

# Willow Bright's Secret Plot



AUTHOR  
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## SYNOPSIS

*'I feel her in the breeze that makes the dahlias bob, and in the scent of the roses . . .'*

After moving to the city from the country, Willow Bright feels like she's lost her mum all over again—and landed on another planet. Her clothes are wrong, her taste in music is wrong, and even the food she eats is wrong. But when Willow spots a pattern in a series of puzzling accidents and mishaps, she forms an unlikely friendship—and finds new purpose.

Can Willow solve the mystery and find room to be herself along the way? Or will her plot to run home to the wide-open spaces and memories of her mum land Willow in even more trouble?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Allison Tait (A. L. Tait) is an internationally published, bestselling author of 11 middle-grade novels.

Her three epic fantasy adventure series—The Mapmaker Chronicles, The Ateban Cipher, and Maven & Reeve Mysteries—have been shortlisted and longlisted for various awards.

In 2024, her first contemporary middle-grade novel *The First Summer of Callie McGee* was longlisted for the Margaret and Colin Roderick Literary Award. *Willow Bright's Secret Plot* and *Danger Road* will both be published in 2025.

Allison is the co-host of the top-rating Your Kid's Next Read podcast, speaks regularly in schools and at conferences and festivals, and teaches creative writing for children online.

A. L. lives on the south coast of NSW, where you'll often find her in the garden.

## STUDY NOTES

- Before reading the story, discuss the book cover and title. Some things to include in your discussion might be:
  - What does the cover artwork show?
  - What do you think that the cover artwork might be referencing? What does it tell you about the contents of this book?
  - What is a secret plot, and why might someone have one?

- What do you think the title of this book is referencing?
- What does the text on the front cover of the book tell you about the story?
- Read the back of the novel. Do you want to change your answer to the previous two questions?
- What information does the text on the back cover give us about the setting, genre, characters and action of the novel?
- As a class discuss the differences that Willow finds between her home in the country and her new home in the city.
  - In pairs or small groups, create a two column list of features, descriptive phrases, and other aspects of each of the two worlds Willow has inhabited. In the first column write down your list relating to her life at Jack's Creek Station, and in the second column write your list of descriptions of what Willow finds and experiences in Barrack Hill.
  - As a class, discuss everyone's lists. Are there any words or phrases that appear on both lists? Why do you think this is so?
- Is your home more like Jack's Creek Station, or more like Barrack Hill? Or is it somewhere in between? Use the previous exercise to inspire you in creating a list of features describing life where you live, similar to the lists you made for Willow's two homes.
- Use crayons and dye to create an artwork featuring a flowering vine inspired by the artwork on the cover of the novel, and representing the vine that was choking Mr B's garden. Choose four crayons in either light pastel colours, or four crayons in deeply saturated dark bright and jewel tones. Use your crayons to create a swirling vine covering an entire A3 piece of white paper or card. Press firmly with your crayons being sure to leave a solid layer of wax on the page with each line and shape you draw and colour. Leave the background spaces between the loops, swirls, leaves and flowers of your vine-pattern blank.
  - Once you have finished your crayon design, choose a contrasting colour and tone of water-based paint (watercolours or diluted food colouring work well for this). If you chose light pastel colours for your crayons, you should choose a vivid and deeply saturated colour such as red or emerald green for your dye. If you chose dark bright and jewel tones, you should choose a lighter colour such as lemon yellow or sky blue. Make sure that the colour of your dye is not a variation of one of the colours of your crayon design. If you are unsure of your choices, create a test page using scrap paper, and trial the effect of different dye colours with your chosen crayon colours.
  - Lightly and quickly paint over your entire artwork with your chosen colour of dye, and allow to dry. The wax crayon design should repel the dye, creating a vibrant contrast between the two aspects of the artwork. Do NOT apply a second coat to make the dye darker as it will soak under the wax crayon and ruin the effect.
- When Willow lived on Jack's Creek Station with her father, she was often alone, but rarely felt lonely. In contrast, when she first started living at Barrack Hill she was often lonely but almost never alone. As a class, discuss the difference between being alone, and being lonely, and the ways in which Willow's life sheds light on the contrast between the two.
- What are some of the ways in which we can all help someone new to our class, school, or community feel welcome and included? As a class, brainstorm and think of as many different things as you can, that you can do both as individuals and as a group, to help newcomers to your community not feel lonely in the same way that Willow felt lonely and excluded. As a class, discuss why it is so important that we make sure that newcomers feel welcome and included.
- At the end of the novel, Fleur says that she was so caught up in what having Willow move in would mean to her, that she didn't take the time to really consider what it was like for Willow. Choose one of the scenes at the start of the book, and rewrite it from Fleur's perspective.
- Do you think that Willow's story would have been different if Fleur had been welcoming from the very beginning? What events might have actually turned out worse in the long run, if Willow had been welcomed by Fleur and her friends and made to feel at home in Barrack Hill from the start?
- Willow was used to doing all her schooling remotely, through school of the air. Given this, why did Willow's father not take her with him when he went to work at the mines? In small groups discuss the reasons that you know of for parents not to take their children with them when they go to work at the mines, as well as all the reasons that were presented in the text, that justify his sending Willow to live with her aunt and cousin.
- Read the acknowledgements section at the end of the text. Having read this, research online and investigate the

station upon which the author based the fictional Jack's Creek Station where Willow lived. Share your findings with the class, and discuss how what you have read online and the pictures you saw compare to the mental images of Willow's previous home that you created when reading the story. Find images online of terrace houses in Sydney's inner west. (Surry Hills and Newtown both have a lot of the original terraces still standing.) How do these images compare to how you imagined Fleur's home in the novel?

- When Willow researched how to get back to Jack's Creek Station, it was listed as being 818km from where she was now living in Barrack Hill. If you moved to somewhere that was about 800km from your home, what type of environment would you find yourself in, and how different would it be from your current home? Search online, and research as much information as you can about somewhere that is a similar distance away from your home as Willow found herself living. Summarise your research, and write a report comparing and contrasting what life would be like there, to what your current life is like now. Some key points to consider are: Population density, climate, distance from amenities, key industries and job availability, schools, housing, natural features and landscape.

AUTHOR OF NOTES  
**RAE CARLYLE**