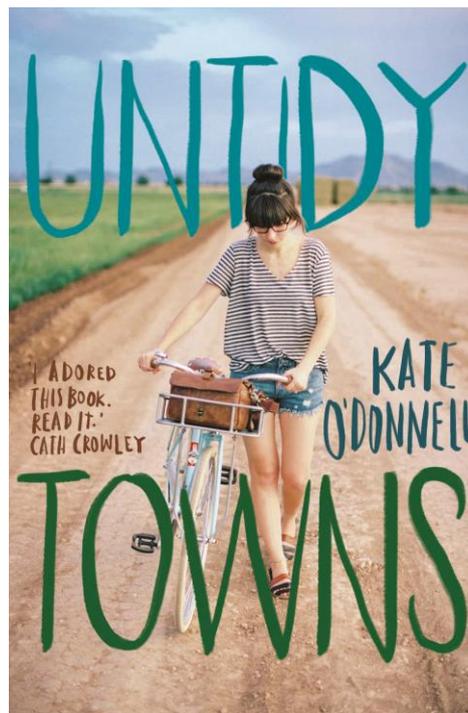


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# UNTIDY TOWNS

## Kate O'Donnell



### Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian  
in context with the Australian curriculum  
(English)

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**SYNOPSIS**

Overwhelmed by the pressures of Year 12 and the expectations of her scholarship, Adelaide flees boarding school to her hometown and the friends and family she left behind after leaving Emyvale.

Frustrated by the schooling system and reluctant to make decisions about her future, Adelaide finds herself working with her grandfather at the local historical society, a place that is as dusty and messy as Emyvale itself. Not only that, she falls for the unlikely Jarrod, who is almost as lost as Adelaide.

*Untidy Towns* is a coming-of-age novel about friendship, love and putting one foot in front of the other to seek what life has to offer.

**THEMES**

- Resilience
- Friendship
- Family
- Courage
- Acceptance

**WRITING STYLE**

*Untidy Towns* is written in first person, past tense, and is suitable for an adolescent audience. The narrative gives insights into the confusion and pressures that many teenagers experience as they struggle with the choices they must make as they finish Year 12. It also incorporates the coming out of Adelaide's best friend, Jen, as well as the burgeoning relationship between Adelaide and Jarrod. Adelaide's voice is both relatable and believable.

**STUDY NOTES**

- The opening pages of *Untidy Towns* immediately hook the reader. Discuss the way in which the author has successfully created tension in the first chapter. Why is it important that the complication arrests the reader so quickly?
- Adelaide's escape was unplanned – 'I'd accidentally fled' (p4). Why do you think she decided to buy a train ticket to Emyvale?
- Discuss Adelaide's comment that 'this education cost too much' (p7). Besides money, to what else is she referring?
- Adelaide thinks that she doesn't have 'any real reason to have come apart' (p11). Do you agree with her or not? How does this thought hinder her healing? Discuss?

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- Why does Adelaide feel both like an ‘invalid’ and *invalid* (p12)? What does the deliberate use of these homographs reveal about Adelaide’s character?
- When Adelaide’s mum collects her from the train station, ‘conversation was like untangling delicate necklaces that had been down the back of the drawer for years – finicky, and not worth it’ (p12). Discuss Kate O’Donnell’s use of figurative language to help portray this scene. Share a time when you too felt that the conversation was difficult and ‘not worth it’.
- Why is Addie so concerned with what the locals will think about her dropping out of boarding school and returning to Emyvale? How does this contribute to her state of mind?
- Addie is unsure if she is having panic attacks, or whether she is depressed, fatigued or simply pressured by expectations. With a friend, share times when you have felt like Addie. How does identifying with characters help readers to process their own feelings and experiences? How is this helpful?
- Why does seeing her grandad for the first time make Addie feel ashamed?
- Why does Addie’s grandad give her a job at the historical society?
- In what ways does Grandad become a father figure to Addie?
- Addie wonders if she is still close with her mum, or whether she should feel closer. Why does she feel like this? As the novel progresses, how do you think Addie feels about her relationship with her mum?
- What are the attributes of country towns that Addie slowly begins to appreciate?
- Addie asks her mum what advice she would give to her younger self. Write a reflection to your younger self, giving advice to help navigate the teenage years.
- Why has Addie let her friendships in the town disintegrate over the years?
- How important is it to have goals, be challenged and to know love? Why is it important to Addie’s mum that Addie have these?
- Why is Addie’s family so adamant that she needs to finish high school? What are the benefits? Why can’t she see the importance for herself?
- Why does Addie decide to complete school via Distance Education rather than at the local high school? What would you have done if you were Addie?
- How important is having friends to Addie’s recovery?
- Compare and contrast Emyvale with Melbourne. Show this comparison visually.

