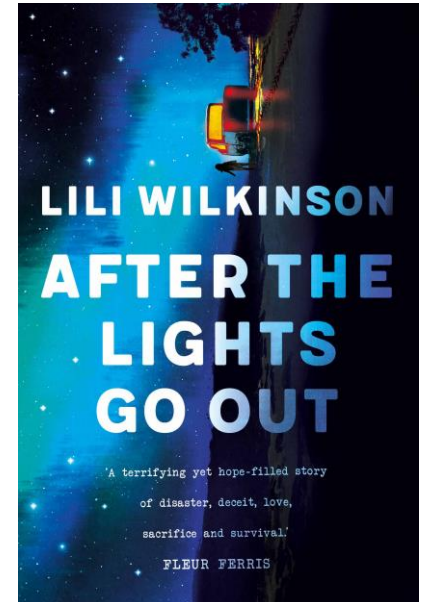


After the Lights Go Out

By Lili Wilkinson

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Recommended for readers 14 years and older



Summary

Seventeen-year-old Prudence Palmer lives with her fifteen-year-old twin sisters Grace and Blythe and their father Rick, on the outskirts of Jubilee, an isolated Australian mining community. Rick is a doomsday prepper. He has a secret bunker filled with non-perishable food and a year's worth of water. Each of the girls has a 'bug out bag', packed with water purification tablets, protein bars, paracord bracelets and epipens for Pru's anaphylaxis. Blythe loves to challenge their father. Grace shares his paranoia. And Pru resents the home-schooling and isolation.

Then one day while their father is at the mine, the power goes out. At their house, and in the town. No one knows why. All communication is cut. Before long, supplies are running out. The sisters decide to keep the bunker a secret – and when their secret is out, there are disastrous consequences. The world is different now, the rules are different. Survival is everything.

Then the phone networks come back on. The two-month blackout wasn't terrorism, or the apocalypse. It was a solar flare that knocked out the power grid for the whole Asia-Pacific region. The surviving sisters must face who they have become...



After the Lights Go Out offers contemporary realism with a dark underbelly. Set in a small outback community this story is laced with paranoia, secrecy and real danger. Full of moral choices and survivalist action, readers are on the edge of their seats. But it is what happens when the lights come back on that is the core of the book's message.

Themes

- disaster
- survival
- moral choices
- love
- sacrifice
- community

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In the author's own words

'I became interested in the preppers movement after reading an article online. I then read a book called *One Second After*, which all the preppers seemed to be recommending. Like my book, it is about a small community surviving the aftermath of a devastating EMP [electromagnetic pulse attack]. I was taken by how masculine the narrative was, and how patriotic. I started imagining what would happen if such a disaster happened in Australia to a mostly female community. For one thing I didn't think people would spontaneously burst into the national anthem quite so much: for another, perhaps there would be less town square executions?'

—Lili Wilkinson

Use in the curriculum

After the Lights Go Out is an interesting novel to study in the context of the Young Adult dystopian genre that has become so popular in recent years. Its conclusion is thought-provoking and, in terms of genre, table-turning.

In fact, it is a realist suspense thriller: readers may, like the characters in the novel, believe they are in a post-apocalyptic setting, but the 'twist in the tail'—it was a serious but not devastating two-month blackout, which the town's isolation prevented them from knowing about—turns the focus clearly onto the moral choices the characters made while in a survivalist frame of mind. Once communication is restored and they discover that order mostly prevailed in the cities, they must face up to their own behaviour.

This is another twist that the author makes to the survivalist genre: rather than chaos and violence prevailing in the cities, forcing protagonists to create new, safe, communities in rural areas, in this story, the better resourced city communities band together to restore law and order and ensure mutual survival. A second twist is that a large portion of the male population is away at work in the mine, bringing a much greater proportion of female characters into the action.

