



THE LIES WE TELL OURSELVES

Maura Pierlot

Synopsis

Fifteen-year-old Harley just wants to wake up one morning as her perfect self, the one who's buried beneath all the awkwardness, sarcasm and weight. But on her first day back at school, her life's already splintering. Struggling with the sudden death of her beloved grandmother, Harley hopes sidekick Talia has her back, but Talia's more interested in impressing the popular girls. Even Griff, Harley's quirky male bestie, is acting weirder than usual.

When gorgeous new American student Carter struts into class at the start of Year 10 with his dazzling smile and stunning good looks, Harley knows it's time to take control of her destiny – to get skinny, get a boyfriend, get a life. Soon, Harley is drawn into a dangerous game, denying herself food in a desperate bid to win over Carter. Revelling in compliments about her appearance, Harley turbo-charges her weight loss, thanks to a new job at the gym. As Harley disconnects from friends and family, her philosophy teacher makes her question herself, her perceptions and reality. With no one else to turn to when her parents separate, Harley texts her deceased grandmother. Astonished to receive a reply, she retreats further into a world where nothing is as it seems. Just when Carter and happiness are finally within her grasp, Harley discovers the things she believes to be true aren't real, sending her freefalling. Until a person she's known all her life, but has never really seen until this moment, steps out of the shadows to catch her.

Author Background

Maura Pierlot is a Canberra-based author, playwright and filmmaker who creates across art forms for children and adults. Her work typically has an existential bent, exploring the nature of self, belonging, identity and ethics – perhaps not surprising for someone with a Ph.D. in philosophy. Maura is the author of four picture books and three young adult titles, including *Fragments: Journeys from Isolation to Connection* which is now an award-winning web series and feature-length film anthology. Maura is actively embedded in community initiatives, running The Book Bench Project in Canberra, working with Books in Homes Australia, serving as an ACT Branch Ambassador for Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA) and reviewing children's books for the CBCA online magazine, *Reading Time*. When she is not doing writerly things, Maura enjoys spending time with family and local wildlife at their avocado farm in Jamberoo, NSW.

Author Publications

- ***The Lies We Tell Ourselves*** – YA novel, Big Ideas Press, 2025
- ***Clutterbugs*** – picture book, Big Ideas Press, 2025
- ***Alphabetter – A Better You and Me, from A to Z*** – picture book, Affirm Press, 2024
- ***What Will You Make Today?*** – picture book, Storytorch Publishing, 2023
- ***Fragments: Journeys from Isolation to Connection, 2nd ed*** – hybrid YA novella, Big Ideas Press, 2023
- ***Fragments: Journeys from Isolation to Connection*** – playscript, Big Ideas Press, 2021
- ***The Trouble in Tune Town*** – picture book, Little Steps Publishing, 2017

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Curriculum areas

English

- Language
- Literature
- Literacy

Health & Physical Education (HPE)

- Personal, social and community health

Click [HERE](#) for v9 curriculum links.

Themes

- Identity
- Friendship/relationships
- Belonging
- Self-esteem
- Bullying/cyberbullying
- Social media
- Family
- Memory
- Grief
- Mental and physical health (including disordered eating, body dysmorphia, anxiety and depression)
- Philosophy
- Romance

Teacher Notes prepared by:
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Author Inspiration

Adolescence has often been described as a rollercoaster of emotions. Add to the mix social media and the unattainable ideals it perpetuates for young people, who far too often measure their self-worth by peer comparison. For many, it's easier to become someone else than to work out who they are. It was the same in my day.

I've had a life-long love affair with philosophy and wanted to write a layered young adult novel for readers who like to think deeply about 'big ideas' like truth, reality and the nature of self. *The Lies We Tell Ourselves* weaves humour, pathos and a dash of philosophy, cultivating a profound sense of hope. The novel can be read simply as a pacy, angst-fuelled ride through adolescence or more substantially as a tale of an existential crisis. It can be read narrowly as a book about body image or more generally about mental/physical health and healing. It can be read broadly as a journey of self-discovery or with irony and subtext.

