

# Moonlight and Dust

By Jasmin McGaughey



An intriguing, fast-paced debut YA fantasy novel, featuring sixteen-year-old Torres Strait Islander Zillah, who is caught up in the world of exclusive high school parties after her sister has a mysterious accident. For fans of kick-arise girls, enigmatic boys, true friendships, dark secrets and illicit magic.

## RECOMMENDED FOR

14 – 17 (Upper Secondary)

## THEMES

First Nations Australians, Torres Strait Islands, Indigenous, African American, fantasy, superpowers, mystery, speculative fiction, Own Voices, #LoveOzYA

## ISBN (AUS)

9781761181337

## SYNOPSIS

*There's something dangerous in the air. It shimmers in the night, wrapped in the warm, humid breeze. I stand on the kerb outside my cousin's house waiting for my sister.*

Zillah has always been a good girl – nothing like her rebellious big sister Nik. After Nik has an accident that leaves her comatose, Zillah has to find a way to navigate life and high school in Cairns without Nik's guiding light.

Determined to fit in, Zillah seeks out the secrets of her school's after-hours party scene and discovers Moondust – a sparkling elixir with magical properties. Could this have something to do with Nik's accident? To find out, she must plunge further into a world of moonlit parties and take out-of-character risks.

As Zillah unravels what might be going on at Craigmont High, she forges friendships with other Island students and starts falling for a boy who might know more about Nik than he lets on. But Zillah is not entirely sure who she can trust. And she has no idea of the danger they're all in.

A wonderful new voice in YA fantasy with a unique story about family and friendship, mysterious parties and unknowable secrets.

## AUTHOR MOTIVATION

'This book started as a short story in *Unlimited Futures: Speculative, Visionary Blak+Black Fiction*. I began the short story by asking what an Island girl would do if she started dating a boy with some kind of supernatural power. In the short story she breaks up with him! Eventually, I developed the short story into a novella for the creative component of my Master of Philosophy at UQ.

'It was really important to me to include culture in the book, but I didn't want to confuse readers about what was fantastical and what was true. Lisa Fuller's article in *Kill Your Darlings* was super helpful for me. It's called "Why Culturally Aware Reviews Matter".'

Jasmin McGaughey

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jasmin McGaughey is a Torres Strait Islander and African American writer and editor. She is the author *Moonlight and Dust* and the Little Ash series presented by Ash Barty and illustrated by Jade Goodwin. Jasmin started her publishing journey as a black&write! editor intern while she studied a Master of Writing, Editing and Publishing followed by a Masters by research, investigating fantasy literature written by people of colour. In 2023, she won a Queensland Premier's Young Publishers and Writers Award. She has written for *Overland*, *Kill Your Darlings*, *SBS Voices* and *Griffith Review* and recently co-edited *Words to Sing the World Alive*.

## IN-CLASS DISCUSSIONS AND ACTIVITIES

### BEFORE READING

#### For discussion on representation in literature:

McGaughey, J. 2020. 'Hope and motivation while writing', Centre for Stories, 20 July 2020, <https://centreforstories.com/stories/journal/journal-jasmin-mcgaughey/>

McGaughey, J. 2020. 'Why Australian YA Needs More Torres Strait Islander Writing', KYD, 20 January 2020, <https://www.killyourdarlings.com.au/article/why-australian-ya-needs-more-torres-strait-islander-writing/>

'My own experience has shown me that people don't know who Torres Strait Islanders are. While on a CareerTrackers Indigenous internship in Melbourne I shadowed a colleague; an older man, grey, with glasses and bushy brows peaking above.

"Can you tell me," he whispered, as if admitting a secret, "where the Torres Strait Islands are?" We sat at his desk as he showed me his work. "Are the islands in Australia?"

'My heart stopped. I was at a national company on an *Australian Indigenous internship*, and staff didn't even know if my people came from Australia. It wasn't anger I felt, but frustration as I explained, yet again, where the Torres Strait Islands are.'

#### For discussions on place and climate change:

McGaughey, J. 2023. 'Finding Home Away from Family', SBS Voices, 26 January 2023, <https://www.sbs.com.au/voices/article/finding-home-away-from-family/kmsz46exa>

'I have always been connected – physically – to my relations; it is something that has sustained me. So, moving to Darwin has been challenging. It's a process of "splintering" that feels as if I've left multiple versions of myself around the country – Brisbane, Cairns, the islands and more.'

