



The Brink

HOLDEN SHEPPARD

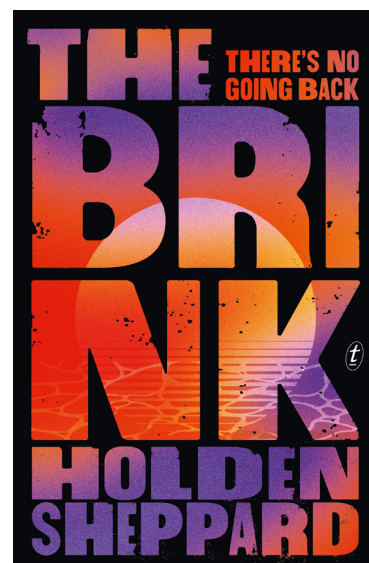
ISBN 9781922458643

RRP AU\$24.99

Fiction

RECOMMENDED READING AGE: 15+

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CURRICULUM GUIDE

The following teaching guide has been designed to embrace shared curriculum values. Students are encouraged to communicate their understanding of a text through speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing.

The learning activities aim to encourage students to think critically, creatively and independently, to reflect on their learning, and connect it to audience, purpose and context. They aim to encompass a range of forms and include a focus on language, literature and literacy. Where appropriate, they include the integration of ICT and life skills.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Holden Sheppard is an award-winning author born and bred in Geraldton and now based in Perth, Western Australia. His debut novel, *Invisible Boys* (Fremantle Press, 2019), was published to both critical

and commercial success. It won the WA Premier's Prize for an Emerging Writer, was shortlisted for the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards and was named a Notable Book by the Children's Book Council of Australia. *Invisible Boys* is currently in development as a television series.

SYNOPSIS

When Leonardo tags along with Mason, Jared, Val and Kaiya to leavers week he's already anticipating the week from hell. Even though Jared used to be his best friend, they haven't spoken since the first year of high school, when Jared made it clear that he didn't want to be friends with someone weak. But Leonardo wants things to be different, wants to be different himself.

He's not the only one—Mason, a footy jock with no time for squares, is harbouring feelings for Jared; high achieving Kaiya wants to be something other than the good girl for once. Everyone going to leavers week is looking to come back changed. But they get more than they bargained for when, instead of taking over the usual seaside town, the group finds themselves turned back. Backtracking along the highway they find themselves at the Brink, a small off-grid island off the Western Australian coast. It's not the perfect place to party, but it will do.

The remote wilderness of the island exposes each of them in ways they hadn't predicted, straining friendships and loyalties, and testing the bounds of identity. Fuelled by drugs, booze and sexual tensions the party starts to feel reckless, with danger creeping in. First Val is roofied. Then one of the locals is found dead on the beach. Everyone starts to panic, throwing around accusations and blame. Someone else will die, and nobody will leave the island unscathed. *The Brink* is a gripping contemporary thriller that examines masculinity, sexuality, fear and friendship.



BEFORE READING

1. Think about the title of the book. What does it mean to be on the brink of something? The book is about a group of friends at the end of high school, celebrating in a remote location with no parents. How do you think the specifics of this scenario might lead them in various ways to the brink?
2. 'A group of school-leavers: free at last, ready to party, expectations high.' What are some of the expectations these characters might have about leaving school, leavers week, or the future beyond that?
3. Discuss this book in relation to the blurb. What genre is the book? Discuss the different ways genre impacts your expectations of the plot.

WHILE READING

1. Why doesn't Leonardo like being called 'Leo'?
2. What does Leonardo's single cigarette represent to him?
3. Why are the Brink locals so angry when Jared and the others arrive on the beach? How does Ryan convince Max to let them stay? Why are they so wary of anything that might bring the cops to the island?
4. Why are Kaiya's parents so afraid that she'll share their private matters? Are their expectations of her realistic?
5. Discuss the decision everyone makes not to report Baz's death. Has their rebellion become a crime? What do you think would have happened if they'd reported it?
6. What does Mason's footy coach say he lacks when he plays? How does this apply to his life beyond footy?
7. Why does Mason feel ashamed of his sexuality? How do you think his friends would react if he told them the truth?
8. What parallels does Kaiya draw between Val and her sister?
9. Discuss the way that loyalty and friendship are explored in the story. How does Val use friendship as a tool to stay in control?
10. How does alcohol change Leonardo? Is it true freedom?
11. Why is Jared jealous of Leonardo's relationship with his dad?
12. Do you think that either of the deaths were accidental?

AFTER READING

CHARACTER

1. Leonardo and Mason both want Jared to notice them (albeit in different ways). Why is his attention so important to each of them? Why does Jared withhold it? We never see the story from Jared's POV, but what do you think we might learn if we did? What does he want? Why is he so angry all the time?
2. At the beginning of the novel, Leonardo describes Mason as the 'kind of lunk who makes Jared look intelligent.' (p. 9) What does he mean by this? What makes them change the way they see each other? How do you think Leonardo would describe Mason at the end of the book?
3. 'Just this week, just this once, I want to be bad.' (p. 27) says Kaiya, when they set out on the trip. Why does she want this so much? Identify one thing that each character wants to change about themselves over the course of the week. Do they succeed?

