong themes to which teenagers, and many adults, can relate. The first relates to growth and change – in many ways this is a ‘coming-of-age’ novel, as the characters move out of childhood and towards adulthood. In doing so, they have to make choices about their values and goals, and their sense of identity becomes clearer. Alba’s always felt sure of herself – even when she was going through different ‘phases’ – but now she’s not so sure. What if she has no idea at all where she wants to end up? Her friends, especially Grady, have always assumed she will have a career in comic art, but what if they’re wrong?

Place is also central to *The Incredible Adventures of Cinnamon Girl* – the characters may soon trade in the relative security of a familiar small town for the unknown of a large city. They wonder how this will change them.

Finally, in terms of relationships, the themes of first love, friendship and grief are central. Although they’ve known each other as young children, suddenly some of the group are hooking up and trying to work out what it means to be ‘a couple’. But Alba’s not in any rush to rock the boat with anyone. Beneath the surface, she is also processing grief about her father, who is an important figure (in absence) in her life. In each of these threads there is fear – of changing, of confronting, of experiencing strong emotions.

WRITING STYLE

Melissa Keil’s writing is very engaging. She uses a lot of references from popular culture – in this case from comic books, particularly – and the characters speak in contemporary Australian vernacular.

The Incredible Adventures of Cinnamon Girl is written in the first person. We see everything through the eyes of Alba, the narrator. She is self-aware, sometimes commenting on her ‘poor’ storytelling ability. Alba does not always understand the reactions of people around her – and so, as readers, we get a sense that there are things the other characters know or can see that she doesn’t.

As a first-person narrative, the reader is carried along in Alba’s story, privy to her emotions as she navigates the changes in her life, which makes for a powerful journey.

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AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Melissa Keil says that this story first took shape back in 2012, the year of the Mayan-calendar end-of-the-world anxiety. The idea of the possible coming apocalypse was floating close to the surface of public consciousness, and various places around the world were embracing the idea. Melissa did not pay much attention to these reports, until she stumbled on a small newspaper article about a tiny town at the foot of a mountain in France, which was apparently predicted to be the only place on the planet that would survive the coming apocalypse. This town, with a population of just under 200 people, was expecting an influx of thousands, and was preparing to deal with a raft of new-age groups, UFO-watchers and assorted cults descending upon them. Though the article was a little tongue-in-cheek, activity around this town seemed to be extremely serious. Melissa thought the idea of these circumstances happening in Australia was somewhat amusing; she guessed Australians would embrace the predicted End of Days with decidedly more frivolity. And she began to think of this idea as the background for the journey of a young character, on the cusp of adulthood, who was struggling to work out what the next chapter in her story would hold.

While working on her first novel, *Life in Outer Space*, Melissa had spent some time writing on a friend's rural property, and the seeds for *The Incredible Adventures of Cinnamon Girl* were sown there – the idea of a group of teens, isolated from the world, who suddenly have the world unceremoniously thrust upon them.

AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Melissa Keil was born and raised in Melbourne, Australia, and has been a giant book nerd for as long as she can remember. She has at various times been a high school teacher, Middle Eastern tour guide and IT help desk person, and now works as a children's author and editor. When she is not writing, she spends most of her spare time reading, buying comic books and watching YouTube. She is the author the picture book *Rabbit's Year*, and the young adult novel *Life in Outer Space*, the first book commissioned by The Ampersand Project, Hardie Grant Egmont's initiative for emerging YA writers. *Life in Outer Space* was the recipient of the 2014 Ena Noel award, and was shortlisted for the 2014 CBCA Book of the Year Award (Older Readers).

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STUDY NOTES

1. Writing activity: Identity and coming-of-age

Alba is not the only character to be facing changes in her life. Choose one of the following characters, and write half a page about the choices they are making about their future (in terms of where they live, their relationships and their goals and aspirations). Are these what they (or other people) always thought they would do? How do the characters view their futures? What does Alba think about their choices? Find quotes from the text to support your points.

Characters: Daniel Gordon, Eddie Palmer, Caroline Gresham, Tia Holbrook, Peter Nguyen

2. Class discussions: First love

Alba says 'Ever since the beginning of time, it's always been Grady and me.' (p.31) Think about Alba's relationship with Grady. As a class, discuss the following questions.

- Why do you think Alba doesn't think of Grady as a potential boyfriend? What reasons does she give? How does she think of him? How does she treat him?
- Alba says 'in truth, I'm just sucky at piecing together the right details' (p.2). Although we see everything through Alba's eyes, the novel gives us some clues about Grady's feelings for Alba. Can you give examples of these?
- Why do you think Alba is taken by surprise in the final stages of the novel? What leads her to put the pieces together?
- Have you ever had a friendship that you think could turn into more than a friendship? How do you think you might feel about this if you were in that position?

3. Small-group discussions

Break into small groups and pick one of the following topics to discuss.

a) End of Days

People begin arriving in Eden because someone on YouTube has predicted that it will be the only place to survive the apocalypse. What comment do you think this makes about social media? What do the characters think about social media such as Twitter? What impact does the idea of the End of Days have on the main characters? In what ways does it affect their experience of this 'final summer' together?

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b) Body image and identity

Daniel gives Alba a weight-loss book. Why is this unexpected? What does Alba learn about Daniel when he does this? How does she react? How does Grady react? What do you think Alba learns from this experience?

c) Grief

How does Alba react to motorcycles? Before she goes to see Eddie, did you guess why this might be? Why do you think she asks to ride with him? Why is Eddie a 'safe' person for Alba to do this with? The ride didn't result in a 'lightening-bolt moment', as Alba says, but it is still a turning point in the novel for her. Why and how is this the case?

d) Identity

What clues do we get about Alba's identity? Think about the clothes she wears, the things she enjoys reading and watching, and what she says about her friends, family and relationships. Alba is a confident young woman – why do you think, then, she feels some hesitance about her future? How does this change as the novel progresses? What realisations do you think she comes to?

4. Bonus activity: Intertextual references

Alba and her friends love popular culture, especially comics. Do some research and find out more about some of these references. Which characters enjoy them? What might this tell us about them?

Artists/comic book artists: Faith Erin Hicks, Fiona Staples, Frida Kahlo, Frank Miller, Ramona Fradon, Nicola Scott, Marjane Satrapi, Marjorie Liu, Gail Simone, Kelly Sue DeConnick, Sara Pichelli, Chynna Clugston

Comics: Archie Comics, Best American Comics, Hinges, Wonder Woman, Persepolis, Ms. Marvel, Batman: Year One, Captain Marvel, She Hulk, Image, Vertigo, Dark Hor