McGaughey, J. 2021. 'Language and Country – the saltwater and the land – felt healing to me', SBS Voices, 4 July 2021, <https://www.sbs.com.au/voices/article/language-and-country-the-saltwater-and-the-land-felt-healing-to-me/ktq8smse2>

'Some of my family is buried on the edge of Hammond Island and the water gets closer to them as sea levels rise. Where I stood during the tombstone unveiling just this year, listening to songs in language and watching island dance, is close to the water.

'I believe that the survival of culture, language, and the physical survival of our lands is an interconnecting conversation.'

**For discussions on culturally safe reading and writing:**

Fuller, L. 2020. 'Why Culturally Aware Reviews Matter', *KYD*, 5 October 2020, <https://www.killyourdarlings.com.au/article/why-culturally-aware-reviews-matter/>

McGaughey, J. 2023. 'Entering the Publishing World in Culturally Safe Space', *KYD*, 23 January 2023, <https://www.killyourdarlings.com.au/article/entering-the-publishing-world-in-a-culturally-safe-space/>

- a) After reading the article 'Why Culturally Aware Reviews Matter' by Lisa Fuller, what do you think a culturally aware book review looks like? Do you think it looks different when the book is of a fantasy or sci-fi genre?
- b) Read the quote below from 'Entering the Publishing World in a Culturally Safe Space' by the author:

'Unknowingly, we were attempting to twist the stories we loved to turn them into something we could see ourselves in. Something that could happen to two black kids in the small northern beaches of Cairns.'

Can you think of any movies, TV shows, or books that had characters similar to you?  
A class discussion might be useful, though students may prefer to privately reflect on this question.

**For discussions on the Torres Strait Islands:**

- Locate the Torres Strait Islands on a map and identify Thursday Island and at least three other islands.
- Research the languages of the Torres Strait Islands and write a definition for Kala Lagaw Ya, Kulkalgau Ya and Yumplatok.
- Research the historical and contemporary significance of Thursday Island (Waiben) in Torres Strait Islander life and in Australia's broader history.
- Research the 2022 UN Human Rights Committee finding relating to Torres Strait Islanders and climate change.

**DURING AND AFTER READING****Cover/Visual Literacy**

- How does the visual style and colour palette of the cover – particularly the use of deep blues, purples, and silver – suggest both the fantasy genre and emotional intensity of the story?
- What might the posture and expression of the character on the cover reveal about her inner world or the challenges she faces? How does this align with common themes in YA fantasy?
- The tagline 'Choose a power. Pay the price.' is placed above a glowing full moon and a girl glistening with lightning-like markings. How do these visual elements contribute to a sense of mystery and danger, and what expectations might they create for the reader about the story's world and stakes?

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## Prologue

- Read the prologue of *Moonlight and Dust* and consider the following questions:
  - What tone did the prologue create?
  - Were you hooked to continue reading the story?
  - How did the prologue help you understand the world in which the events of the story take place?

## Genre

- Fantasy novels featuring magic or superpowers often serve as a powerful lens through which to explore real-world issues, such as identity, morality and social justice. What is it about the fantasy genre that helps us reflect on real-life struggles, challenges or societal structures? How does *Moonlight and Dust*, in particular, illuminate truths about our world? Use specific examples from the text to support your response.
- Fantasy novels often feature invented worlds yet *Moonlight and Dust* is grounded in a contemporary Australian setting and spotlights Torres Strait Islander cultural reality. How does Jasmin McGaughey use fantasy tropes – such as transformation, hidden powers, and magical realism – to explore deeper themes of grief, identity, and belonging? Does this novel shift how we understand what fantasy novels can be?
- Consider the articles [‘Edges, Centres and Futures’](#) by Palyku author Ambelin Kwaymullina and [‘Why Culturally Aware Reviews Matter’](#) by Wuilli Wuilli author Lisa Fuller.
  - What genre do you believe *Moonlight and Dust* falls under?
  - How is *Moonlight and Dust* different and/or similar to Lisa Fuller’s *Ghost Bird*, which she describes in the article, and to Amelin Kwaymullina’s writing? (consider the voice of the characters, the plot of the novel, and the author’s notes/thoughts on writing).
  - Write a culturally aware review of *Moonlight and Dust*. It may be helpful to read reviews of other speculative fiction YA first.

