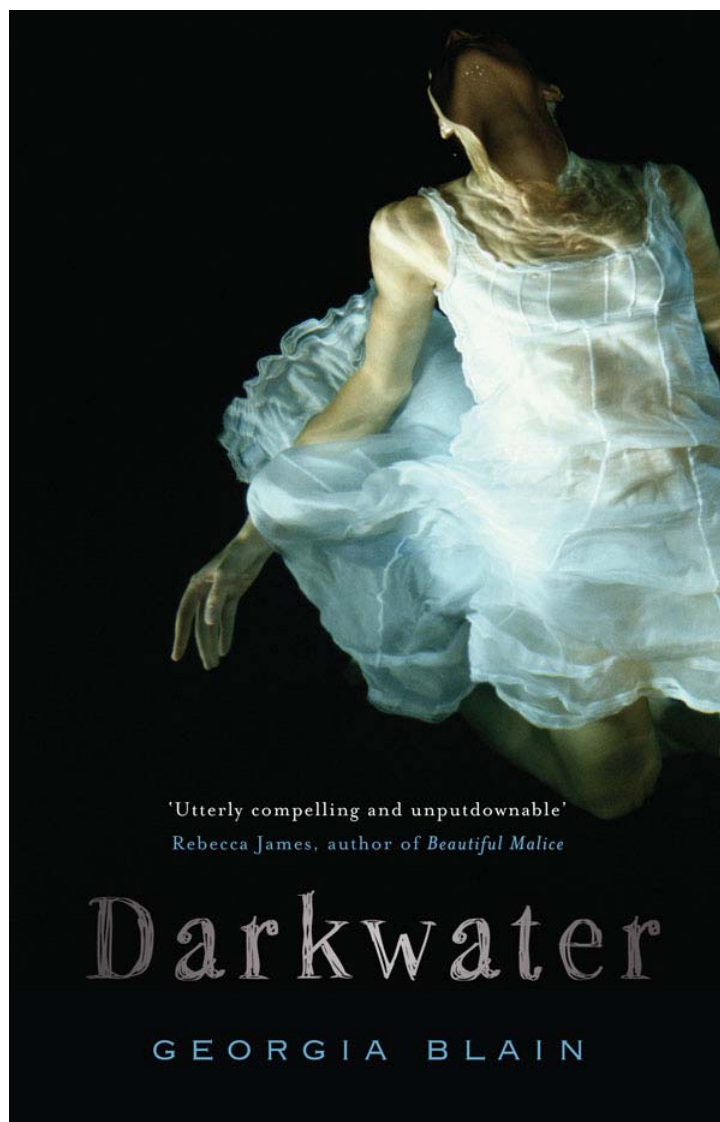


# DARKWATER

Georgia Blain



## TEACHING SUPPORT KIT

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# **DARKWATER**

## Teaching Support Kit

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## **1. SYNOPSIS**

It's summer, early 1973, and Winter is a fifteen-year-old girl living in a small suburb. At a school assembly, the headmaster announces that a student has died. Amanda Clarke's body was found floating facedown by the waterfront and no one knows what happened. Her friends, Kate, Stevie, Lyndon, Cherry and Winter's older brother Joe, are led away to speak to the police.

Amanda had broken up with Stevie just a week before, and was spending more time than usual with Cherry and Lyndon, kids on the outer edge of her group. Lyndon was once close to Joe, but he'd grown increasingly intimidating and unpredictable, and his family was well known to the police. And why Cherry Atkinson? The girl relied on money and access to her parents' liquor cabinet to keep friends. Cherry's father Len was a local developer – powerful, arrogant and barely interested in his daughter.

Winter struggles not to lose patience with her friends Cassie and Sonia as they gossip about who could be to blame for Amanda's death. Lyndon's name is already being whispered. Winter's felt distant from her friends lately – she's found their conversations self-absorbed, and their rules about teenage romance silly. That day, Sonia and Cassie encourage Winter to speak to Nicky Blackwell, the boy Winter likes. It seems wrong to flirt on such a sombre day, but Winter makes a show of bravado and approaches him. They speak a few times over the following weeks, and he gives her skateboarding lessons. But when Nicky mentions his girlfriend, Winter is embarrassed and starts to avoid him.

With solid details of Amanda's death still unknown, fear and supposition leave their mark on the community. Parents begin picking children up from school, rather than letting them wander through the streets as before. Words like 'murdered' are whispered, and front doors firmly locked. The waterfront where Winter used to spy on Joe and his older, more daring friends now seems sinister, despite the bright summer light and heat.