Although *The Lies We Tell Ourselves* touches on many themes, including the timely and pervasive issues of body image and body dysmorphia, it is ultimately a story of grief and loss: Harley grieves the loss of her grandmother, her friendships, and her sense of self as she strives to be someone she's not. I hope young readers and their families can see their lives echoed in these pages and take the time to embrace, and will talk about, their own stories and issues that matter.

Reasons for studying this book

The Lies We Tell Ourselves is a poignant, relatable and moving story featuring relatable themes of friendship, belonging, self-esteem, first romance and mental health. The characters' mental health struggles provide a forum for exploring a range of issues including grief, depression, anxiety, body image and self-identity, while reinforcing that support is always available. The layered storytelling and intertextual references in *The Lies We Tell Ourselves* offer a unique opportunity for crossover readings.

The Lies We Tell Ourselves will enable teachers and students to:

- Examine different writing styles
- Analyse how language and writing evoke mood, tension and characterisation
- Encourage critical thinking
- Encourage creative and imaginative writing
- Discuss moral and ethical dilemmas
- Examine how first person voice can be unreliable and change perspective
- Explore universal questions through philosophical thought
- Explore humour and figurative devices
- Explore grief and loss through the lens of mental health
- Discuss relationships, resilience, perseverance and the power of human connection



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Before you read the book

- ▶ What do the front and back covers tell you about this story? How do the covers influence your feelings about the story before you read it, and then after? Does the front cover support your impressions of the book?
- ▶ Discuss the choices made when designing covers and writing blurbs for young adult fiction.
- ▶ Consider other novels from a range of young adult (YA) fiction genres (e.g., Contemporary, Fantasy, Romance, Dystopian).
- ▶ Compare and discuss book covers and blurbs and whether they accurately depict the tone and tenor of the story.
- ▶ How does the title of this story influence your thoughts about the book?
- ▶ What does the prologue mean?

Perception is cunning. It plants a seed in your vulnerabilities, where it burrows like a parasite, feeding on nameless fears. It's everywhere but reveals itself only in glimpses: the shadow that follows you mercilessly; the emptiness that can never be filled; the voice that taunts you from the mirror.

- ▶ Revisit the prologue throughout the novel study, supported by ideas and examples from characters and events in the book.
- ▶ Learn more about the author, her background and other work:
web: maurapierlot.com; IG: [@maurapierlot_author](https://www.instagram.com/maurapierlot_author); FB: [@maurapierlotauthor](https://www.facebook.com/maurapierlotauthor)

As you read the book

- ▶ Create a character map for the key characters in the story (Harley, Griff, Carter, Talia, Harley's mother & father, Harley's grandmother). Discuss their physical characteristics, key feelings/events, behaviours and personalities.
- ▶ Which of the key characters, and minor characters, did you enjoy reading about most, and why? Do you think any of the minor characters deserved more action in the story, and why?
- ▶ Note the major settings in this novel. How are they different, similar and important in the development of Harley's thoughts and actions?
- ▶ Harley's world is often dominated by her internal thoughts. Discuss whether, and how, a character's mind can serve as a setting.
- ▶ Create a plot structure, exploring the key events, the rise and fall in action and major turning point/s of the novel.
- ▶ **Higher order thinking tasks** can engage students in critical thinking, problem-solving and analysis, encouraging deeper understanding of the text and facilitating connections between the novel's themes and real life issues. Explore higher order thinking tasks [HERE](#).

