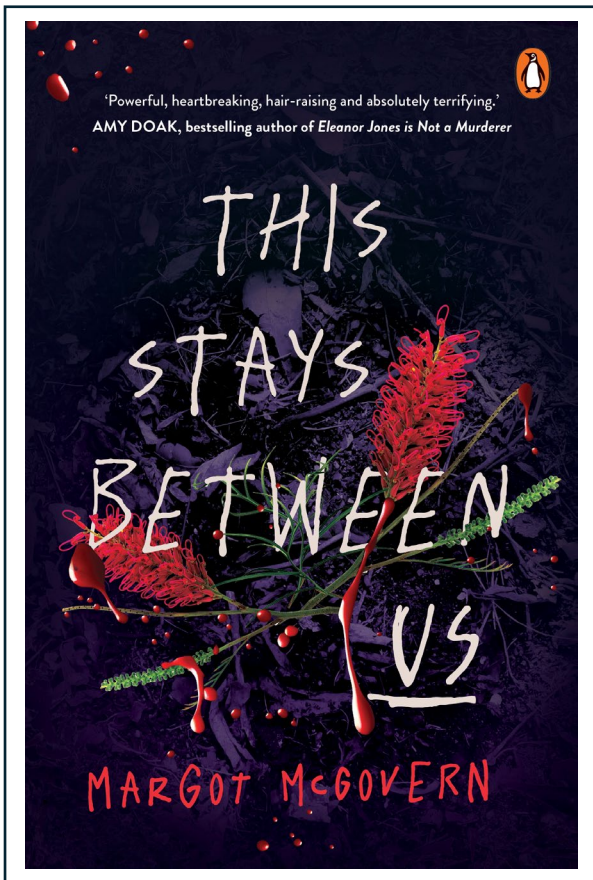




TEACHERS' RESOURCES



This Stays Between Us Margot McGovern

PLOT SUMMARY

Four girls share a cabin on their school retreat – in an abandoned town where the ghost of Smiling Jack is known to haunt the isolated campers.

- Shelley** is the new girl with her own haunted past.
- Mack** made things awkward by kissing her best friend.
- Priya** thinks she's ready to take the next step with her boyfriend.
- Raffi** has a flair for drama, and convinces them all to hold a seance.

But when you call on the darkness, sometimes the darkness replies . . .

'Powerful, heartbreaking, hair-raising and absolutely terrifying. This feminist ode to the 90s slasher films is twisty, clever and frightening from beginning to end.' AMY DOAK, bestselling author of *Eleanor Jones is Not a Murderer*

RECOMMENDED FOR

Ages 15+ (Years 10 to 12)

CONTENTS

1. Plot summary	1
3. About the author	2
4. Author's inspiration	2
5. Writing style	2
6. Key study topics	3-4
7. Key quotes	4-5
8. Further reading	6
10. Order form	7

KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- Learning areas: English
- General capabilities: Literacy; Critical and creative thinking; Ethical understanding

REASONS FOR STUDYING THIS BOOK

- Thrilling new horror novel from YA author Margot McGovern – a total page turner that clips along at a great pace.

THEMES

- Friendship • women and power • Horror genre • ghost stories • Final Girls • consent and empowerment

PUBLICATION DETAILS

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This Stays Between Us by Margot McGovern

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Margot McGovern lives in Adelaide and has a creative writing PhD from Flinders University. Her debut novel, *Neverland*, was shortlisted for the Text Prize and the Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature, and her short horror fiction has appeared in issues of *The Dark* and the Aurealis-Award-shortlisted anthology *Hometown Haunts: #LoveOzYA Horror Tales*. You can find out more about Margot by visiting her website: margotmcgovern.com

AUTHOR'S INSPIRATION

This Stays Between Us is first and foremost a love letter to the teen horror boom of the late 90s/early 00s (think films such as *Scream*, *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, *Jawbreaker*, *Teaching Mrs Tingle*, *Final Destination*, *The Craft*, *Urban Legend*, *Halloween H20*).

Horror and its fandom have long been a refuge for those who don't feel they fit elsewhere. And when I was struggling to find my place in high school, I sought out slasher films, where ordinary teenagers are transformed into fearsome Final Girls capable of taking down the genre's biggest hitters.

