

# Look Me in the Eye

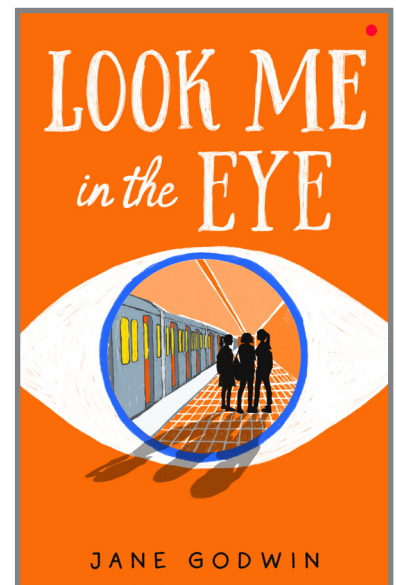
AUTHOR

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RECOMMENDED FOR: Lower to Mid Secondary



## SYNOPSIS

*Running late  
drop it off without me*

I type *Drop what off?* I don't know what Mish is talking about.  
While I'm typing, another message appears. Don't tell Bella  
But I am Bella.

Best friends Bella and Connie live on the outskirts of the city in an area that was once full of open fields and paddocks but is changing as the suburbs creep closer. And now there is Mish, Connie's cousin, who has to be included even though she is unfriendly and unpredictable. The pandemic lockdowns have lifted and the three teens are eager to explore their newfound independence. But with the world opening up, there has been a rise in surveillance, from apps that track their movements to voice recorders and hidden cameras. It feels like everyone is watching them. But when does 'watching' become 'watching over'? Do we have a right to know everything about those we love?

*Look Me in the Eye* is a dramatic and compelling story about freedom and control, privacy and secrecy, and the challenges we face in a post-Covid world.

## 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's books include her novels *A Walk in the Dark*, *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 *Tilly* (illustrated by Anna Walker), and *The Best Hiding Place* (illustrated by Sylvia Morris), both shortlisted for the CBCA Picture Book of the Year Award.

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 [janegodwin.com.au](http://janegodwin.com.au).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF NOTES

Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright AM operates justified text writing and publishing consultancy services, and is widely published on children's literature, publishing history and Australian fiction. Her publications include *Paper Empires: A History of the Book in Australia 1946–2005* (co-edited with Craig Munro) (UQP, 2006). In 2011 she was recipient of the CBCA (Qld) Dame Annabelle Rankin Award, in 2012, of the CBCA Nan Chauncy Award for Outstanding Services to Children's Literature, and in 2014, the QWC's Johnno Award. In 2021 she was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia.

## STUDY NOTES

- Before reading, examine the cover of this novel. What does it suggest about the novel's themes? After you have read the novel, examine the cover again: what does it suggest to you now?

## HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES (HASS)

### Surveillance

- How much do people your age have a right to privacy? Is privacy important to you?
- Do you think parents have a right to monitor their children? To what extent do your parents monitor you?
  - Compare Mark's suspicious attitude to Mish, to Cara and Pete's trust in Bella.
- Observe the world around you and what forms of surveillance are prevalent.
  - Bella and Cara go to Baby Mart and discover a wide range of baby monitors on sale. Many homes have security and most shopping areas do as well. Mark takes this to an extreme in monitoring his daughter and voice recording her movements. Bella notices how many cameras there are in Baby Mart: 'I've become someone who is watching for being watched.' (p 156) How do you feel about this constant surveillance? Does it make you feel uncomfortable?
- Mark's suspicions actually put Mish at more risk, as Connie says: 'She could be anywhere, with anyone, and he'll never know. All his surveillance, and he didn't really protect her.' (p 232) Is surveillance useful or is it dangerous, in your opinion? Would you feel safer knowing that your parents always know where you are? How would it make you feel? Would it change your behaviour in any way?
- Research the use of surveillance in our society.

### Trust

- Have you ever been in a situation where a family member or friend hasn't been honest with you? How did it affect your relationship? Did you lose trust in them?
- Pete and Cara trust Bella until she disappoints them by lying. But they choose to continue trusting her. Discuss the notion of maintaining trust in someone. Do you think your parents trust you?

