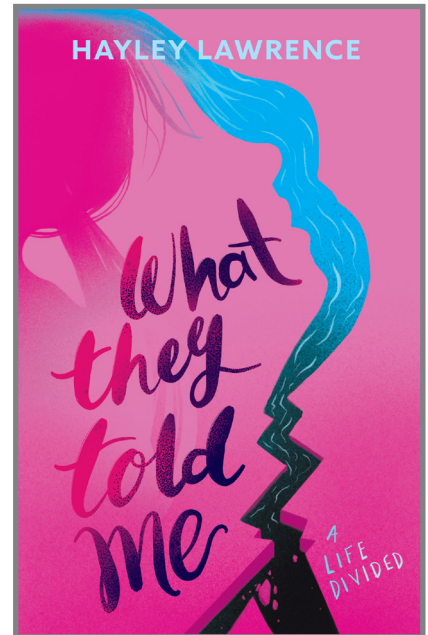


What They Told Me

AUTHOR

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RECOMMENDED FOR: Upper Primary/Lower Secondary

SYNOPSIS

We are the luckiest, Elliott's dad told her. And Elliott, of course, believed him. Elliott and her family have lived in the house of a thousand storms by Crooked River all her life, with her best friend, Drake, just a kayak ride downstream. But one ordinary evening, Elliott's parents tell her some shattering news and Elliott realises they are no longer the luckiest. Has it all been a lie? As Elliott's life is split apart, she stands to lose all the places and the people she calls home. Except Elliott refuses to lose anything. Because if she lets go of everything she loves, Elliott will surely lose herself too.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hayley Lawrence has been writing since she learnt to hold a pencil. She is currently a lawyer in coastal NSW where she lives with her five beautifully wild daughters and writes novels. Hayley's work is haunted by the stories she encounters as a lawyer, through her daughters and in the incredible people who lay their souls bare to her. Hayley's novels have won fellowships, been shortlisted for The Australian Vogel's Literary Award, longlisted for the Sisters in Crime Davitt Awards Best Young Adult Crime Novel and recognised as Honour Book and Notable Books for Older Readers in The Children's Book Council of Australia's (CBCA) Book of the Year Awards.

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STUDY NOTES

- Before reading the story, as a class, discuss the book cover and title. Some things to include in your discussion could be:
 - What can you learn about the story from the cover and title?
 - What do you think the imagery on the cover represents? Why do you think this?
 - What are all the different elements in the cover art?
 - What genre do you predict this book to be?
 - Based on the title and subtitle, what do you think is likely to happen in this story?
- After reading the first chapter, as a class, discuss what you have learnt about the main character. How has the author set the scene for the rest of the novel? What emotions and feelings have been conveyed to you with these opening words? From whose perspective are we seeing events?
- Paint a picture of Mt Wilderness as seen from Elliott's house using the descriptions of it in the opening scene as inspiration and instructions.
- What imagery does the phrase 'house of a thousand storms' paint? How often does Elliott use this phrase to refer to

her home? What does this phrase tell us about how Elliott feels about her home?