However, on closer inspection, many slashers reveal themselves to be conservative cautionary tales in which the violence has strong sexual and (and sexist) undertones. While surviving these stories is theoretically easy – keep your wits about you and steer clear of the monster in the mask – in actuality, the monster might be anyone and all the narrative elements are rigged in the monster's favour. The Final Girl's only real power lies in her ability to resist temptation and present herself as an unwavering instrument of purity and goodness to match the monster's corruption. Indeed, in the wider horror genre, female-identifying characters who embody the monstrous feminine (or merely fail to be pretty or 'virtuous' enough) are too often Otherised as figures to be tamed, pitied or killed.

So, in *This Stays Between Us*, I wanted to capture the playful, self-aware thrill of late 90s/early 00s horror films, along with the sense of belonging I felt watching these movies with my newfound, horror-obsessed

friends, while also flipping the script on the genre's problematic tropes to create a more empowering arc for the young women in my story.

This Stays Between Us is set in the fictional ghost town of Baynton, but is inspired by memories of my Year Nine school camp to Inneston on the land of the Narungga People in South Australia's Dhilba Guuranda-Innes National Park. Growing up in South Australia in the late 90s/early 00s, the stories I read and watched were, for the most part, set in unfamiliar places. The excitement and the heroes were forever elsewhere. Now as an author, I'm proud to draw from local landscapes to create stories that hero Australian teens in the hopes that readers find something of themselves and their world reflected on the page, and that the horror hits closer to home.

WRITING STYLE

Once you have read the novel. Think about how you would describe the author's writing style.

Questions and activities

1. How has Margot leaned into and subverted horror tropes to tell this story?
2. How has she used language throughout the story to set the mood and the tone of the narrative?
3. Are there ways Margot's used things like repetition of words and phrases and motifs to further the story? Find an example of this in the text.
4. Can you think of examples of other authors who have a similar writing style?
5. Margot has used four different points of view – how do you think this has helped create tension in the narrative? What do you think would be different about the story if it had just been told from one character's point of view, for example, Mack? Do you think the novel would have been as satisfying with just one point of view/narrator?
6. In a group of four – each choose a character. Choose a short passage from each character and read it aloud. What makes each voice distinct?



Would you be able to tell whose point of view it was without the chapter headings guiding you?

7. Would you describe any of the girls as unreliable narrators? How do you think this serves the narrative?
8. Margot has used deliberate repetition throughout the novel. Pick one or two words or phrases (or other examples of repetition through the story) and write a short paragraph on why you think this has been so successful. (Examples could include: 'he's in the trees', red rain, the words 'What if...' and 'almost'.)

KEY STUDY TOPICS

Horror/Final Girls

The word 'horror' is defined as: 'a shuddering fear or abhorrence' and 'a painful emotion excited by something frightful or shocking' by Macquarie Dictionary. The horror genre – which sometimes adds a certain 'supernatural' element to this definition – has captured the imagination of readers (and viewers) over the centuries.

Questions and activities

1. Which elements of the narrative of *This Stays Between Us* place it in the horror genre?
2. There are those who believe that being 'scared' by entertainment mediums like horror films and literature is fun and can help build resilience in everyday life. Do you think this is true? Give an example of this from your own experiences.
3. Margot has written the story as a homage to 90s horror films and wanting to explore and expand the idea of Final Girls. Do you think she has succeeded? Why or why not?
4. There are many references to horror films and novels throughout the story. (Eg: *Halloween*, *Scream*. Were any familiar to you? Can you think of others?)
5. Look at the quote at the start of the novel from the Gothic Horror novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley. *Frankenstein* is considered to be the original horror novel. Research the events surrounding Mary Shelley writing her debut novel and the themes in the book. Compare this to Margot's novel. Can you find similarities? Are there other

connections that the two novels share – even though they were written over two hundred years apart?

6. How has Margot used various traits and personality quirks of her characters to represent elements of a Gothic Horror novel? For example, look at what Raffi is wearing on P137. Could this connect to the way female characters were crafted in novels like *Dracula* by Bram Stoker? (And what else could this symbolise?)
7. What do you think of the ghost story Raffi tells about Smiling Jack at the seance? (P77) Write your own ghost story about Smiling Jack's origins. Keep in mind that ghost stories are often spoken forms of entertainment and adjust the pacing and sentence length of your story to reflect this.
8. Write your own short horror story. Keep in mind the various tropes that make these stories so successful. (Eg: A grain of truth, an isolated setting, some form of geographical or meteorological obstacle) Include one of these tropes in your story. Read your story aloud to the class.
9. Write a definition of a Final Girl in the context of a typical horror film or book. Now write another definition of what you think Margot believes a Final Girl to be – based on the novel *This Stays Between Us*.
10. Look at Raffi, Mack, Priya and Shelley. Write a short paragraph on each demonstrating how they each represent an element in traditional horror films or novels.