Key Study Topics

IDENTITY

- Examine how Harley's character is developed throughout the story by her thoughts and actions. How do Harley's immediate thoughts about herself influence your feelings towards her? How do the events around her influence her actions? Write another paragraph or more from Harley's perspective. This could be a part of the book where you think the reader may want to know more, before the book started (school holidays) or after Harley has started treatment at the end of the story.
- If this story were told in third person, would it change how you feel about Harley, and how/why? Rewrite a highly emotive paragraph from the novel in third person to see how the reader's perspective may change. Explore the importance of choosing the right voice for stories and how this voice can influence the reader's experience (comprehension, emotional impact and enjoyment).
- Analyse the way in which young people are portrayed in this novel. Ask students to explore the conversations, thoughts and behaviours of the young people. Do the students identify with this perspective and do they believe the depiction is realistic? Can students link this book into their school environment? Ask students to write about a moment in the story where they felt a strong connection to their own school life or to the portrayal of high school life generally.

RELATIONSHIPS

- In the process of trying to get close to Carter, Harley distances herself from Talia, Griff and her family. Explore the notions of connectedness and disconnectedness in the novel.
- How does Harley's relationship towards her family and friends change throughout the story? Explore some key quotes that highlight her feelings. Is Harley the same person at the start and end of the novel? Is Harley aware of the extent to which she has changed?

FRIENDSHIP & BULLYING/CYBERBULLYING

- Harley is told to take the pledge (p181) and distance herself from Griff, and although she knows it will hurt his feelings, she does it.
 - Ask students to consider what they would have done in this circumstance.
 - Debate Harley's actions here and in other key moments regarding Griff (lying about not being able to go to the movie and then ditching Griff to attend the formal with Carter).
 - Using evidence from the novel, ask students to justify and form an opinion about Harley's actions.
- Some characters tease Harley about eating while others insist there is nothing wrong with her weight. In your view is Harley overweight or is her size mainly exaggerated in her head?
- Do friendships change over time? How do the friendships of Harley, Griff and Talia change? What is a good friend? Relate to your own experience.
- What sort of friend are Griff and Talia to Harley, and Harley to Talia and Griff?

SOCIAL MEDIA & SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS

- Discuss the different influences society and social media have on the young people in this novel. Try to categorise these into negative and positive influences, local and global influences, spoken and unspoken. Other categories may be developed to fit into your classroom situation.
- How do the characters in *The Lies We Tell Ourselves* cope with grief, loss, anxiety, and societal pressures to look and act a certain way? Find evidence throughout the novel that shows the influence of society, social media and peers on young people and adults. Discuss the pressures felt by the adults, namely, Harley's parents. Find examples from the novel where these influences are found and the language used to express them.

Key Study Topics

FAMILY

- Read the story excerpt below. Students can work in pairs then small groups to compare the different responses they have towards Harley's mother from this description and at various points throughout the novel. Which student responses are based on events in the stories, and which are based on an emotional response? Ask students to write a description of their own mother, grandmother or significant adult when they feel frustrated and when they feel connection. Compare the language used and their feelings towards her/him/them.

I hardly recognise the person sitting across from me. I stare at Mum in silence, having no idea who she is. Then I see her, really see her. She's a woman who had hopes and dreams, who put her husband's career before her own, a woman whose marriage has broken down. A woman who has just lost her mother. Suddenly, everything I thought I knew about her no longer seems real. (The Lies We Tell Ourselves, p291)

WRITING

- Where do you think the author found inspiration for this book? Research the incidence of eating disorders, depression and other mental health issues in the general population and amongst young people.
- There are many times throughout the novel where Harley is texting her friends. Find examples of how the language used in the text messages changes depending for whom the message is written. Discuss these differences and why this occurs. Ask students to recreate a series of text messages that a minor character would write in this story. (What would the texts between Harley's parents look like? Or Carter's texts to his friends? Eden's?)
- What is the author's purpose in writing this story – to inform, persuade, instruct, describe/explain?
- Symbolism features throughout the novel (e.g., the fig tree at The Mount, Harley's phone as a conduit to her grandmother, the gardening analogy). Discuss these examples and identify additional ones.