But it still draws the kids in. Winter spies Kate, Lyndon, Cherry, Joe and Stevie by the water. Lyndon and Kate argue – it emerges that Amanda had a secret before she died. Winter recalls overhearing Amanda and Joe talking the week before. Joe had a barely concealed crush on Amanda, but she wasn't interested. 'Everything is wrong,' she'd told him fretfully, and Winter had wondered what someone as beautiful, popular and wealthy as Amanda could have had to worry about.

Later, Winter hears that Lyndon and Amanda were a couple. As Winter strives to separate fact from rumour in her diary entries, she begins to realise how little is certain, how little you can know about the private dealings of another's life. Influencing her investigations are Winter's mother, Dee, and her elderly neighbour, Mrs Scott. The older woman offers a calm, inquiring perspective in stark contrast to the gossip and posturing of Winter's friends. Mrs Scott encourages Winter to question everything, and during one of their talks slips her a copy of the *The Female Eunuch*. Winter's not too keen to take it. She likes fiction.

At home, Dee gestures to the teetering stack of books by her bed. She has her own copy of Greer, and wishes Winter was more engaged in the changes taking place around her. Dee is studying politics and busily organising a protest against the development of bushland near the river. But Winter's not really interested. She just wishes her father Tom would pick up the slack from Dee's sudden abandonment of housework, rather than leaving it to Joe and herself. But he does more than most, Dee protests. Winter grudgingly acknowledges it to be true, and also agrees to come to the protest.

Winter is shocked to see Cherry there. It's her father Len's development that Dee is protesting, and Cherry is joining in to goad him. The day is a revelation for Winter; Dee's project has become a community cause and the construction union has placed a green ban on the site. Winter sees her mother's passion and bravery, and is surprised that her usually taciturn brother is equally admiring. As Joe and Winter chat it emerges that Cherry knows something more about Amanda's last days. Amanda had arranged to meet someone by the waterfront that night.

Winter heads to the waterfront again. She bumps into Bradley Parsons, a boy who lives by the river stairs. Bradley doesn't go to the same school as Winter; he's different, and it seems to Winter that his mother has hidden herself and her son away in their overgrown garden and dark house. Bradley can see down to the water, he tells Winter. 'Someone died down there,' he says. 'I know.'

But Winter doesn't ask more. She's preoccupied with her plan to demand that Cherry tell the police who Amanda was meeting. And it seems Cherry does. Amanda's brother Daniel is in Winter's year at school. He's heard that Cherry went to the police and attacks her, asking why she didn't come forward sooner. Daniel had already revealed to Winter

that the Clarkes had lost all their money, and Amanda was angry at the sudden change in fortune. Now Winter wonders what, if anything, the connection might be.

Cherry said that Lyndon was the one meeting Amanda that night, and now the police are looking for him. There are other tensions around the suburb too: one of the builders protesting the bushland development has been beaten up and Winter's friend Cassie has been humiliated by a boy she'd been spending time with. When Cassie and Winter go to confront the boy, Winter sees Lyndon. Impulsively, she tries to speak with him, hoping still that he is innocent despite what everyone suspects. Cassie calls the police.

Tom is angry at Winter for endangering herself, but Dee and Winter convince him to sit with Lyndon at the police station, as he has no other adult to rely on. While they wait for Tom, Dee tells Winter more about the hospitalised builder: Len Atkinson, whose development deal was in danger, appeared to have paid thugs to frighten the union into lifting the green ban. If so, it was likely that he'd organised the beating as well.

When he returns, Tom says Lyndon is the only suspect in Amanda's death. Cherry saw him heading to the waterfront that night. The police said Amanda had been found with a black eye and a broken arm. She'd slipped or was pushed into the river, got her foot wedged between some rocks, and drowned. She was, as Cassie had guessed, pregnant. One comment from Tom sticks in Winter's mind: Lyndon had appeared genuinely shocked at this news. She writes in her diary: *I do not believe Lyndon Hayes is guilty.*

Winter remembers who else might have seen what happened. Bradley. He knows Lyndon. He says it wasn't him with Amanda that night – it was a much older man. Winter confronts Cherry once more: why did she tell the police she saw Lyndon? Eventually Cherry confirms that it wasn't Lyndon at the waterfront. It was her father.

She explains what she knows. Amanda had overheard Len Atkinson on the phone. She tried to blackmail him, saying he wouldn't want anyone to know what she'd heard. She arranged to meet him by the waterfront, expecting to receive some money that might ease her family's situation, or at least her own.

Cherry and her mother have disappeared 'on holiday'. Lyndon has left school, and the Clarkes have also fled, their house standing empty. Len Atkinson's trial is not for a few months. Winter suspects he'll get off lightly. He has money, connections and access to good lawyers. Lyndon had none of those. She can imagine what would have happened to him, had he continued to bear the blame.