Friendship

A core element in the story is the friendship between Mack, Raffi and Priya. Shelley, while ultimately accepted into the group, isn't immediately welcomed by all the girls.

Questions and activities

1. How would the dynamic of the group have been different if Shelley hadn't been sharing a cabin with Raffi, Priya and Mack? What main differences would this have thrown into the narrative?
2. If Shelley hadn't been there, do you think Smiling Jack would have still acted the way he did?



3. Do you think the four girls would have remained friends after the school camp?
4. Look at the Epilogue of the novel. It is the only chapter from the point of view of 'us'. Do you think this is an effective way to end the narrative? How does this last chapter play into the horror genre. What do you think it suggests about the girls and their new 'selves'?
5. Can you think of some other strong friendship groups in fiction? How do they compare to Raffi, Mack and Priya? Why do you think the addition of a new person to a friendship circle is such a common literary device?

Consent and empowerment

Questions and activities

1. How does the decision to start the story with Shelley getting her period set the tone for the novel? Do you think the introduction of Shelley would have been the same without it? Why or why not?
2. Consent is an important topic in society today. Given that the story is set in 2000, do you think that things have improved for girls and women since then? Do you think women's voices are being heard more than in the early 2000s?
3. Smiling Jack aims to take control away from Raffi, Priya, Mack and Shelley. Look at the other men in the story. Do they behave in a different way? Could their methods of removing power be considered less deliberate than Smiling Jack? Does this make it any less harmful? Eg look at the scene with Mr Wallace starting on page 197. How does his unconscious use of language diminish Mack's confidence and belief in herself?

KEY QUOTES

1. *Raffi's eyes flew open, the whites still showing and seeming almost to glow in the dark. The man's face filled Priya's mind. Her thoughts were teeth.*

'Smiling Jack.'

The night shifted and slid. [P93]

What makes this passage so effective? How has Margot managed to create such a strong moment using just a few words? How have the scenes prior to this helped make this so impactful?

2. *She didn't know Shelley, but her vanishing act was troubling. She'd looked so strange when she returned. A different person almost. And for one breathless, nauseating second, Raffi had glimpsed something violent and terrible looking back at her through Shelley's eyes. Gone as quickly as it appeared. A trick of the firelight. But now that she'd seen it, she knew: Shelley Martin was haunted. [P106-107]*

What are some tropes Margot has used to give the reader the impression that Shelley is haunted. When did you first start to suspect that something wasn't quite right with her?

3. *Priya didn't want to play, either, but Georgie backing out meant she and Eleni needed to put on a good show and, ideally, drink a few of the boys under the table. They'd never hear the end of it if they didn't. [P122]*

Do you think the pressure Priya feels in this moment is common? What do you think would have happened if Priya had refused to drink more at this point? What would the knock-on effect have been for the rest of the narrative? Would the girls have still ended up in the same place later in the story?

4. *'The Hitchcock movie,' Raffi clarified. 'Anthony Perkins and Janet Leigh? The infamous shower scene -?' She closed her fist around an invisible knife hilt and stabbed the air. 'Eek! Eek! Eek! Eek!'*

Mack had no idea what she was referring to.

Raffi shook her head, smiling, just a little. 'You have Final Girl ignorance when it comes to horror. Could it have been Shelley?' [P138-139]

What do you think Raffi means here when she said Mack has 'Final Girl' ignorance? Do you think this is true? This is the first time 'Final Girls' are mentioned in the story. Had you heard this term before? Do you think that each of the girls could be described as a Final Girl?

5. *'He looked like a creep,' Sy said. 'Who was that, Raf?'*



She shook her head, her thoughts racing.

'Someone who doesn't belong here.' [P241]

This is a tipping point in the novel – the moment when Raffi understands that something is going on, it's her initial interaction with Smiling Jack, as it were. Do you think her statement here is referring to something supernatural or something from the real world? What different implications do both of those have?

