

# THE KILLING CODE

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**Format: Paperback**

**Recommended for: 14-18 years**

**Themes:** Good vs Evil, the power of love and hope, young women's friendships, impostor syndrome, codebreaking, codeswitching and issues around class, secrecy and keeping secrets, women's rights and the history of feminism, LGBTQIA+, community history and lived reality.

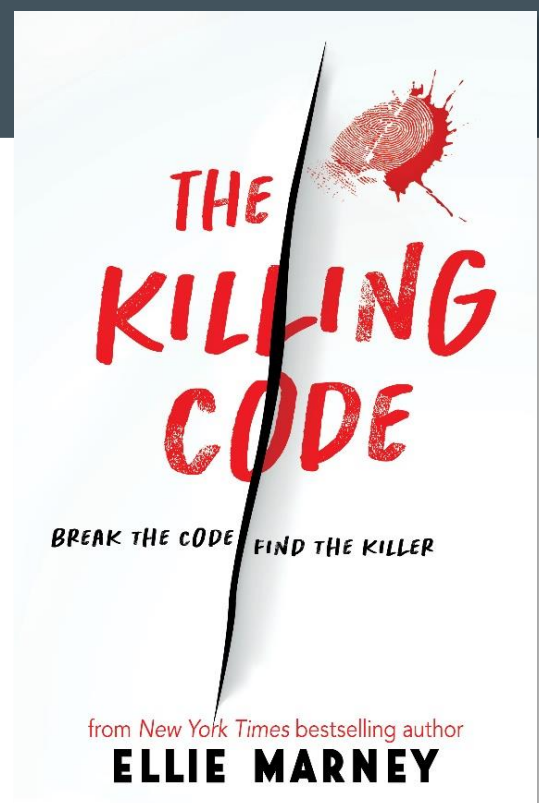
**Applicable to learning areas: English language, literacy and literature**

## A Word from the Author

'*The Killing Code* was inspired by the amazing book *Code Girls* by Liza Mundy, which is an incredible work of research into women's roles as Allied codebreakers during WWII. Once I started reading about this stuff, I couldn't stop. It also seemed providential that Arlington Hall, the site of the Army codebreaking unit where so many Allied women codebreakers worked, was originally a girls' school.

'And I was equally fascinated by the TV show *The Bletchley Circle*, which is about women who once worked as codebreakers at Bletchley Park, and how they team up to catch a killer years after the war.'

– Ellie Marney



## Suggestions for use in the classroom

### GENRE STUDY: YEAR 9 & 10

In the Year 9 & 10 classroom, *The Killing Code* is valuable for genre study.

Teachers may use it as a jumping off point for a larger examination of the murder mystery genre, including watching films such as *Knives Out*, *Rebecca*, *Death on the Nile* or the TV series *The Bletchley Circle*, or an examination of the psychological thriller genre, including watching films such as *Rear Window*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Heavenly Creatures* or *Shutter Island*. It is recommended for a Literature Circle, discussing the tropes of mystery and thriller fiction, or other crime/mystery fiction.

### ENGLISH STRANDS: LANGUAGE, LITERACY AND LITERATURE

Study of *The Killing Code* will enhance student understanding of the interrelated strands of language, literature and literacy. Students will observe how interpersonal relationships between the characters of Kit, Moya, Violet and Dottie are developed, and how those relationships are navigated through language in the story's dialogue. The author's use of devices such as allusion, metaphor and evocative vocabulary can be further investigated, and students will be able to identify how the author's language choices contribute to the book's stylistic effectiveness.

### TEXT ANALYSIS

As the story is set in America in the 1940s, students will be able to interpret, compare and reflect on the representations of characters in different social, historical and cultural contexts. It may also be a productive case study for an evaluation of LGBTQIA+ themes in a text. Teachers may find it an effective text for an analysis of unfamiliar context, and for an investigation of the appeal of an individual author's literary style, contrasting it with the author's previous works.

Incorporating contemporary understandings of the mystery and thriller genre, teachers in the Year 9 and 10 classroom will find *The Killing Code* a useful text for examining how text structures and language features influence audience response.

## Classroom Discussion and Application

### Visual Literacy: Before Reading

Read the back cover blurb and highlight keywords giving an insight into the book's genre. Look closely at the front cover to analyse its visual elements, asking questions such as:

- Do the images on the cover relate to any of the keywords?
- Do the colours used relate to any of the keywords?
- Does the font used in the title and subtitle relate to any of the keywords?
- Does the simplicity of the white background highlight or diminish the effects of all of the above?
- Does the cover reflect the WWII era in which the book is set? Why might the cover have been designed in this way?