## 2. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Georgia Blain was born in Sydney's northern beaches in 1964. At the age of fourteen, with the family belongings packed into a station wagon, she moved to Adelaide, where she spent her formative years in the beach-side suburb Grange Beach. She has worked in a variety of occupations, as a copyright lawyer and a journalist, and she also has experience working with artists. When writing her acclaimed first novel, *Closed For Winter*, Georgia drew on her life experiences for inspiration to create an evocative and powerfully atmospheric work.

*Closed For Winter* has been made into a feature film, and another of her novels has been optioned for film. She was named one of the Sydney Morning Herald's Best Young Novelists in 1998, and has been shortlisted for the NSW Premier's Literary Awards. She has been published internationally, with her work appearing in publications such as *Granta* and *The Independent Magazine*. Her memoir *Births Deaths Marriages* was shortlisted for the Nita B Kibble Award in 2009.

*Darkwater* is her first book for young adults. Her interest in writing for teenagers was sparked by starting to share books with her daughter.

## 3. GENRE, STRUCTURE, NARRATIVE STYLE, SETTING and THEMES

### GENRE

*Darkwater* is a mystery, as well as a coming-of-age novel.

Can you identify elements that make the story effective as a mystery? For example, think about:

- red herrings/misdirection
- conflicts or events that set up character motivations and possible suspects
- pacing
- reveals
- what stereotypes are used and whether/how they're manipulated
- the narrative POV used, and how it affects what is revealed to readers.

## STRUCTURE

- What is the novel's structure? Is it linear, does it have more than one strand or timeline, or is it circular?
- What is the narrative's timeframe compared to the story's events? E.g., is it being told as the events unfold, or in hindsight?
- Was that clear throughout the story, or only at certain points? What effect did that have on how you read the story?

## NARRATIVE STYLE

The story is told through Winter's first person narration.

- How does using Winter's point of view rather than an omniscient third-person narrator shape the story? Could the themes and structure have remained the same if another narrative POV was used?
- What are the advantages and limitations of this first-person narration? Do readers ever know or infer more than Winter does? (The top of p. 246 gives a clue.)
- What are some of the devices used to overcome the limitations of a first-person narrative? Can you give examples of other such devices used in different novels – particularly mysteries? (You could think about fact versus supposition, different media for the written or spoken word, and the types of conversations in the book.)
- How might the story be different if narrated by another of the characters? Pick an incident and write it from a different character's point of view, or from an omniscient third-person narrator's point of view.

## SETTING

**Time:** Winter states the date only once, on p. 3: '*February 16, 1973*'.

- What markers of the era can you identify in the text? Think of events, pop cultural references, the characters' habits.
- Did you notice these in your initial reading, or did you forget that the story was set in the past? How did it affect the way you understood the story?
- If, in thirty years' time, you were to write a story set in the current era, what items, events or trends do you think would be iconic enough to use as cultural references?

## Place

- There are hints of where the book is set (e.g. the 'Gladesville Bridge', which is real and the 'Greenwood Bush', which has parallels with Kelly's Bush.). Did you have any assumptions about which city or town the story took place in?
- Give examples of key quotes in which the physical setting creates a strong mood, or gives clues to how characters are feeling.
- Can you find examples of the same place being described in different ways? Compare the descriptions and the atmosphere they create or support.

## Now and then

- Did you notice differences in the technology the characters use, compared to the present day?
- How might the story have been different if set in the present day? You could consider a range of things:
  - What are the adult characters' occupations – what do they tell you about the era and the setting?
  - Would the teen characters spend as much time outdoors – and out of contact with their parents – if the story were set in the present?
  - What differences might mobile phones and the internet have made?
  - Does this match what you know about Australia in the early 1970s?

## THEMES

Before beginning this section, try brainstorming in class to identify themes in the story. Or work in groups, and compare which themes the different groups identify. What do readers know about Australia in the early 1970s – how do they think the themes link with real history?

Some of the themes readers could discuss include:

- Truth, gossip and assumptions
- Friendships, relationships and families
- Community
- Outsiders, social status and class
- Hope, conviction and finding meaning
- Gender politics and the rise of feminism
- Environmentalism and conservationism, community activism
- Unions, power and corruption
- Authority figures
- How tragedy affects communities

## 4. DISCUSSION POINTS

Grouped roughly by the themes above, the following could form discussion points for classroom activities and essays.