Study of the novel fits the Australian Curriculum requirements for Year 9 and 10 English:

- Australian literature
- genre study—Realist genre. Thriller genre. Survivalist genre. Possible comparison of survival and survivalist genres.
 - subversion of genre expectations—what is the author's purpose?
 - exploration of socio-political context and purpose, particularly prominent in sci-fi and apocalyptic narratives
 - enhanced agency of teenage protagonists in YA fiction in general, and survival stories in particular
- 'what if' scenario prompting reflection on social, moral and ethical positions, leading to discussion, debate and persuasive writing
- construction of 'twist in the tail' stories
- cross-media opportunities with many films, comics and video games
- comparison of current YA novels with 'classic' dystopian fiction

Discussion questions

Cover Design

Why do you think the author has turned the cover image of the girl and the ute at night on its side? What effect does rotating this image have on your expectations of what might come later in the novel?

Chapter One

1. What mood is set by the opening line of the novel, "They're here."
2. Why do you think the author contrasts Pru's current life with one she might have in a 'parallel universe' (p. 6)?
3. What does Chapter 1 tell us about each member of the Palmer family? Write a short paragraph outlining each character's personality.
4. 'Part of what he loved about living out here was that he got to control where we went and who we saw. Family is the most important thing, says Dad. We have to stick together.' (p. 14) Describe the relationship between Mr Palmer and his daughters.
5. What might explain the girls' willingness to go along with their dad's obsessions?
6. What does Pru mean when she describes Keller Reid as having 'something uncanny valley about him'? (p. 18)
7. Define the term 'doomsday prepper'.
8. If the purpose of an opening chapter is to draw the reader into the story and make them want to read on, how would you rate this chapter?

Literary Devices

*'After all, everyone enjoys an apocalypse.'
I grit my teeth. Dad'll love that one. (p. 27)*

- Define the literary term *foreshadowing* and its purpose in the thriller genre. Find as many examples as you can of it occurring in Chapters 1-3.

*The cars aren't working
The cars aren't working...
The shit has hit the fan. (p. 45)*

- Define the literary term cliffhanger and its purpose. How might this be an example of a cliffhanger? Are there any others you can find in the novel?

Characterisation

Mateo stretches his arms out in front of him and laces his fingers, cracking his knuckles... "And hybrid Hogwarts houses – you cannot be a Gryffinpuff!" (p. 36)

- This paragraph concisely describes Mateo's dislikes, and along the way tells us a lot about him. Unpick this paragraph to give a full description of him. For instance, his dislike of people who claim not to be feminists suggests he is aware of social issues and is probably left-leaning.

Narrative Arc

Read the following article and map out the main plot points of *After the Lights Go Out* against the elements listed here:

<https://www.quora.com/What-would-be-a-general-plot-structure-for-a-thriller-revenge-novel>

Class Debates

Pru Palmer is torn between telling the town about the Paddock and sharing their stores of food and medicine or doing as her father instructed and keeping everything so the family can survive long after everyone else has died. (p. 200)

1. Divide into two groups, one arguing the benefits of sharing, the other arguing the benefits of staying silent. In both cases consider if it makes any difference if 'the lights come back on'.
2. Should Pru and Mateo have used the precious epipens on Keller to save him from the wasp stings? Are they guilty of murder? Does this incident change your view of these characters?

Themes

'When the shit hits the fan, the normal rules don't apply' says Dad in my head. 'You have to do whatever it takes.' (p. 203)

'Old laws don't matter anymore,' says Violet. 'We figure out our own laws now. Ask ourselves – what kind of a community are we gonna be?' (p. 213)

'We have to get smart,' she says to the crowd, raising her voice to be heard over the thunder. 'Put all our stuff together and share it out fairly.' (p. 213)

- Compare Rick Palmer and Violet Hickory's understanding of community and survivalism.

The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice...*Maybe we can come out of this stronger and braver and kinder. Maybe we can take the terrible things that have happened and use them as lessons to shape a new world where things can get better.'* (p. 251)

- Would you describe *After the Lights Go Out* as a dystopian novel? Compare it to another dystopian novel you have read.

The author

Lili Wilkinson is the award-winning author of eleven YA novels including *The Boundless Sublime*, *Green Valentine*, *Pink* and *Scatterheart*. After studying Creative Arts at the University of Melbourne, Lili established the *insideadog.com.au* website, the Inky Awards and the Inkys Creative Reading Prize at the Centre for Youth Literature, State Library of Victoria. She has a PhD in Creative Writing, and lives in Melbourne with her husband, son, dog and three chickens.

