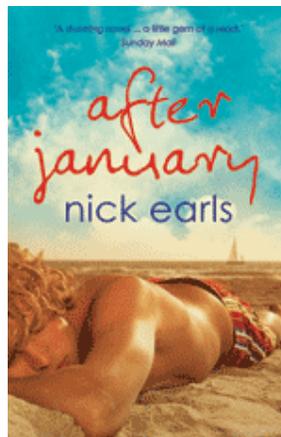


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AFTER JANUARY

Nick Earls



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising secondary English teacher

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Synopsis	2
Themes	2
Study Notes	3
Author Motivation	5
About the Author	5

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SYNOPSIS

After January is a touching and realistic portrayal of the awkwardness, inexperience and innocence of teenage first love. The reader follows the twisting and turning of Alex Delaney's stomach and heart as he embarks on his first relationship and all that goes with it. Other life-changing events are also at the forefront of Alex's mind, which makes his first summer break as an adult one to reflect upon.

The novel deals with numerous issues poignant in senior high school students' lives. Sexuality, identity, post-school opportunities and the various rites of passage through life are central to characters' experiences. This novel will particularly resonate with the male readers, but girls will also gain insight into the inner workings of a boy's mind during the beginning of a relationship.

Side issues throughout the novel will spark quality discussion in a classroom setting. The debate surrounding issues to do with the environment and deforestation, serve as a background to the story of growing young love during a hot summer. Overall, *After January* has a distinctly Australian feel and gives students the opportunity to discuss issues ever-present in their lives as young Australians.

THEMES**Teenage sexuality**

- ◆ Throughout the story, Alex's inexperience with girls and his longing to rectify that situation is highlighted through his first-person narration.
- ◆ Alex and Fortuna's budding relationship brings to life teenage apprehensions about sex.
- ◆ Parental and adult opinions of sex are also shown through characters in the story.

The future and teenage identity

- ◆ Alex is concerned about his body and is yet to be truly comfortable in his own skin.
- ◆ Alex alludes to the idea that he has to go to university to be something or to have meaning in society.
- ◆ While waiting for his university acceptance, Alex thinks about the importance of his decisions in life.
- ◆ Fortuna and Alex have very different perspectives on life, showing the differing views teenagers and their families can have on prospects for the future.

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Family

- ◆ Fortuna's close relationship with her family and limited social life outside her family circle gives insight into a different way of life.
- ◆ Alex's parents are divorced and he lives with his mum, as his father now has a new wife and children.
- ◆ Alex's relationship with his parents changes when he begins to see them as people and not just parental figures.

Environment

- ◆ The redevelopment of the Sunshine Coast Hinterland is a passionate topic for the characters Cliff and Len.
- ◆ The discussion of the way life and the land once were in the area is cleverly woven into the story.
- ◆ Readers are forced to form their own opinions on the matter of development and urban progress.

STUDY NOTES

- ◆ After reading the chapter "Before January", what do think of Alex Delaney? Do you think he's a typical teenage boy or different in some way?
- ◆ At the beginning of the novel Alex describes his physique. How does he feel about his appearance? Does he feel comfortable in his own skin? Is this narration about his body stereotypical for boys?
- ◆ Alex's entire summer break is devoted to waiting for his tertiary offer. Do you think that you will be waiting with anticipation for university offers like Alex, or do you have another path to follow? Either way, can you empathise with Alex's torturous wait?
- ◆ What importance do you think society places on tertiary entrance scores and tertiary study? What ramifications does this have on the lives of young people? Discuss alternatives to university.
- ◆ 'Alex and Fortuna are polar opposites with regard to their ideologies about the future and the need for identity through their work.' Respond to this statement, using evidence from both characters' lives. Who is right? Whose beliefs most align with yours?
- ◆ Throughout the story, sex is alluded to, whether by Alex's mother or in Alex's narration. However, Alex never once uses the word 'sex'. What do you think this means? Is he ready for sex?

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- ◆ Fortuna and Alex are different in many ways. Is this relationship compatible in the long term?
- ◆ When is the right time for young people to engage in a sexual relationship?
- ◆ Alex's mother and Cliff both have 'sex talks' with Alex. Do you think they go about bringing up the topic appropriately? Is there an appropriate way to bring up the topic? Is it any of their business? What role should parents have in their children's sexual education?
- ◆ Fortuna and Alex's relationship forces them to evaluate their own lives. Is this a natural thing to happen in a relationship? Do you think a person needs to be in a relationship at some time in their life to grow?
- ◆ While with Fortuna, Alex begins to think about his mother and her needs as a woman. Do you think this is a turning point in Alex's relationship with his mother? Does he now see her as a person instead of just a parental figure? Does a similar situation occur with his father?
- ◆ Alex and his mother have a good relationship. Do you think Alex would have turned out differently if his mother had remarried when Alex was younger? How has Alex's relationship with his father been shaped by this?
- ◆ Fortuna's family does not fit the stereotypical mould of a traditional Australian family. How does this shape Fortuna's view of the world? In your view, is her family a positive or negative influence on her future?
- ◆ Alex has an interesting relationship with his neighbour, Len. Is it important for young people to have regular interactions with older generations?
- ◆ Do you think Len's work with the retirees at the nursing home is an admirable thing? Do you think the government should reward this type of work to encourage young people to be more involved?
- ◆ Len and Cliff are extremely passionate about the negative impact of deforestation and land development. This is an ongoing topic throughout the novel. Is development a negative thing or a natural progression of the human race? What are your ideas on the issue? Discuss them at length.

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AUTHOR MOTIVATION – WRITTEN BY NICK EARLS

After January began when Robyn Sheahan (now Robyn Sheahan-Bright) asked me to write a story for a young adult anthology. I told her I'd never written for a specific age-group readership before, but she was persuasive and I was desperate. She told me to think back to my last year or two at school and use something there as the basis of a story, and then write the way I would normally write.

I came up with an idea that had a loose connection with my life but because the central character therefore had a loose connection with me, I didn't write it the way I had been writing at the time. *Passion*, my only book at that time, had been deliberately dispassionate and perhaps somewhat misanthropic.

The story of Alex and his school play called for something different. Alex stayed with me, and I wanted to do more with him.

I decided I didn't want to write more about him at school, since that would need too many characters, so I took him to the end of the school year, to Caloundra, where I had gone for holidays. I realised I needed to get the people right, and the best way to do that was to invent as few of them as possible. That meant one parent, no siblings, one lot of neighbours and one other element. And what did I wish had happened during holidays when I was his age? It would have been nice to have met a girl. So I invented a girl and made her different to Alex and her family different to his. I had my people, and the story came from there.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nick Earls is the author of thirteen books, including five novels with teenage central characters. *48 Shades of Brown* was a CBCA Book of the Year, and his other four young adult novels were Notable Books. *After January* was also shortlisted for the National Children's Literature Award, won a 3M Talking Book of the Year Award and was shortlisted in the Fairlight Talking Book Awards. The International Youth Library in Munich, included it in its White Ravens selection of International Notable New Books. *After January* was the first of five of Nick Earls' novels to become plays. Two novels have also been adapted into feature films.