## First Chapter

Did the first chapter of *The Killing Code* hook you? What elements did the author use to compel you to keep reading? Analyse your reaction to Chapter One by asking yourself the following questions:

- Did you find the characters of Katherine and Kathleen interesting?
- Did you find their relationship intriguing?
- What did you learn about the society in which the story is set?
- If the purpose of an opening chapter is to draw the reader into the story and make them want to read on, how would you rate this chapter and why did you assign that rating?
- Is this story told in first, second or third-person narrative?
- How and why does the POV change in the course of the chapter?

## Third Person Close Narrative (POV)

- Why do you think the author chose this narrative over first or second? How might your reading experience have been changed if the story were told in first person from Kit's POV?
- How might it have changed if it were told entirely in first person from Violet's POV? Why do you think Ellie Marney decided to show both Kit and Moya's POV's in key scenes?

## Primary Character: Kit

Consider this extract from the text and answer the questions that follow:

*The oaks remind her of childhood...Kit puts that old memory firmly aside; thinking too much about who she was, who she became, and who she is now makes her head ache.*

- Why is it important to the story for Kit to have taken on a new identity at the start of the novel? Why do you think Ellie Marney chose to complicate Kit's character this way?
- What impact did living as an impostor have on Kit as a person, and as the primary detective in solving the mystery?
- Find out what is meant by the term 'code switching' – do you believe this term applies to Kit?
- Do you think she would have had as much insight into the killer if she had not had this experience? Why or why not?

## Primary Character: Moya

Consider this extract from the text and answer the questions that follow:

*Every morning, [Moya] gets up and finds her costume in the armoire, does her hair and makeup, dons her glamorous shield and steps out to do battle. On the days she's feeling low, she makes herself look particularly good. It's a kind of armour and it's useful, but the effort involved in so damn tiring.*

- Moya is portrayed from the very start of the novel as someone who presents as glamorous and self-assured, and who uses clothes and appearances as armour. But what does she need to protect herself from? Does her personal history offer some clues?

- Why has Moya chosen this coping strategy, instead of a different one, and why does she continue to use this strategy, if it exhausts her? Her relationship with Kit (and the other girls) gives her an opportunity to think about personal change – what kind of realisations has she made by the end of the novel?

### Secondary Character: Violet

- Violet is the daughter of middle-class Black Americans, and is affected by racial segregation throughout the novel. Find three scenes in the book that illustrate Violet's social situation. How has dealing with racism and segregation in daily life affected Violet as a person?
- Why does she seem unsure about taking on domestic work, or going to college? (Hint: check page 120.) By the end of the novel, new opportunities open up for Violet – find out a little more about NACA, and the accomplishments of the Black women who worked there.
- Why do you think Ellie Marney chose to highlight the conditions for Black codebreakers in *The Killing Code*?

### Secondary Character: Dottie

- Dottie seems like the most lightweight of the characters in the story, but she plays a crucial role in *The Killing Code*. Note three moments when Dottie is important to the action of the story.
- What is the significance of Dottie's friendship in the development of Kit's character? Why was Dottie angry at Kit, when it was revealed that Kit was an impostor?
- Do you think her anger was justified? Why or why not? What do you think happens for Dottie after the events of the novel conclude?

### Setting: Time

- Most of the action of *The Killing Code* takes place during March 1943. Other than the narration directly informing the reader about the war on page 1, what details (both minor and major) has the author included to paint a complete picture of that time?
- How does that time differ from our own in terms of values? Consider a range of issues including gender equality, sexuality, race, class and equality of opportunity. Why do you think the author gave the novel a wartime backdrop? Do you think the story would have been as effective if it had been set in a time of peace?

### Role of Women

Consider this extract from the text and answer the question that follows:

*'There are girls everywhere now: girls in the streets, girls in uniform, girls in the newly completed Pentagon building three miles away. Girls are crammed into every available space in the capital, hot-bedding it in billet bunkhouses, lining the counters at drugstores and train stations, sitting three abreast on buses. Newspaper editorials complain about the lipstick brigade, but that's just how it is while the boys are overseas.'* Page 24

- While Kit, Moya, Dottie and Violet are each experiencing a newfound freedom, how does Ellie Marney show that not all of US society is comfortable with the change in gender roles?

### LGBTQIA+ themes

*'Nothing has happened or been said that might reveal her interest, or Moya's reciprocation. Kit doesn't even know how that might work, and speaking plainly is always risky. But – but! – some taut thread inside her thrums in Moya's presence.'* Page 134

- The relationship between Kit and Moya is carefully handled in the novel, to reflect the difficulty in negotiating queer relationships during the time period. Find out a little more about the status of LGBTQIA+ citizens and the realities of their lives during WWII.
- With this knowledge, reflect on whether you think Kit and Moya's love story was portrayed in a realistic way.