## Cultural Identity

1. How do the below quotes represent Zillah's culture and identity?
  - 'I think a lot about accent and words. How my mouth feels thick and heavy, all caught with cobwebs and unused. Something emphatically wrong, at least when I compare it to my family's. It can be hard even within Australia to have an Australian accent, when, really, I want a Black accent or an Island accent. Or better yet, have the language of my people fully formed in my mind, ready to spring from my lips.' (page 11)
  - 'How do I say that going with my family brings about a whole other tidal wave of emotion? That when they stand in the room with me, watching Nik's body hooked up to machines, the slow rise and fall of her chest, the flicker of her eyes beneath thin eyelids, it's too much? I feel not only my own sadness but theirs too.' (page 39)
  - 'Awa Liam's house is stacked full of random things: boxes full of childhoods, photo albums of previous lives, books and artefacts of our family. He is the keeper of history. *A sentimental hoarder*, Nik says. But there is a comfort in being surrounded by memories.' (page 231)
2. In chapter 31, Zillah and her family travel to the Torres Strait Islands for a tombstone unveiling. Can you write a scene (based on a real event) where you travelled to a place that had significant meaning to you? How does this place impact your own idea of who you are?
3. In the author's note at the beginning of the book, the author writes, 'While this story is completely fictional (if the magic teens don't make that clear), I want to specifically note that I have not included any true cultural stories or beliefs in this book.' Could you unpack this in a class discussion, or through individual, written reflections? Why do you think author's note might be important? Who do you think it is written for?



4. Create a new character to write into *Moonlight and Dust* and write a chapter from their first-person perspective. How have you shown their culture and identity in the chapter? It may be helpful to define culture and identity with the class first.
5. In her Author Motivation, Jasmin McGaughey writes that she has not included any cultural stories or beliefs in her book. Why might it be important for authors to differentiate lived culture from fiction? In your answer refer to Lisa Fuller's article, 'Why Culturally Aware Reviews Matter', published 5 October 2020, *Kill Your Darlings*.

### Characterisation

- How does Zillah change throughout the novel, and what experiences contribute most to her growth? In your response, consider how her relationships, her reconnection with home, and her confrontation with grief and identity shape her transformation. What kind of strength does she discover in herself by the end?
- What roles do Casey and Lilli play in Zillah's journey, and how do their contrasting personalities highlight different aspects of her character? In your answer, consider how each girl influences Zillah's sense of identity, belonging and trust.
- Nik is a magnetic presence in the story, even while unconscious. In what ways does her character influence others, particularly Zillah and Artie? How does her absence shape the emotional and narrative landscape of the novel?
- Artie is introduced as someone closely tied to Nik, but he quickly becomes important to Zillah. How does Artie function as both a bridge and a barrier between Zillah and her sister? Consider his emotional complexity and loyalty in your response.
- In what ways does *Moonlight and Dust* challenge mainstream representations of Australian adolescence?

## Language

*Moonlight and Dust* includes dialogue where the characters speak Yumplatok or Ailan Tok. It is one of the [most commonly used First Nations languages](#) in Queensland. See the below example:

“‘If you no lesen tok blor Mum, you gor come stap lor me and Aka,” Athe Ray growls, pointing his fork at Arlo.’ (page 47)

What do you think First Nations peoples might have to consider before using language like this in their work? To assist, consider the [Protocols for using First Nations Cultural and Intellectual Property](#) created by Terri Janke and Creative Australia. Under the section ‘Current Australian protections of ICIP’ there is a subsection called ‘iv. Language laws’ and may help guide conversation around the languages used in books.

- *Moonlight and Dust* features a first-person present-tense narrative that is common to many YA novels. Why do you think YA authors choose this form and in what way might the book be different if it were written in third-person past tense?
- The novel blends Australian English with Yumplatok or Ailan Tok (derived from Kulkgau Ya, a central island dialect of Kala Lagaw Ya). What is the significance of this language choice, and how does it contribute to the novel’s themes of identity, culture, and belonging? Consider both the emotional resonance and political implications of this linguistic blend.
- Examine Jasmin McGaughey’s use of imagery and metaphor, particularly in scenes involving the moon, water, or heat. How do these recurring images reflect Zillah’s inner world or the novel’s mood and atmosphere?
- Dialogue plays a crucial role in revealing character and tension. Choose a scene where dialogue between characters (e.g. Zillah and Nik, or Zillah and Artie) is especially powerful. How does Jasmin McGaughey use dialogue to convey unspoken emotions or conflict?

