

# A Walk in the Dark

AUTHOR

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**RECOMMENDED FOR:** Lower to Mid Secondary  
(Sexual references)



## SYNOPSIS

*'It's just a walk in the dark. What is there to worry about?'*

That's what the head teacher, Johan, says. And so the Year Nines from Otway Community School set out on an overnight hike, with no adults.

But doesn't Johan know that a storm is coming?

When five teenagers head in to the forest that late afternoon, none of them is aware what the night will bring. Each will have to draw on their particular strengths to survive. Each will have to face the unknown, battling the elements, events beyond their control and their own demons. It's a night that will change everything.

*Five head into the forest, but will all five make it out?*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jane Godwin is the highly acclaimed and internationally published author of many books for children and young people, across all styles and ages. Children's Publisher at Penguin Books Australia for many years, Jane was the co-creator with Davina Bell of the Our Australian Girl series of quality historical fiction for middle readers. Jane's books include her novels *Falling From Grace*, *As Happy as Here* (a CBCA Notable Book) and *When Rain Turns to Snow* (shortlisted for the CBCA Book of the Year for Older Readers and for the Prime Minister's Literary Awards) and picture books *Go Go and the Silver Shoes*, *The Silver Sea* and *Watch This!*.

Jane is dedicated to pursuing quality and enriching reading and writing experiences for young people, and spends as much time as she can working with them in schools and communities and running literature and writing programs.

Find out more about Jane at <https://www.janegodwin.com.au/>.

## STUDY NOTES

### HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES (HASS)

- Each of these teenagers learn new things about themselves and each other. Discuss what they each learn about themselves.
- What is the likely future of each of these five teenagers? What can you predict of their future choices from the end of this novel?

- ‘That’s the thing about life, she often thought. Basically you’re on your own.’ (p 134) Is Elle right about this?
- How effective are Johan’s theories of education? What is positive or negative about them, in your opinion?
- Was the school correct to send these children into the wilderness? Was the potential loss of their equipment or the storm something which could have been prepared for or considered more carefully?
- Elle’s mother works for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade so she has worked in many countries and Elle has had to learn to adapt to new schools and classmates. How difficult is it to make friends in such circumstances?
  - What other changes are each of the five characters in this novel confronting?
- ‘What was his problem? Only that both his parents had given him away, left him for new-model families.’ (p 84) Fred feels that his parents have abandoned him for their new lives and families. How easy is it to adapt to becoming part of a new family or families? How might parents assist their children in such new circumstances?
- ‘It had been a while since someone had spoken to Ash like this, he wasn’t used to being on the alert. It never bothered his friends when he lived up north, and from how Ash saw it, they all seemed to have lots of adults around them who were like their parents. Other people were curious, some seemed almost envious, as if he’d be able to get away with anything. Laila knew, his friends at school all knew, they had other friends with same-sex parents.’ (pp 82–3) Ash hasn’t been subject to comments about his same-sex parents before but he replies calmly to Fred’s sarcasm. What did you think of his reply? How might you have responded to Fred’s attitude?
- From what is written about them in the novel, how would you describe the parents of each of these five characters?
- ‘And something dawned on Elle, something no one had ever told her in the leadership courses—that resilience can be a double-edged sword.’ (p 241) What does she mean by this?
- Trust is an essential part of forming a relationship. Laila has lost trust in Joe but Ash proves to be the sort of person she can trust. Why?
- Elle is initially annoyed both by Chrystal and by Fred. How and why does her relationship with each of them change by the end of this novel?
- “‘That’s a compliment, isn’t it?’” said Ash. “‘Easy on the eye?’” Elle didn’t want to explain to Ash why it didn’t feel like a compliment. It felt like you weren’t offending someone with the way you looked. But that it would be your fault if you were. Like it’s your responsibility to be easy to look at. All the body image talks, the books about being proud of your body, would they ever make a difference?’ (p 178) What do you make of the expression ‘easy on the eye’? Is Elle correct to be unsettled by it?
- Discuss concepts of masculinity and how they affect interactions between women and men.
- Fred’s dad has a bad habit of calling him blind Freddy, because of his tendency to daydream. How debilitating is it when a father derides a son like this?
- Sean, one of the four young men in the Hilux ute, harasses the teenagers and threatens them with violence, although his mates are clearly dubious. How much of such male behaviour is a ‘performance’ to impress his peers?
- “‘Well, I used to worry sometimes that there was no one to teach me what a man is.’” Laila stopped, let go of his hand. “‘Is that what a dad’s supposed to do?’” Ash laughed. “‘I dunno. But now I don’t think I need a male parent to turn me into a man. I just need to become who I am. Myself. Like, I don’t know, a human.’” (p 215) Discuss Ash’s explanation to Laila regarding how he has resolved this conundrum as the child of single-sex parents.
- How sensible was it of her family to send Chrystal away as an exchange student? Did this distance have the potential to heal or might it have exacerbated her trauma?
- Fred is not coping with his family’s disintegration and his anger is the way he expresses this trauma. Do you think anger a useful or cathartic emotional response to trauma or is it destructive?