### Truth, gossip and assumptions

- Winter is very cautious about what she calls 'fact' and 'theory' in her diary. Do the characters' actions and assumptions support the idea that the truth is difficult? Consider Winter's comment on p. 273: *'They would probably want to believe him, and when you want to believe something, taking the next step and seeing it as true isn't that hard.'* Compare this to Dee on p. 251: *'You know, when someone gets that hurt, you wonder whether it's worth it.'*
- Mrs Scott's advice to Winter on p. 44 suggests that the truth is more important than being right: *'The capacity to retain an open mind, a willingness to re-examine the evidence if it's called for. And . . . the strength to be able to admit when you are wrong.'* Can you find examples of Winter examining the evidence and acknowledging when she's been wrong?
- Is honesty always rewarded in the story? (For example, look at pp 122–124 and p. 231). Does this mean the truth is unimportant, or should be side-stepped for convenience's sake?
- What is Lyndon's perspective on 'truth' – does he think the truth is enough? To start, consider his comments on p. 242.
- Find examples of Lyndon being set up as a troubled or unlikeable character. Did these passages affect whether you suspected him? Contrast this with Winter's words on p. 247: *'Sometimes I don't like him all that much, but it doesn't mean he's a murderer. To be a murderer . . . That's a huge thing.'*
- Look at Winter's descriptions on pp. 1–3 and p. 273. Does Winter always deal in the truth? (You could also consider these passages in the context of 'hope, conviction and finding meaning'.)

### Friendship

- Winter struggles to balance her affection for her friends and their shared history, with a growing sense of distance from them. Do Winter's experiences with her friends seem common? Did you think Winter made fair appraisals of her friends? Whether yes or no, are her actions those of a good friend? (Among other episodes, you could look at pp 226–236.)
- Compare this with Joe and Lyndon's relationship, and Joe and Stevie's. What issues do these friendships raise? As a writing exercise, you could imagine a future scene



between Joe and Lyndon. What do you think they'd say to one another? (To start, you could look at p. 274: *'When someone has thought you capable of the very worst, it must be hard to forgive.'*)

### **Community, outsiders, social status**

- What are the benefits and problems of living in a close-knit community, as highlighted by the story? Consider the favours, friendship, sympathy and support characters extend to one another, and issues such as gossip, privacy, prejudice and social obligations.
- Despite seeming to be close-knit, how well do you think the characters really know one another? How effectively are they able to help one another? You could consider a number of things, such as the Clarkes' situation, and Daniel's comment on p. 226 *'Dinner isn't going to fix anything.'* or the episodes described on pp. 34–35, pp. 55–58 or pp. 251–254.
- Who are the outsiders in this community and why? Consider Winter's words about the Parsons' home on p. 150: *'It was a garden of shame, I thought, one in which you hid from the world, and as I realised this, I felt overwhelmingly sad.'* Do you think the Parsons would be so isolated if the story were set in the present? Why?
- Would you say class differences play a part in the novel? Give examples of the ways different characters' wealth and social standing are hinted at in the text. (E.g., To start, you could find and compare descriptions of Amanda's, Winter's and Lyndon's homes.)

### **Family**

- What clues are there early on that all is not well in the Clarke family? And in the Atkinson family? Did these hints go in a direction you expected?
- The Clarke, the Atkinson and the Hayes families all have secrets or troubles. Although they're functional and loving, do you think Winter's family would have been considered conventional at the time? Even what Winter calls her parents might be a clue. Consider also the party Dee throws, and Winter's lack of surprise at seeing adults drinking and smoking marijuana, and her mother being hungover the next day.

### **Hope, conviction and finding meaning**

- When Winter suggests to a priest that she is not religious, he intones *'Lack of belief will drive any of us to despair'* (p. 53). Winter doesn't seek solace in religion, but consider this later quote: *'I still missed the way that hope had made me feel, no matter how pointless it had been.'* (p. 221, about Nicky Blackwell.) Was her faith in Lyndon's innocence another example of hope – was it pointless?

- On p. 251, Winter says of Joe: *'He was surprised at my certainty that [Lyndon] was innocent, and I was disappointed by his willingness to doubt.'* Did this situation surprise you, given that Joe was friends with Lyndon, and Winter was not? How do you think Winter would have reacted had Lyndon been guilty? Which do you think might have been more devastating to her: Amanda's death or Lyndon's guilt?
- Does it seem likely that Winter hadn't really considered death as a possibility prior to Amanda? Look at Winter's reasoning on p. 65. *'People die. People like Amanda are just suddenly gone . . . It was time to take a risk.'* Do you think this is a common reaction to news of death? Do you think, as a philosophy, it's enough? (You could consider whether the same thought might have influenced Cassie's dealings with Grant Benson.)
- How does Dee find meaning and fulfilment? Among many quotes from and about her, you could consider her words on p. 69: *'You spend most of your life living for other people and it's hard to find out who you really are until much later – and by then, no one cares any more.'*

### Relationships

- Did you find the teenagers' romantic relationships and crushes believable? Consider Winter and Nicky, Cassie and Grant, Amanda and Lyndon, and Joe and Amanda. What issues were raised by these relationships – are they as relevant today? Does this surprise you?
- Would you say Winter's attitude to Nicky is conventional for a teen novel? How is it unusual?