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- Addie is asked where she sees herself in five years' time. Consider this question yourself – where do you hope to live in at the age of 22? What job would you like? What book would your life be like?
- Why does it take Addie so long to reconnect with Jen? Why does Addie sense a 'guarded vibe from her, a veneer of protection' (p71)? If you were Jen, how would you react towards Addie?
- What does Addie mean when she says she is 'rebuilding the bridges I had burned' (p86)? How does she do this?
- Why does Addie suddenly feel incredibly sad when she realises that Clover has become a 'Somewhere along the line, she had become a little girl'. (p87)?
- Addie seems to feel more comfortable thinking about the 'here and now' rather than getting carried away with the future. In small groups, discuss Addie's sentiments. Do you agree or disagree with her standpoint? Why?
- Why does Addie say 'the more I saw of Emyvale, the more Emyvale was okay' (p109)? How does this statement reflect Addie's state of mind?
- Why doesn't Addie like the thought of Jarrod joining the army? Why is Jarrod considering this as a career path? Why doesn't Jarrod kiss Addie when she expresses her dislike for this possibility?
- Why does Addie begin to think that everyone should be in Emyvale (p138)? Do you agree with her? Discuss.
- Why does Addie help Mr Cairn make scones and bake Anzac biscuits for the 'oldies' at the historical society? Why is she so proud when they reach for a second biscuit? What does this reveal about Addie's development as a character?
- What impact has the death of her father had on Addie and her mother? Why has her mum chosen to stay in Emyvale rather than return to Queensland?
- How does her relationship with Jarrod help Addie to re-evaluate her situation and move forward? Could she have done this alone, or is Jarrod instrumental in this process? Discuss.
- Nick tells Addie that 'it's not all about wants' (p182). What does he mean by this? Why does Addie need to hear this?
- Would you rather have the opportunity to go back in time and tell people about their futures, or leave it to chance? Discuss.
- What does it take to make Addie finally care about her future?
- When Addie's results come out, she discovers she will have to adjust her plans, but that things will still work out. What message is the author giving to young people about the various pathways available after school?
- Why is Jen scared she 'might get everything I want' (p231)?

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- Why do Jarrod's parents treat him so poorly? What advice would you give to Jarrod?
- Reread the passage on p238-239 when Addie stresses about all of the things she may *not* get to experience. Why is this mindset so detrimental to her state of mind? How can she challenge such unhelpful thoughts?
- Why does Addie finally begin to realise that Emyvale is 'trapping me like a tarpaulin over a swimming pool' (p240)? How is it doing this?
- Re-read the opening paragraph of Chapter Thirty-six on p241. How does this passage reflect the title of the book?
- Addie wants to say to Jarrod that their options 'were infinite' (p246). What does she mean by this? How does this sentiment help Addie? Why is it so difficult for her to articulate this properly to Jarrod?
- How does Mrs Dobbs's life story help Addie's sense of confusion? How does the fact that Mrs Dobbs made the most out of her life help Addie to see her own future more clearly?
- Reread p258 What does the author have to say about the perils of catastrophising about the future rather than imagining and dreaming positively?
- In what ways is Addie's year like a bushfire? (See pp272-3).
- How does Miss Nell influence Addie, even after passing away?
- How are the scenes in which Grandad teaches Addie how to drive symbolic of her coming-of-age?
- How does working at the historical society help Addie?
- As you read *Untidy Towns*, create character portraits of the main characters, such as Adelaide, Mia, Jen and Jarrod. Include personality traits, physical characteristics and attitudes. Add to these portraits as you read the novel.
- How does Adelaide change throughout the narrative? Give examples from the text to support your response.
- What clues do we get that Jarrod doesn't have a very close relationship with his parents? How has this impacted on Jarrod's life?
- Describe the relationship that Adelaide shares with her mother and her sister, Clover? How do these relationships help her to heal?
- Write a chapter in the role of one of the other characters, such as Jen or Jarrod.
- In the role of either Adelaide or Jarrod, write and perform a monologue that demonstrates your understanding of the turmoil they are experiencing about their uncertain futures.
- Write a reflection about the importance of friendship in your own life.
- What is the difference between 'living' and Addie's former strategy of merely 'staying, hovering' at boarding school (pp205)?

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- How is Jen undergoing her own crisis? In what ways is her life as ‘untidy’ as Addie’s?
- How has the author used the motif of trains, railway tracks and journeys in *Untidy Towns*?
- Why is the text titled *Untidy Towns*? How is this title reflected in the lives of Emyvale’s characters?
- Visit your local historical society or museum to find out more about your local area. In small groups, create a website to promote your local area or town.
- Consider signing up for a 14-day trial to Ancestry.com to trace your own roots or to investigate the history of a local resident.
- Adelaide loves to read novels and poetry, influencing Jarrod to start reading as well. Use the lists of books at the end of the text for some great recommendations. After reading from these lists, reflect on why Addie would like these texts.
- What do you think is the author’s main message to readers in this text?

**AUTHOR MOTIVATION**

*Untidy Towns* is fiction built around a tiny autobiographical spark of 16-year-old me, who was a pretty good student (though definitely not a child genius like Adelaide) but who felt constrained by the curriculum and my private school education. So I wanted to write a girl braver and smarter than I was; a girl who took chances. I hoped to portray the various paths to adulthood and education while also honouring friendship – particularly intergenerational friendship – family, history and the teenage experience.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Kate O’Donnell is a writer, editor and bookseller specialising in children’s and young adult literature. She has a BA in History and French from the University of Melbourne and studied Professional Writing and Editing at RMIT. *Untidy Towns* is her first novel.