## SCIENCE

- How important is it to be in touch with nature as Laila and Ash are, and to observe nature closely?
- The setting is the Great Otway National Park in Victoria, and the novel ends at Apollo Bay on the Great Ocean Road. The bus route taken by Ash and Fred at the beginning also offers local landmarks to research. Read more about this area and its unique ecology. Map out the journey the five teenagers might have taken by examining maps of the area.

- “He turned to them. “You know that’s a thing? When there’s a decrease in atmospheric pressure, it makes a difference between the outside air and the air in your sinuses. That’s what causes pain, like a headache.” Chrystal’s humming got louder. “I get tinnitus, too. When the weather’s going to change.” “Do you have that now?” asked Ash” (p 69) What other scientific concepts did you read about in this novel?

### ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

- This is a third-person account of a night in a forest in which dialogue and interior monologues reveal personal perspectives of three of the five main characters—Elle, Fred and Ash. The narrative also includes tiny snippets from Chrystal’s point of view, and the only avenue via which we receive Laila’s point of view is through dialogue. Discuss how the story is revealed from the points of view and thoughts of three of the characters, with Laila and Chrystal revealed more through the other characters’ perceptions of them. How does this work as a technique, in dovetailing the narrative from the three main characters’ points of view? And discuss, as well, that there is also a separate ‘voice’ in the story—that of the narrator.
- Symbolism is used throughout *A Walk in the Dark*. It can be seen in the following symbolic devices and motifs:
  - Art
  - The story of Sleeping Beauty (rescue, endless sleep)
  - Forest (unknown, unconscious)
  - Lost child
    - What other symbolism did you notice in this novel?
- Encourage students to interrogate the use of words in this text. For example, the title ‘a walk in the dark’ reminds one of the saying ‘a walk in the park’ which generally denotes something which is easy to do. So the title might be viewed as an ironic commentary on the action. Naming is another related topic: Laila and Ash discuss the significance of their names (p 183) and Fred refers to a famous artist with his name (p 50). Invite students to make other critical observations on possible literary allusions in this text.
- This is a survival story, an adventure, and a rite of passage novel. Discuss the tropes of each genre and how this novel incorporates those tropes.
- Although the journey or walk begins with the group setting off together, the novel juxtaposes a number of different scenes before that, and afterwards, to add to the suspense. How does this structuring contribute to suspense?
- What elements of the story created suspense for you? For example, the novel establishes that Tessa is missing but doesn’t reveal where she is until later in the action. What other suspenseful features were included?
- Write a diary entry by Fred about the overnight adventure and what it meant to him.
- Write a poem in any style (eg, ballad, haiku, acrostic, sonnet) describing the adventure.
- Write a letter as if written by Laila to her guru father describing her changed feelings about him and their work together subsequent to this adventure.