### Post-pandemic Society

- Has the Covid pandemic made you less likely to enjoy a social life, or has it made you determined to enjoy your social life more?
- One of the things people recall about living through Covid was that people returned to doing simple things at home such as baking, craft, enjoying their gardens and renovating. They learned to live 'slowly'. Bella reflects on a day with Connie: 'And I'm thinking if it wasn't for lockdown, we mightn't have thought to do this, have this day of making things. We got used to doing craft at home when we couldn't go anywhere.' (p 56) Discuss with students whether Covid changed what they choose to do in their leisure time. Do they have new hobbies and have they abandoned old ones?
- Bella observes that Covid was bad for some people's businesses and good for others. (p 48) What did you observe in the people closest to you? Did their livelihoods suffer?

### Social Media

- This novel reveals that mobile phones and texting can often prove quite dangerous for people. Mish communicates with a young man she's never met and then finds he has disappeared from social media platforms after stealing Pete's valuable card. What protective strategies should you employ when using social media?
- Did you or people in your family spend more time on social media during the pandemic? How did that affect your use of social media after the pandemic?

### Friendship, Bullying and Peer Pressure

- The novel is not only about the influence Mish has on Bella and Connie but about the environment of this first year at secondary school where friendship groups shift and where behaviours are scrutinised by peers and often criticised. It reveals how some kids react by abandoning their real interests, as Max does with his circus skills (p 115) in order to ‘fit in’ and to prevent themselves becoming targets for bullying. Discuss with students how they found the transition from primary to secondary school, and how they negotiated that.
- Discuss the strategies one can use when confronted by bullying. Connie and Bella are bullied by Mish into taking her phone and her texts in order to trick her father. How might Connie and Bella have reacted differently when asked by Mish to hold her phone for her?
- By the end of the novel Bella and Connie have come to understand Mish’s problems, to feel sorry for her, and to wish to be her friend. Mish leaves Bella a touching gift for her new room, as well. Have you ever found yourself re-assessing a person and discovering that they have qualities you didn’t first perceive?

### Morals

- Mish has no qualms about shoplifting and leads Bella and Connie into some dangerous situations. Discuss with students the fact that shoplifting is illegal, and also the morals involved in stealing from others.
- Why does Mish steal? She clearly doesn’t want some of the things she takes.

### Sustainability

- Living sustainably is one of the themes in this novel; for example, growing your own vegetables, making your own clothes, buying second-hand furniture instead of new, eating organic food. Discuss these and other examples either from this novel, or practices you’ve observed people in your own life demonstrating.

### Land Subdivision and Urban Development

- This novel is partly a lament for the encroachment on countryside by new housing developments that destroy both flora and fauna. It suggests that these new homes aren’t designed for practicality, but are simply designed to look appealing. Discuss the pros and cons of housing developments.

### Parenting

- What did you think of Cara and Pete’s parenting skills? Or of Anna and Seb’s? Compare to Mark and Renata’s approach.
- ‘That documentary we watched about Anne Frank, when her dad Otto read her diary after she had died, he said he never knew half the things she was thinking about, even though he thought he knew her well. Like they spent two years in a small attic together. It made him believe that parents never really know their children completely. Does anyone really know anyone else? It’s a scary thought.’ (p 137) Discuss.
- Do parents have a right to know everything about their children? When does being a caring and responsible parent morph into surveillance?

### Collecting

- Pete’s work is buying and selling collectable toys. What did you discover about collecting in reading this novel?
- What do your students collect? Discuss the things which they consider precious.
- ‘Pete told me there were two main yo-yo crazes—in the 1970s and the 1990s. I think about the crazes we’ve had in our era.’ (p 96) What are the current crazes at your school?

### Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

- Despite being such an unlikable character who spies on his daughter and bullies his wife, the novel reveals that Mark is probably suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a result of his service in armed conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Did you have sympathy for him once you realised that?
- ‘And now I feel like we have our own connection to Mish’s family because Mark knows who Pete’s dad was, and they were both part of a war I don’t understand.’ (p 231) Discuss the impact of war.

