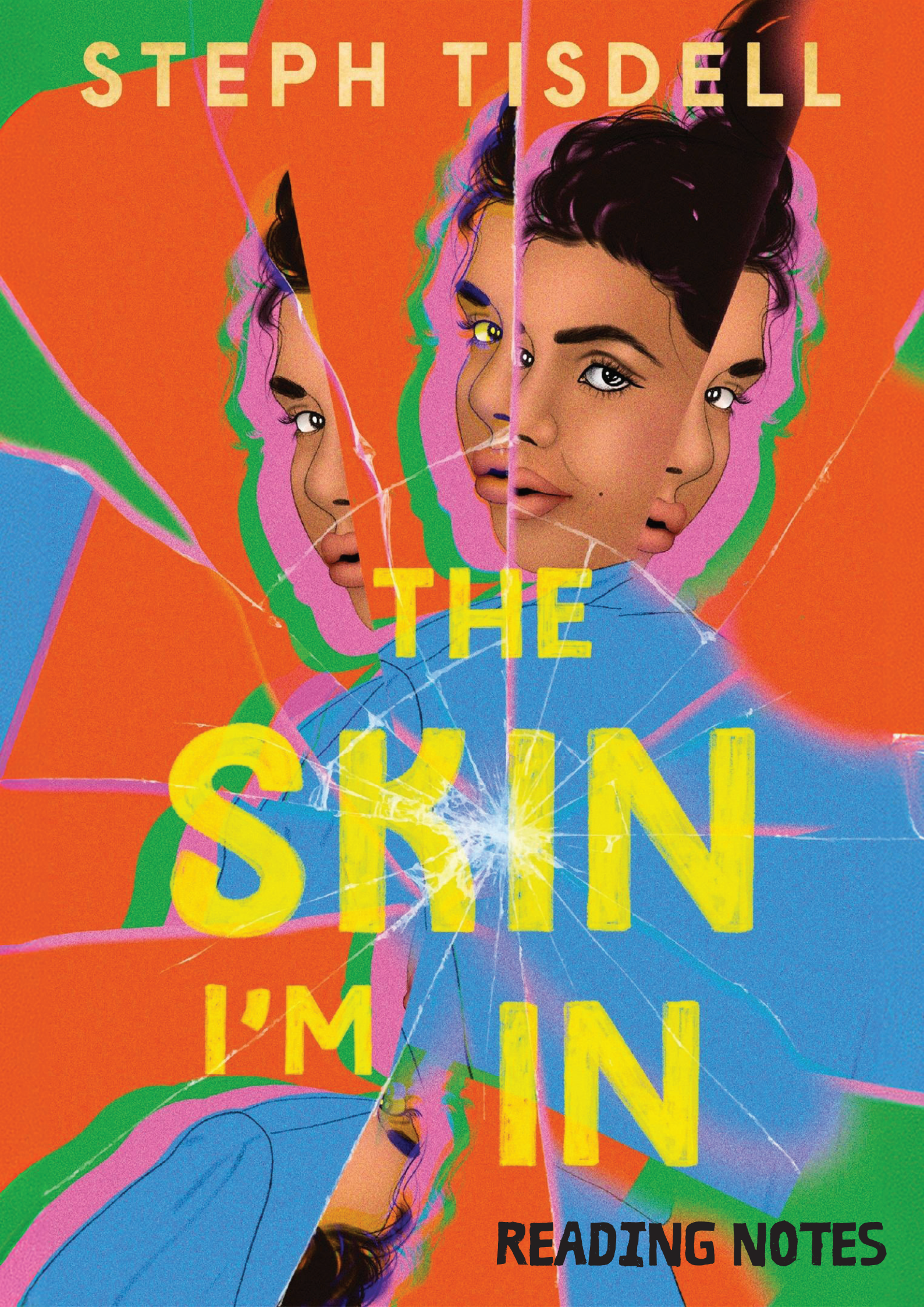


STEPH TISDELL



THE
SKIN
I'M IN

READING NOTES

BLURB

'It was the beginning of everything. And the end of so much.'

Layla is in her final year of school. It's the last year to make sure that the next major phase of her life begins correctly because she's got big plans.

She just wants to be a normal teenager and to fit in but when her troubled cousin Marley comes to stay, he challenges everything she thought she was.

Steph Tisdell is a writer, actor and an award-winning comedian. She's a proud Yidinji woman, and her words sparkle with humour, depth and authenticity in this extraordinary debut novel that explores cultural and personal expectations, and responsibilities.

'The Skin I'm In weaves Tisdell's natural comic instincts into vibrant, fearless, and unpretentious YA fiction. A deadly debut.'

Sydney Morning Herald

ABOUT STEPH TISDELL

Steph thought she'd become a lawyer before she started a successful comedy career in 2014. She soon became one of the brightest stars in Australian comedy, selling out award-winning live shows and having several viral sensations.