MENTAL & PHYSICAL HEALTH

- Assign students different chapters of the book to explore the issues of grief, toxic friendships, perils of social media, body dysmorphia, disordered eating, depression, marriage breakdown and family dysfunction. Focus on the events, descriptions, beliefs and language used. Compile the students' findings and identify the techniques used.
- Several characters in the novel struggle with issues affecting their mental health yet none speaks openly about this until much later in the novel. Ask students whether these struggles seem meaningful or relevant to their lives? Explore whether literature, particularly young adult fiction, can provide a platform for discussing contemporary concerns like mental health issues and, if so, how? Highlight the fact that help is always available, and link to information resources and key professionals at your school and in your area.

GRIEF

- Can people gain strength in life from losing someone? How? Relate this to Harley's story.
- Compare and contrast the different ways people react to grief, the various ways they navigate it, and the consequences. Explore how we can deal with grief in different ways in our own lives.

HUMOUR

- How does humour engage you with the story and the characters?
- List different moments of humour in this story (e.g., conversations with Carter – Australian language, Harley and Eden at the ice cream shop, Harley and Griff on the bus and at their tree).
- Discuss humour as a literary device, particularly when used in the context of serious issues like mental health.

Key Study Topics

CHARACTERS

- How do the secondary characters enhance and support the main character (Harley)?
- What are the purpose and motivation for each character?
- Harley's grandmother is deceased but plays a central role in the story. How can absent characters enhance plot and character development?
- Choose some key moments in the text for students to decide whether they feel sympathy, empathy or antipathy towards the different characters. Examine the techniques the author has used to position the reader, and link the student's values and experiences to the events. Ask students to rewrite the passage/s to evoke a different response.

STORY STRUCTURE

- What is Harley's arc in the novel? What does she learn about herself and others, and when? How does she change as the story progresses?
- What role does structure play in the novel? Is the separation of the text into four school terms an effective device for telling Harley's story, and why/why not?
- Could Harley's story be told over one or two school terms rather than an entire year? How, if at all, would a shorter timeframe affect the reader's experience and emotional connection to the story?

PHILOSOPHERS & PHILOSOPHY

- Explore the philosophical quotes that introduce each chapter [HERE](#). Ask students if the quotes seem applicable to their lives, and how. Explore the role that philosophy may play in finding meaning and purpose in life.
- Discuss the meaning of the quotes and how they relate to the events that unfold in the relevant chapters. Discuss why the author may have used quotes from ancient texts rather than more contemporary language.
- Ask students to choose a quote from the story that resonates and/or to find new quote from a (modern or ancient) philosopher that relates to their lives.

VOICE

- Working in small groups, ask students to explore the voice of Harley in different chapters. Discuss how she is feeling, the influences on her mindset and actions, and events. Discuss the type of language she uses to tell the story depending on her frame of mind. Discuss how her voice throughout the novel, particularly as her disordered eating progresses, influences how the readers feel about the character of Harley. Give examples of language used.
- Re-read the chapter where Harley is drunk. Look at how her thoughts have been written to portray the jumbled state of mind. How does drinking to excess change how Harley feels, her thoughts and her actions? Explore the style of writing that the author has used to depict the state of drunkenness. Ask students to create an additional paragraph in this section to learn more about writing in a different style. They may write the build-up to Harley becoming drunk, add details to Eden's party or perhaps write Harley's scattered thoughts when she finally wakes up.
- What role does perception play in Harley's story and how does it differ from reality? Is Harley a reliable or unreliable narrator (or both)? Explore how this has affected students' understanding and enjoyment of the story, and their emotional response to it.

REFLECTING

- Read readers' online reviews for this novel on sites like Goodreads. Identify preferences and values, context and modes of communication used for positive and negative reviews, and identify any patterns linked to opposing opinions, and to cultural, gender and age factors.
- Ask students to write and share their own reviews by uploading to a review site, sharing on social media, featuring in a blog or presenting in class.
- What emotions did you experience when reading Harley's story? Compare these to your emotions after finishing the novel.
- What role does empathy play in a reader's emotional response to literature? Relate this to your own experience.