STYLE AND STRUCTURE

1. The novel is written from multiple points of view (POV). How does the writer distinguish between the voices of these three characters? What makes each of them different or unique? Consider not just what they say but how they say it.
2. The story unfolds over six days and the narrative is divided accordingly into six parts (plus the prologue and epilogue). What changes over the course of each day? What is a narrative arc? Stories will have multiple narrative arcs to keep our attention—you might notice in a television series for example that some problems are solved in one episode while others continue across the whole season. The same thing happens here. Map the narrative arcs that are resolved within a day and the ones that track across the whole week.
3. Consider the first line of the novel—'it didn't start with the dead body.' (p. 1) What does this tell you about what's going to happen? Discuss the way that our choice about when to reveal details like this in a story impacts the suspense and tension for the reader.

THEMES

Love

1. Kaiya's sister asks, 'Why should we have to do anything to be loved?' (p. 221) Is she right? Do we need to earn love? Do you think their parents did love her?
2. 'Control just feels like love if you've never felt the latter.' (p. 127) What does Leonardo mean by this? Do you agree? Why do you think his mother was so controlling?
3. 'I could have given all of that love back to Jared, twice as strong, so he knew what love felt like, too,



because I don't think he had ever known it.' (p. 271) Val and Mason both love Jared, but he is unable to love either of them back. Why do you think this is? How does Mason feel when Jared rejects him? Would their friendship have survived if Jared had lived?

Masculinity

1. What is Leonardo's perception of masculinity? Find a quote in the book that summarises what he thinks a 'real man' is like. Do you agree with this? How does his perception of masculinity impact his perception of himself?
2. Why is Mason afraid that his sexuality will make him less of a man? What does Leonardo say to him when they're trapped in the outhouse together to make him rethink this.
3. Discuss the way that masculinity is explored in relation to the following in the novel: sex, sexuality, relationships with women, relationships with other men. When masculinity causes conflict (for example when Ryan and Jared fight for leadership of the group) how does the writer resolve it?
4. Brainstorm a list of words that you associate with 'traditional masculinity'. What does positive masculinity look like? Are there examples of positive masculinity in the novel?

Danger

There is an undercurrent of danger running through the novel that increases the stakes for the characters and builds tension and suspense.

1. Before they arrive at the Brink, Leonardo describes the scenery: 'Before long we're out in the bush, heading north on the Indian Ocean Drive. They only opened the coast road a few years ago. Apart from the road, this land is pristine. To our right, there's low, dense scrub—saltbush and grass trees, the occasional darting emu—and to our left, powdered beach, turquoise sea and a cloud-free blue horizon.' (p. 15) How does the isolation here feed into the sense of danger? What other dangers are present in the landscape once they reach the Brink?
2. There are external and internal dangers for the characters as well—Max, for example, is an immediate threat because we know that he carries weapons, and the toolies are volatile additions to the group. But the real dangers come from the tensions and aggressions inside the group. Who is seen as most dangerous and why? Are you surprised to find out who is really behind the deaths of the two men?
3. In addition to the real dangers, the story explores our perception of danger—there is Leonardo, who suffers debilitating panic attacks because he fears death; Mason fears that he will be exposed as gay; Kaiya worries that if she lets go she'll be cut off from her family. Are their fears real or perceived? How do they each overcome these threats?

RESPONDING

1. In the acknowledgments of the book, writer Holden Sheppard says that 'this book looks at masculinity and the experience of being a man in a way I would have loved to read as a teenage boy. My work seeks to empower boys and men to be their whole selves, in a positive and healthy way: it will never demonise them, implicitly or explicitly for being themselves. I hope this book might present an opportunity to re-examine the way we talk about masculinity, especially to teenagers.'
 - a. What are some of the ways that masculinity is talked about?
 - b. What are some of the stereotypes of masculinity that you see in your lives? Where do they come from? Are they realistic? Do they impact the way you see yourself?
 - c. Discuss some of the ways that boys and men aren't represented in positive or healthy ways in fiction. How is this book different?
 - d. Make a list of some of the character traits you see in the novel (eg. kindness, gentleness, physical strength, aggression). Is each typically seen as a masculine or a feminine trait? Where do our ideas about this come from?
2. Only three of the characters (Leonardo, Kaiya, and Mason) are in control of the narrative. Why do you think the author has chosen them to tell the story? Why are their perspectives important? Which of the secondary characters interests you and why? Choose one, and rewrite a significant scene from their point of view.
3. The night Jared dies, several significant interactions take place. Kaiya and Jared sleep together. Mason reveals to Jared that he loves him. Leonardo finally tells Jared how angry he is at him. Imagine the morning after if Jared hadn't died and write a scene where the repercussions of one of these revelations is played out.
4. 'We're seeing each other properly for the first time. There's no room here for lies: all our truths are out now.' (p. 293) Write about a time you've found freedom in sharing a secret—why is telling the truth so scary?
5. Write a review of the book and share it with your class. Consider the following:
 - a. Did you enjoy the book? Why/why not?
 - b. What is the story about?
 - c. Who would enjoy the story?
 - d. How is it similar or different to other things you've read?