- What can you tell about where Elliott lives based on the information in the first chapters? Where do you think her home might be located?
- When Elliott is told that her parents are separating, and that her mother is desperately unhappy, she goes on social media and looks at her mother's posts. Her mother's social media feeds tell a story to her, of someone withdrawing from things and gradually losing the ability to take joy in life. What other stories can social media feeds tell, and how can these stories be misleading?
 - As a class, discuss this, then use what you talked about and your own experiences to help you write a short story incorporating a social media feed that is completely misleading in some way. Your story can be a mystery, a drama or even a fantasy if you wish.
- When Elliott thinks about all the things her mum will miss about living in their house, she includes a lot of sounds in her mental list.
- 'Our fiery sunsets over the hills, the smell of the damp earth in the rain, the safe sound of a storm hammering against our dry roof, the twittering of finches, the caw of the green-black ravens, the gurgle of the river. I can barely swallow at the thought of what she'll miss.' (p 89)
- What do you associate with your home? What smells, sights, and sounds do you think of when you think of home?
 - Write a paragraph sharing the sights, sounds, smells and feelings that you associate with your home.
- After reading Chapter Seven, discuss whether you think that Elliott is being fair to her mum. Later in the novel, when Elliott really thinks deeply about why her mother is leaving, she comes up with a lot of reasons that make sense, and she understands better why her mother might be making the choice to leave. As a class, discuss the importance of thinking carefully about things and not just continuing to react with your first emotional response to a situation.
- Contrast Elliott's first response to her parent's separation, with her later understanding. Discuss how she has come to achieve this insight whilst still clearly devastated by the whole situation. Write approximately 800 words analysing Elliott's response to her parent's separation, and detailing how and when her attitude changes. Include in your analysis the key events, strategic behaviours and outside assistance that helps Elliott come to terms with the changes in her life. Use evidence from the text to support your assertions, and conclude with a paragraph detailing what you see as the most helpful behaviours that someone in Elliott's situation can engage in.
- When Elliott tells Drake about her parents separation, she struggles to see her surroundings through her tears. 'The world is a blurry watercolour. A dove grey sky, a murky riverbank and a bottle-green river. Everything featureless and smudged.' (pp 165–166) Paint a blurry watercolour of a natural scene of your choice. Imbue your scene with emotion, and caption your artwork with the location of the scene and the emotion you filled it with.
- When Elliott thinks about the life her mother had before Elliott was born, it seems to her somewhat unreal, and 'like something out of a novel'. (p 171) Try to imagine the world before you were born. What were your parents, grandparents, teachers or carers doing twenty years ago? Think about the older people in your life, and how their lives and experiences have changed them since you were born. Individually, write a brief (max 300 words) piece reflecting on what you know of their lives prior to your birth, and what you don't know. Think about what their lives were like, and try to imagine them as young adults.
- When Elliott is talking to Drake, she wonders about the nature of love, and thinks that 'Maybe that word "love" isn't even a feeling but a solid thing. Something you do.' (p 172) What are some things that you do, or that others in your life do, that speak of love to you? As a class, discuss all the different ways in which people can show others that they care about them.
- When her mum leaves, Elliott feels as if she is losing her, and her mother is slipping away from her and her life. The fear of future loss is also strong in her, but Drake reminds Elliott that there are many things in her life that no-one can take from her. What are some of the things in your life that you value, and which can't be taken away? Write a list of at least five things that you value and which can't be lost, then choose two of them and write an explanatory paragraph sharing why this thing is important to you, how it makes you feel, and its role in your daily life.
- When the drought broke, the river that runs by Elliott's home flooded. Floods after a drought are not uncommon, and El talks in the novel of all the different forms the river takes, from a dry riverbed with waterholes, to a raging flood breaking its banks. Drought, floods and fire are natural disasters that everyone in Australia eventually

- experiences in one form or another. Think about the following questions, then complete the activity:
 - Think about where you were and how you felt when the drought broke at the end of the Black Summer.
 - Did you have flooding where you live, or was it just enough rain to soak the ground and turn it to mud?
 - Do you live far from an active fire ground? Are your memories only of television and social media news reports, and the occasional waft of far distant smoke?
 - What feelings went through you when it started to rain and the fires went out, and did those feelings change when the rain continued?
 - In Australia the drought breaking at the end of the Black Summer, coincided with the arrival of both floods, and of Covid-19. Because of this, a lot of people haven't really had a chance to identify and process all the emotions, experiences, and losses that they had or felt during the Black Summer and the subsequent floods.
 - As a class, discuss your feelings, and how living through these times has affected you.
 - After your discussion, use washable poster paints to create an A2 sized artwork that embodies your feelings surrounding the Black Summer, the floods and the pandemic. Be inventive in how you apply your paint to the card. You can use your fingers to paint, a pastry brush or toothbrush, sponges, or even a house painter's brush.
 - You might wish to use big sweeping broad strokes to represent the depth of emotion that these events inspired, or you could use small careful brush strokes that reflect the constant suppressed anxiety that many felt.
 - You can use fallen leaves pressed into the paint as if they are stamps, or you could draw with twigs or crumpled balls of paper.
 - There is no wrong way to complete this artwork. It should be a reflection of your emotional response to the events of the 20s, and is entirely personal to you. Regardless of the personal impact on you and your community, your emotional response is valid and is what you should aim to represent.

AUTHOR OF NOTES

RAE CARLYLE