### Maturity

- How does Bella mature over the course of this novel?
- There are signs throughout the novel that Mish has developed an eating disorder, and later Connie confirms that Mish has been receiving help for this issue. Do you think Mish’s behaviour—lying and stealing—and her eating disorder are related to Mark’s excessive control and surveillance of Mish?
- “‘He’s NOT childish.’” Words come out before I realise what I’m saying. “‘You’re being childish!’” I shout at Mark. “And

you're sulking because none of the other adults agree with what you're doing. Not even your wife! And now Mish could be anywhere." Silence. I'm thinking, What did I just say? Then, "Whoa," says Pete quietly, "out of the mouths of babes." (p 198) Bella calls out Mark for immature behaviour. Why do you think Mark is behaving this way?

### ENGLISH LANGUAGE & LITERACY

- The story is told in first person, present tense, from Bella's point of view. Before and after the narrative, though, two poems (in first person elided with second person) appear, but they're not written by Bella. They're by Mish. How do these poems relate to the novel?
- How different might the narrative have been, if it had been written in third person?
- Find examples of the use of literary devices in this novel, using the table below to identify examples.

<b>Simile</b>	
<b>Metaphors</b>	
<b>Other</b>	

- Strong beginnings and endings to chapters are one way of structuring a narrative, for example:  
Beginning: 'June fell off her horse. At pony club.' (Ch 10, p 58)  
Ending: 'I don't know where the guy went.' (Ch 6, p 22)  
Which chapter beginning or ending was particularly significant in your opinion?
- Suspense is the key to any narrative's structure. Discuss the suspenseful aspects of the plot in this novel.
- Write a character study of any of the main characters.
  - Which of the minor characters intrigued or interested you the most?
- Read the following passage, then write your own analysis of what you learned during Covid.  
'I work on the What did we learn? question. It's hard to answer because some people say we learnt to go with the flow, to adjust when plans change, and accept that you can't control things. Mum and Pete were going to get married, but it didn't happen because of the restrictions. We learnt to adapt to altered conditions. We all wore face masks and had to do remote learning. Then the rules changed again, and we didn't do that anymore. But I don't think it taught everyone to go with the flow because some people lost confidence to go out. And people went backwards, like June was making heaps of progress with her speech therapy but then she had to do it on Zoom, which Anna said didn't really work. Anna says it's just one thing after another with June, ever since Covid. I google some stats about mental health that I hope will impress Ms Ritter.' (pp 106–7)
- Debate the pros and cons of working from home.
- Write a microstory (or 'flash fiction') on the theme of surveillance.
- Read the following passage, then respond to the questions that follow:  
'In SOSE, Ms Ritter tells us about our new project. We have to prepare a five-minute oral presentation on the pandemic. She puts us in pairs, doesn't let us choose. Luckily I get put with Connie. Mish is put with Penny who's sitting at our table. Mish groans. Ms Ritter writes on the board: What will you miss? What did you learn? What made you stronger? We have to brainstorm ideas and write them down.' (p 60)
  - Describe the worst thing you experienced while living through Covid.
  - Describe the best thing you experienced while living through Covid.
  - What events did you miss during Covid?
- The title *Look Me in the Eye* cleverly refers to both surveillance and trust. What other title might the novel have had?

### VISUAL LITERACY

- Design a new cover for the novel.
- Illustrate the microstory you wrote above.
- Design a patchwork pattern for a cover for Bella's new bed. Use collaged papers or fabrics to create the pattern.
- Design a graphic novel page illustrating a scene in this book, eg the three girls being caught by store security and interviewed by a policewoman.
- Design a poster about the pros and cons of technology that can be used to both connect people and exert control,

such as smartphones, social media, online communities.

- Create a handcrafted phone case, like the one that Mish steals from the market. Use scraps of patterned material and a button, and stitch by hand, to create a unique and useful accessory.
- Make some origami animals like the ones Mish makes for June and later for Bella.

AUTHOR OF NOTES

**ROBYN SHEAHAN-BRIGHT**