



THE ERASURE INITIATIVE

LILI WILKINSON

August 2020
ISBN 9781760525057
Format: Paperback
Recommended for 14-18-year-olds

Summary

A girl wakes up on a self-driving bus. She has no memory of how she got there or who she is. Her nametag reads CECILY. The six other people on the bus are just like her: no memories, only nametags. There's a screen on each seatback that gives them instructions. A series of tests begin, with simulations projected onto the front window of the bus. The passengers must each choose an outcome; majority wins. But as the testing progresses, deadly secrets are revealed, and the stakes get higher and higher. Soon Cecily is no longer just fighting for her freedom – she's fighting for her life.

The acclaimed author of *After the Lights Go Out* returns with another compelling YA thriller – a timely novel about the intensity and unpredictability of human behaviour under pressure.

Use in the curriculum

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

- Genre study – realist genre, thriller genre, survivalist/survival genre
 - Subversion of genre expectations—what is the author's purpose?
 - Exploration of socio-political context and purpose (prominent in dystopian narratives)
 - Enhanced agency of teenage protagonists in YA fiction and survival stories
- '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 films, comics and video games
- Comparison of current YA novels with 'classic' dystopian fiction

Themes

- Thriller • Suspense • Human behaviour • Ethics and morality •

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Discussion questions

Cover design:

Read the back-cover blurb then look carefully at the front cover to analyse its visual elements, asking questions such as:

- What does the close-up shot of the girl's face, with a focal point on her eye, suggest?
- What can you see in her eye?
- Why include the torn element around her eye and cheek?
- Why might it be important that only one half of the girl's face is visible and that it is difficult to make out what she looks like?
- Why embed the smaller and longer distance shot of the palm trees in the torn section of the girl's face?
- Why might the designer have chosen to use a mix of colour and black & white?

Chapter One:

How does Lili Wilkinson build tension in the first chapter? In your answer find examples of each of the following and give a reason why each helps build tension:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - foreshadowing - first-person disorientation - the ticking timepiece - mystery | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - sense of menace - conflict - reveal |
|--|---|

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 and why did you assign that rating?

Chapter ends:

What role do the various documents (emails, text messages, newspaper clippings, etc.) play between chapters?

Cecily's memories:

'A wardrobe, my face pressed against coats and jackets. The scent of wool and leather and lilac, perfume, and closer, nutmeg and cedar ... I want to scream.'
(page 25)

How does sentence and clause length in this extract intensify the drama of Cecily's first flash of memory?

'A baby is crying, and I wander down the endless corridor.

A baby is crying, its face red and blotchy.

A baby is crying, and I'm trapped in the wardrobe.' (page 115)

Why do you think Lili Wilkinson uses repetition in this extract? Why is the motif of the crying baby repeated throughout much of the novel?

'A baby is crying.

I stare at the blue fairy, static and unmoving on a screen, secrets buried in her pixels...

There's so much blood' (page 124)

As the story progresses new elements are introduced in Cecily's flashes of memory. What are these elements and how do they add to the overall mystery and tension of the story?

Cliffhanger:

According to the Macmillan dictionary, the term 'cliffhanger' is defined as 'an exciting end to part of a book or television programme that makes you want to read or watch the next part'.

Is Cecily's revelation that Catherine is Cato Bell a cliffhanger? Instead of turning the page and finding out how Catherine responds to her unmasking, what happens in the book? Why do you think it was important to insert this information at this specific point of the novel?

What is the second cliffhanger of the novel and did it make you want to find out what would happen to Cecily and Nia?

Themes:

1. Lili Wilkinson says of *The Erasure Initiative*, 'I'm fascinated by ethics and moral grey areas – difficult choices where there are no easy answers.'

How does the Trolley Problem in the book explore this idea of moral grey areas? Do you think the characters' true personalities are exposed when faced with it?

2. 'I was also really interested in the idea of memory – and how much our memories make us who we are. I did a lot of research into the neuroscience of memory, and into the idea of nature/nurture and how identity is shaped,' says Wilkinson.

'What if it's a test?' Sandra says. 'What if we get rewarded or punished depending on our answers?'... 'Criminals,' she says. 'Get rid of 'em, I say.' (page 57–58)

Do all the characters in the book change when their memory is erased? Compare and contrast Sandra and Riley's backgrounds with their responses to the Trolley Problem and later choices they make.

Debate:

'Prisons don't work. (page 184)

'We did bad things. We should do our time. ... You sound like her. Like Cato Bell.' (page 288-289)

Divide students into groups of two, one taking Nia's position on the prison system and the other Edwin's. Ask each student to carefully consider everything they know about their character's background and personality to debate the arguments for and against the prison system, its effectiveness and potential alternatives.

Characterisation:

'How does it feel?' she asks. 'To be the Blue Fairy?'"...

'Nia reaches out to take my hand. 'I just do.' (page 304–305)

Does Cecily really change in the course of the novel? If so, how does this change manifest itself, and if not, what makes you think she is still the same person?

Author style

The Erasure Initiative's premise is so compelling that once started you simply cannot stop reading until the final page. As a thriller it has all the components necessary to keep the reader engaged: it explores human behaviour under pressure, is set in a confined community, is laced with paranoia and is fuelled by secrets and life-and-death stakes.

Lili Wilkson's masterful use of language certainly delivers, making this an ideal text to study how language can be used to build tension, mystery and menace.

A word from the author

'The idea for *The Erasure Initiative* sprang from a single image that popped into my head at 3am: a girl waking up in a self-driving vehicle, with no memory of who she is or how she got there. I'm fascinated by ethics and moral grey areas – difficult choices where there are no easy answers. These are ideas I explored in *After The Lights Go Out*, but I really wanted to go deeper in *The Erasure Initiative* – to dig into some ethical frameworks and theories and imagine what choices people might make when they're pushed to breaking point.

'I was also really interested in the idea of memory – and how much our memories make us who we are. I did a lot of research into the neuroscience of memory, and into the idea of nature/nurture and how identity is shaped. I wanted the book to have a kind of *Black Mirror*-ish feel – set slightly in the future, examining how technology might change the ethics of our society, but still be a really gripping thriller.

'The biggest challenge for me was to find ways to explore all these big ideas while not letting the pace of the book slow down – I decided that every chapter had to contain a twist and a reveal to keep the plot rocketing along.'

– Lili Wilkinson

About the author

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