### Women's rights and gender politics

- Gender politics and the feminist movement recur in the text. Consider Dee's response to Winter on p. 15, Mrs Scott's words on p. 40, Winter challenging Tom and Dee on pp. 49–50 and Nicky on p. 81.
- Winter's friends refer to the expectations, signals and judgement involved in teenage relationships. Look at the mention of sex on p. 13, the anklet on p. 120, and Cassie's experience with Grant Benson pp.195–197 and pp. 228–236. Do these conversations seem dated to you? Do they focus on what girls 'should' do, rather than what they might *wish* to do?
- Look at the references to *The Female Eunuch*. Had you heard of it? Did any of your relatives read it when it was newly published, or do they have memories of the response to it? From what you know of it, does it seem relevant today?
- What kind of behaviours are expected of the male characters, especially the teenage boys? Is this different from today? Consider Winter's appraisals of Joe (pp 45–46, 54–60, 116–117), Tom and Lyndon's connection (pp. 34–35 and from p. 251) and Winter's experience of Daniel and Lyndon's different moods.

## Politics

- A variety of political movements were particularly active in the 1970s, and many are included in the book: feminism, environmentalism and conservationism, community activism, the union movement. How relevant and transferable are the events to today? Can you think of political issues that may have been relevant in the era but aren't touched upon?
- Consider the physical descriptions and surnames of the characters: Blair, Clarke, Atkinson, O'Connor, Parson, Hayes. Are there any hints of multiculturalism in the story, or even of Indigenous characters? Did you notice this in your first reading of the novel? Is this what you'd expect of a story set in present-day Australia, or even in a different suburb in the 1970s?

## Authority

- Who would you say are conventional authority figures in the book? How are they portrayed – are they respected by the other characters? (Give examples.) Why do you think this is?
- Do you think the author has a particular viewpoint or bias about authority – and why might that be? Do you think the same viewpoint would occur in a novel set in the present?
- Who does Winter turn to when she needs help or advice? Do you think Joe would go to the same people? Would he go to the conventional authority figures you listed above?

## 'The stain' – how communities are changed

- On p. 211, Mrs Scott says: *'Something like that poor girl's death . . . it ripples out. It's a stain that spreads, touching us all.'* Winter refers to this again in the final chapter. Can you find examples earlier in the novel of this change occurring? Do you think it's reasonable to say that the community lost its innocence?
- In particular, how does Winter view the changes in her neighbourhood. (E.g., you could start by looking at pp. 95–96, p. 216 and p. 220)
- Consider the old cliché that ignorance is bliss. Would remaining ignorant of the details of Amanda's death have made any of the characters happier? (You could consider Winter's attitude to Nicky at the end of the book; whether Cassie's painful experience might ever be useful to her; whether it's likely that Cherry was happy, or had a good relationship with her father before Amanda tried to blackmail him.)

## 5. FURTHER RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

Many elements of the story recall real events or issues. Research one of the following and write a short essay on how it's relevant to *Darkwater*:

- The political events of 1972 and 1973: who was PM? What news was making the headlines? What events had been important in the preceding years? What was the political and social climate?
- Consider the idea of health and fitness in relation to the novel, and research attitudes and legislation about these in the early 1970s. Did you notice how active the characters were? The emphasis on sunbaking? What they ate? How much they drank and smoked, including marijuana?
- Research the Kelly's Bush green ban in Hunters Hill, Sydney. Some names to look out for are Jack Munday, Norm Gallagher, The Friends of Kelly's Bush (FKB) and the Builders Labourers Federation (BLF).
- Look up Juanita Nielsen and the Victoria Point development in Kings Cross. Nielsen was campaigning against a property development and investigating vice and corruption when she disappeared in July 1975. Although her body was never found, a coronial inquest found that she was murdered. Many people suspect she was killed because of her campaign against the Victoria Point development.
- The publication of *The Female Eunuch*. What was the response to it? What were the gender issues of the era? (For example, look up 'equal pay for equal work' and 'equal pay for work of equal value'. Has much changed?) You could interview an older relative, friend or teacher about the impact of the book's release.