### Young women's friendship themes

- *The Killing Code* features a group of young women who rely on, help and support one another. Do you think the young women in the story make an effective team? What qualities does each character bring to the group? How do the different personalities of the characters mesh – or clash?
- Why do you think Ellie Marney chose to focus on a *group* of young women, instead of simply making Kit the primary detective? Do you think the group dynamics made it harder or easier for the women to investigate?
- Young women's friendships are often portrayed as emotionally fraught and difficult to negotiate. Why do you think Ellie Marney chose to portray this group differently? Do you think it seemed like a realistic portrayal?

### Setting: Place

- Ellie Marney describes it as *providential* that a girls' school, Arlington Hall, should go on to become the site where so many Allied women codebreakers worked. What do you think she meant by the term *providential*?
- Find out a little more about Arlington Hall and its history before and after the events of the novel. Can you find out the average age of female codebreakers in facilities like Arlington Hall and Bletchley Park?

### Genre

- Would you describe *The Killing Code* as a *mystery* or *thriller*? In your answer define each term and match elements within the novel that fit the definitions. Are the two terms mutually exclusive or could *The Killing Code* be both mystery and thriller?
- *Red herrings, false identities, plot twists* and *cliffhangers* are common literary devices in mysteries and thrillers. Find examples of each in *The Killing Code*.
- Violent crime is another factor that is common in mysteries and thrillers. (a) Why do you think readers find this so compelling and (b) why are we drawn to stories where the violent crime has been committed by serial killers?

### Finale

- Did you find the novel's resolution convincing and satisfying? Was the ending consistent with what you had discovered of the characters up to that point? Was the ending logical? Once you found out the identity of the killer, were you reminded of any red flags about him earlier in the novel?
- Is it better to have had your suspicions about a villain confirmed or to be completely surprised when you find them out? Do you think mystery and thriller stories play to readers' interests by being either confirming or surprising?

### Metaphors

- Why does Kit find the idea of taking a 'flying boat' to Newfoundland with Moya so funny at the end of the novel? (Hint: reread Chapter 1.)
- How does the reappearance of the metaphor bring closure to the novel?

### Dedication

- The author's dedication is, '...—and to every woman who has ever had to hide her light under a bushel'. What do you think this dedication means in light of Kit's, Moya's, Dottie's and Violet's experiences?

### Visual Literacy: After Reading

- Find the US cover of *The Killing Code* online and compare it with its Australian counterpart. Do the Australian and US covers suggest different things about the novel?
- Why do you think book covers are sometimes changed from country to country?

### More About Codebreaking

There was also an Australian codebreaking unit during WWII – it was called Central Bureau, and it was based in Brisbane. You might like to investigate further to discover something about the experience of Australian women codebreakers.

- Many women codebreakers told no one about their participation in the war effort – some of them died without revealing their true work during the war. Find out why this might be so, and what the impact of codebreaking had on shortening the course of WWII.
- The University of Cambridge's Department of Mathematics has produced a simple online guide for beginner codebreakers titled 'The Secret World of Codes and Codebreaking'.
- If you want to find out about famous crimes that have been solved through codebreaking then you can't go past visiting the FBI website and searching for the article, *Codebreaking in Law Enforcement: a 400-Year History*.
- You might like to discover more about famous women codebreakers – search for names like Ann Z. Caracristi, Wilma Berryman, Genevieve Grotjan, and Elizebeth Friedman.
- And don't forget to use your new-found codebreaking skills to crack Ellie Marney's codes in the Author Note at the back of the book.



## Related Texts/Further reading

*Codegirls* by Liza Mundy

*The Secrets of Station X* by Michael Smith

*Enigma* by Robert Harris

*The Codebreakers* by Alli Sinclair

## About the Author:

Ellie Marney is a multi-award-winning, *New York Times*-bestselling author of crime thrillers, including *The Killing Code*, *None Shall Sleep*, *White Night*, *No Limits*, the Every series, and the Circus Hearts series. Her books are published in ten countries and have been optioned for television. She's spent a lifetime researching in mortuaries, interviewing law enforcement officers, talking to autopsy specialists, and asking former spies how to make explosives from household items, and now she lives quite sedately in south eastern Australia with her family. Ellie invites you to find out more about her and her books at [elliemarney.com](http://elliemarney.com)



*The Killing Code* is a twisty historical murder mystery that uses the hothouse environment of an old girls' school, Arlington Hall, and the streets of 1943 Washington DC as a backdrop for a thrilling puzzle plot. The book has a primary protagonist who is both an underdog and an impostor, which conjures ideas about authenticity and code-switching. Forensic and codebreaking details are highly accurate to the historical period. Evoking an era of wartime glamour with its descriptions of rationing, speakeasy bars, blackout rules and fancy clothes, the book is designed to draw in readers and keep them turning pages until the dramatic, high-stakes finale.