## Critiquing literature themes

*Moonlight and Dust* was first published as a short story in the collection [\*Unlimited Futures: Speculative, Visionary Black+Black Fiction\*](#) (edited by Ellen van Neerven and Rafeif Ismail). The story was originally called 'The Breakup' and featured the same character, Zillah, breaking up with her superpowered boyfriend because she didn't think she'd be able to keep his secret from her family.

The author wrote the short story based on the question, 'What might an Island girl do in Cairns if she started dating a vampire or a superhero?' The author's answer was 'tell my family'.

- Why do you think the endings might be different in the short story compared to the novel?
- Plot out an ending chapter of *Moonlight and Dust* with Zillah, Nik and their family, but plan a different ending to what actually occurs in the novel.

List out the themes the class observes within *Moonlight and Dust*. The novel is broken up into four parts:

- Part I, The School
- Part II, The Dust
- Part III, The Love
- Part IV, The Rip

A question for students to consider is: what do you think the names of these parts tell us about the themes of the book? Do you think there are better alternatives for each name that suit the themes of the book more effectively?

The author has [written](#) about *Moonlight and Dust* and said this:

'A friend of mine helped me work this out when I was studying my masters in creative writing. I was looking into how to write First Nations characters into sci-fi and fantasy, and I couldn't work out why I was struggling. My friend (the fabulous

Grace Lucas-Pennington from black&write!) suggested it might be because I am part of a collective. My culture and history don't just belong solely to me.'

How does *Moonlight and Dust* reflect the author's suggestion that she is 'part of a collective'?

### Moondust

- Moondust is used by the students of Craigmont High for different reasons – some for escape, others for courage and confidence – but it also brings danger, disorientation, and harm. Do you think the novel presents Moondust as purely negative, or does it represent something more complicated?
- Discussion – what superpower would you choose from the Moondust 'menu'? Are there any superpowers you would want to include in the menu? What might the dangers be to these superpowers?

Other useful teacher resources for this task:

- [How do I write a book review?](#)
- [The power of short stories](#)
- [Non-Indigenous writers need to listen to Indigenous writers](#)
- [How to write your novel using the Save the Cat Beat Sheet](#)

Key quotes from the book:

- 'In Australia, Cairns is pronounced more like "cans" – like a soft drink. The traditional name of Cairns is Gimuy, and the Gimuywalubarra yidi are the Traditional Custodians. But there's a heap of multiculturalism here. Lots of Island people too; our families have been travelling down to the mainland for a long time – chasing more job opportunities, other family members, or fleeing rising waters.' (page 12)
- 'I feel a bit embarrassed for Ms Lockhart. Explaining the way Island people are connected can get complicated if you don't live within it.' (page 52)

- 'I watch, rapt, as he lays his hands in hers and she squeezes, smiling up at him. Magic, or Moondust, shifts inside of Casey, I'm sure. Because as she holds on and focus flickers across her face, I see tension leave Athe Rob's body. He sighs with the relief and lifts one hand to pat Casey's cheek.' (page 153)
- 'The topic of the essay is overcoming our fears. I've made a list of potential ideas. But the most truthful ones are the most personal.' (page 189)

### CORRESPONDING LITERATURE

- [\*Unlimited Futures: Speculative, Visionary Blak+Black Fiction\*](#) edited by Ellen van Neerven and Rafeif Ismail, with [teachers' notes](#).
- [\*Growing up Torres Strait Islander in Australia\*](#) edited by Samantha Faulkner, with [teachers' notes](#).
- [\*Liar's Test\*](#) by Ambelin Kwaymullina, with [teachers' notes](#).
- *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf* by Ambelin Kwaymullina
- *The Marrow Thieves* by Cherie Dimaline
- *Butterfly Song* by Terri Janke

### OTHER RESOURCES

- [Gab Titui](#)
- [TSRA](#)
- *Blue Water Empire*
- *Strait to the Plate*
- *Alick & Albert* – Alick Tipoti documentary
- [Protocols for using First Nations Cultural and Intellectual Property](#) created by Terri Janke and Creative Australia