Her natural warmth and wit have been a hit with audiences and critics alike ever since she won the 2014 Deadly Funny National Grand Final. She's a regular on mainstream television shows such as *Hughesy We Have A Problem*, *Would I Lie To You?*, *Spicks and Specks* and *The Project*. A contributing writer on various shows including *Bump*, *Fisk* and *Rosehaven*, she has also become a screen favourite in front of the camera: fiery Phoebe on *Class of '07*, compassionate but tough Joely on *Total Control* and socially inept powerhouse Shauna on *Bump*. She has also starred opposite Delta Goodrem on Netflix's *Love Is in the Air*.

Steph's interest in politics and sense of social justice matched with her formidable intelligence enables her to deliver social insights that challenge cultural stereotypes in a way that is hilarious, relatable and, importantly, as a proud Indigenous woman, powerful.

The Skin I'm In is her first novel.

A READER'S INTRODUCTION TO *THE SKIN I'M IN*

****Please note: this may contain spoilers****

Layla is in her final year of high school, and she is ambitious and driven and determined to make the best of Year 12. She is a good kid and a straight-A student aspiring to change the world.

In the summer holidays before school starts her cousin Marley comes to stay, for a change of pace and scenery after some difficulties at home. Marley has had a very unstable childhood – his mother had a troubled childhood herself and was not a dependable parent. As a result, Marley had to move around a lot between different Aunties and Uncles. When Layla learns about this part of her family history, her middle-class North-Brisbane existence is challenged in ways she never expected. While Layla understands that Marley hasn't had all the advantages she has, she does not want to be held responsible for him at school.

The year seems to start off well but Layla soon falls out with her best friend Amy, who's now friends with Jess, whose dad expresses racist remarks. And Layla's once favourite teacher, Ms Marks, has disappointed her with unnuanced conversations about Indigenous history in colonial Australia and her lack of understanding around cultural terms and practices. Layla also feels as if she is the token Aboriginal student at her predominantly white school.

Layla is battling with her identity and Marley's stories from back home make her question her Blackness, and her lack of experience and distance from Country make her doubt connections to her Aboriginal heritage. Throughout this, Layla finds friendship with Angie, a Māori girl. They bond over their First Nations heritage and how they are treated and seen differently from the other girls in their year.

Layla finds it increasingly difficult to get along with Marley and, after a verbal altercation, she comes home to find him overdosed on pills. Marley is rushed to hospital and Layla takes some time off school to recover. Layla's mum now gives Marley a lot more attention and goes to therapy with him regularly. Marley and Layla don't talk and Layla feels it is her fault Marley tried to kill himself. The guilt and confusion overwhelm her and she struggles to deal with the trauma of the incident. When she comes back to school, she and Angie skip school and Layla smokes for the first time.

Angie and Layla's friendship strengthens and they go to a party held by Tim Loft, who Layla has a crush on. Layla is having a good time until a fight breaks out – Tim defends Layla against racist Cody and punches him. After the party, she and Tim become closer.

Layla attends Dreaming Camp, a camp for First Nations high school students to learn more about their history and culture. She connects to other people's stories and learns she doesn't need to earn her Aboriginal heritage, rather she is born with it.

Tim and Layla become a couple after camp and take it slow. Layla starts regularly skipping class with Angie, Tim and Xavier, Angie's new boyfriend. Layla's grades are slipping and she is lying to her parents. Her mother finds out and feels their trust has been broken.

Layla realises that her grades matter if she wants to go to university in Sydney and try to effect real change. She tries to make a pact with the Career's Advisor but breaks it when Marley is arrested and she skips another day of school to cope. Her mother finds out she has been lying again and is deeply disappointed. Layla tells her mother everything she has kept from her and together, they get her back on track. Layla works hard, and with help from her parents, inspiration from Marley's self-motivated rehabilitation, and Tim and Angie, she is able to make the best of the time she has left in school. Tim decides it is best for her that they break up so that she can study without distractions, and they spend one last night together with hopes of reuniting in the future.

The book finishes with Layla's positive aspirations to get into university and fight for justice. We learn she has written this book as part of her attempt to be accepted into university but also to help others through hardships.

QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the title of the novel – *The Skin I'm In* – and how it reflects Layla's journey and the themes of the book?
2. *The Skin I'm In* is first person, and the reader eventually discovers that the book is compiled of diary entries for Layla to use to get into university. Layla's voice is raw and authentic. There are also some times where Layla directly addresses the reader. How does this overall structure affect the way you view the narrative and Layla's voice?
3. Layla's dad always says, '*If you don't laugh, you cry.*' (p.1) How does this phrase permeate the narrative? How and why does Layla use humour to explore uncomfortable themes and scenes? Why is humour an effective device to explore such heavy topics?
4. '*It was the summer Marley came to stay ... Sometimes things happen that change our course so irrevocably it's hard to know if there was ever a clear course to begin with.*' (p.1) How did Marley's arrival change Layla's life forever?
5. At the heart of this novel is kinship adoption – Layla and her parents bring Marley into their family unit because his mother is unable to care for him. In Steph Tisdell's acknowledgements, she says '*kinship adoption is a common experience that is rarely covered*'. Aboriginal children are overrepresented in out-of-home care and foster care in Australia; as the book outlines, disconnection from culture brings a myriad of issues with it. *The Child Protection Act 1999* recognises the importance of placing Indigenous children with kin wherever possible. Discuss how kinship adoption is explored in *The Skin I'm In* and why it's more important than ever that it is portrayed in fiction. Can you identify ways that kinship adoption has been outlined as important for Marley in the book?
6. Layla's mum says to Layla: '*Why would I waste my time having polite conversation with people I don't care about when I trust you? I don't need someone else to tell me how smart you are. You're your mother's daughter after all!*' (p.23) How does Layla's relationship with her mother evolve throughout the novel? Similarly, how does Layla's perception of their relationship change after Marley arrives?
7. Layla's mum uses 'code-switching' (p.18) when talking to different people around her. This is a practice in which people of colour switch their language and behaviours when around white people. Even though Layla can identify her mum's code-switching, can some of Layla's behaviour in this book also be classified as code-switching? What might prompt Layla to code-switch?

8. *'Too "white" for Blackfellas and too Black for whitefellas. Was I a coconut?'* (p.75) Marley uses the term 'coconut' to tease Layla. But how does this term make her question her identity and Blackness, and impact her already fragile connection with her Indigenous heritage? Cody also uses this term to describe Layla. Why does it have a different meaning when Cody says it?
9. *'owning my curls'* (p.38) Throughout the novel we see several moments when Layla's mum encourages her to be proud of her heritage. What other examples can you think of? How do you honour your own cultural history?
10. *The Skin I'm In* explores the *'micro-aggressions that build up to undermine already complex identity issues'* (p.341). What micro-aggressions does Layla experience among her peers and her everyday life? How do these build up to undermine Layla's already complex identity issues? For example, Layla is made to feel uncomfortable when Neveah makes some comments about 'being into Black guys' as well as apologising for the history of Layla's people. How are these similar or dissimilar, and why do you think they've been mentioned in the book? Why do these remarks make Layla uncomfortable if they're not the same overt racism as the behaviours of Jess' dad, for example?
11. Layla goes from being an A student who loves school to someone who rebels, skips school and is disenfranchised by her teachers. How does Layla's challenging journey through Year 12 exemplify how hard it can be for Indigenous people to navigate the education system (and all institutions, in general)? How do Mr Curd's and Ms Marks's actions, tokenism and lack of cultural understanding affect Layla's ability to thrive and feel comfortable in the classroom and at school? Discuss, in particular, how Ms Marks handled her Modern History class. What could she have done differently to ensure Layla felt comfortable with the difficult content?
12. *'These aren't issues that associate with Indigeneity, they are issues that exist as an extension of trauma and pain'* (p.198). At the core of this story is how intergenerational trauma changes people fundamentally, and how where we grow and how we grow can affect us forever. How has intergenerational trauma affected First Nations people in Australia and how is this explored in the book, most poignantly through Marley's family history and his attempted suicide?
13. *'...away from Country, I always had a feeling of some kind of disconnection. I wondered what it meant to be Aboriginal.'* (p.66) This is one of several moments when Layla admits she feels disconnected from her heritage. How does she try to remedy this? What other ways can Australia support First Nations people when many people don't live on Country or have lost that connection.

14. *'Why was it my job to educate them? The pressure was immense, and the fear of getting it wrong was terrifying.'* (p.68) Do First Nations people, and people of colour in general, have a responsibility to educate others on their culture? Why/why not? Similarly, how does Layla feel the enormity of the pressure, and how is this expressed throughout the novel?
15. *'I didn't like looking at myself in the mirror. I wasn't happy with what I saw.'* (p.47) This novel not only addresses the struggles of being an Indigenous teenager but also the universal struggles that all teenagers face regarding identity, body image, peer pressure and fitting in. Which struggles did you relate to? Which characters did you connect with in the book?
16. *'[Angie] calls me Jugs, I call her Tits ... Everyone else thought the nicknames were about boobs and they kind of were, but they actually started because we were both Black and were calling each other "sis".'* (p.40–41) *'Somewhere I had lost respect for [Amy] and that was because she was friends with a girl I couldn't fake affection or respect for.'* (p.129) Compare the differences between Layla's friendship with Amy and Angie. Why do Layla and Amy drift apart? And why does Layla connect so deeply with Angie?
17. *'But your future isn't here, with me. You're going to change the fucking world.'* (pp.336–337) Why do Layla and Tim make the difficult decision to break-up? Could they have made it work? Do you think they'll find their way back to one another? Why or why not?
18. The book finishes in quite an open-ended way. The stories of Layla, Tim, Marley and Angie are all undetermined. Discuss why this decision was made. Do you think Layla made it into university? Did Marley do well with his trade? What do we imagine is next for Layla?