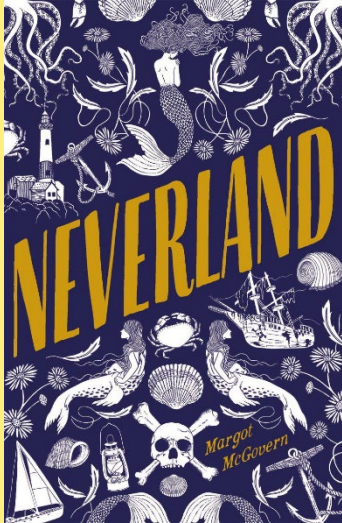
6. *Raffi found this unacceptable. She was worth more than a bit part in a B-grade franchise. When she saw Mack's stolen bracelet hanging from the ute's rear-view mirror she felt no fear, only rage. Clear, focused rage. She had blown up her life to be with Mack. Retreat was supposed to be the story of their beginning. The story of how she, Raffi, stopped hiding and stepped fully and unapologetically into herself. How dare this man – this stranger – overshadow that. How dare he recast them as his victims. She would not be reduced to a grainy school photo in a newspaper article with his name in the title. Hell, she'd never speak his name again. He was just a man, no caps, and this was their story, not his.* [P253]

How does this moment from Raffi's point of view make you feel? How has Margot used language to make it a moment with impact – what literary devices has she employed?

Choose one of the other girls and write this scene from their point of view.



FURTHER READING FROM PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA



Neverland by Margot McGovern

After doing herself near-fatal harm, Kit has returned to her island home. But it's a place she hardly recognises: the witch and the mermaids are hiding and the pirates have sailed to more bountiful shores. In their place is Neverland and its inhabitants – damaged teens too sick to be in regular school, watched over by her psychiatrist uncle. And now Kit is one of them.

Kit has a choice. She can use illicit night-time adventures with friends and mysterious new boy Rohan to avoid the truth. Or she can separate harsh reality from childhood fantasy and remember the night of her parents' deaths.

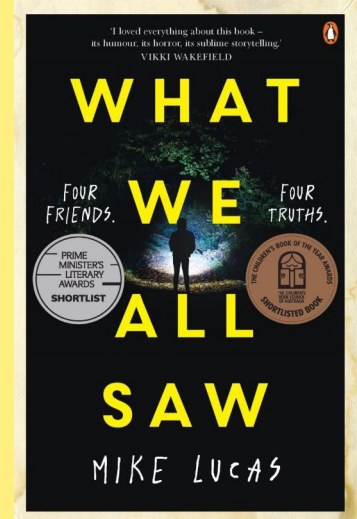
What really prompted her family's departure from the island? Did a monster drive them away? Is the monster still there?



House of Hollow by Krystal Sutherland

Iris Hollow and her two older sisters, Grey and Vivi, are unquestionably strange. Ever since they disappeared as children only to return a month a later with no memory of what happened to them, odd, eerie occurrences seem to follow in their wake. And they're changing. First, their dark hair turned white. Then, their blue eyes slowly turned black. People find them intoxicating, beautiful and inexplicably dangerous.

Ten years later, Iris is doing all she can to fit in and graduate high school. But when Grey goes missing, Iris and Vivi are left to trace her last few days. They aren't the only ones looking for her. As they brush against the supernatural, they realise that the story they've been told about their past is unravelling and the world that returned them seemingly unharmed ten years ago, might just be calling them home.



What We All Saw by Mike Lucas

Witches only exist in stories. Everyone knows that. But what if the stories are real?

FOUR FRIENDS. FOUR TRUTHS. ONE NIGHTMARE.

If you wander into the wood ...
If you hear scratching sounds from the Old Quarry ...
If you go too close to the edge ...

WATCH. OUT.



ORDER FORM

TITLE	AUTHOR	ISBN	SCHOOL YEAR	RRP	QTY	TOTAL
<i>This Stays Between Us</i>	Margot McGovern	9781761346286	10-12	\$19.99		
<i>Neverland</i>	Margot McGovern	9780143787846	10-12	\$19.99		
<i>House of Hollow</i>	Krystal Sutherland	9780143796992	10-12	\$19.99		
<i>What We All Saw</i>	Mike Lucas	9781761045936	9-12	\$19.99		
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