



## ***A Tragic Kind of Wonderful***

**By Eric Lindstrom**

### **Book Summary:**

How can you have a future if you can't accept your past? Mel Hannigan doesn't have it easy. Mourning the death of her firework of a brother, trying to fit back into a school she's been conspicuously absent from and struggling to deal with the loss of three friendships that used to mean everything. Struggling to deal with a condition that not even her closest friends know about. So Mel tries to lock away her heart, to numb the highs and lows, to live quietly without hope – but also without pain. Until someone new shows her that it can be worth taking a risk, that opening up to life is what can make it glorious... And that maybe, Mel can discover a tragic kind of wonderful of her very own.

### **Themes covered:**

Mental illness  
Grief  
Identity  
Self-image  
Friendship and Relationships

### **Appropriate Ages:**

High school readers

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## CONTENTS

This novel will help teachers to initiate and facilitate discussions on a range of social issues that are very topical and students are passionate about.

This book invites students and teachers to discuss, analyse, write and think about issues such as grief, love, mental illness and the impact it has on young people and friendship. Students will enjoy having the opportunity to discuss these issues, particularly if they are encouraged to say what they truly think.

## KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

**AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM** The Australian Curriculum divides the study of English into three distinct strands, Language, Literature and Literacy and these can be found at <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/English/Content-structure>. These notes are divided into sections following the three strands.

### Language:

- Language variation and change
- Language for interaction
- Text structure and organisation
- Expressing and developing ideas
- Sound and letter knowledge

### Literature:

- Literature and context
- Responding to literature
- Examining literature
- Creating literature
- Literacy:
  - Texts in context
  - Interacting with others
  - Interpreting, analysing and evaluating
  - Creating texts

As per the Year 10 standard, this text explores themes of human experience and interpersonal relationships, and ethical dilemmas within a fictional setting and represents a unique perspective.

## Mental illness

As per the Australian Curriculum Year 10 standard, this fictional text explores themes of human experience and interpersonal relationships, and ethical dilemmas and represents a unique perspective. This engaging novel will help teachers to facilitate deep discussions with students about the experience of grief and mental illness for teenagers and what it can mean for managing feelings, peer and adult relations, self-esteem and friendship.

1. Before students read the book ask them to write a paragraph on what they know about mental illness, then repeat the exercise once they have finished the book and get them to reflect on what they have learned. (ACELT1639)
2. Ask students to research bipolar and dysphoric mania. Find evidence in the text of Mel's experience of bipolar and dysphoric mania and the strategies she uses to try and manage it. Is it something she can overcome or is it something that she will have to live with for the rest of her life? (ACELT1639)
3. Ask students to find evidence on how Mel feels about her illness. What are the issues she struggles with? Who does she seek help from? Consider the voice of Mel as a literary device and does her construction as a character evoke particular emotional responses from the audience? (ACELT1643)
4. What is the role of Dr Jordan? Why does she prefer talking to him rather than her own new therapist – Dr Oswald? Why is it significant when Dr Jordan tells Mel, “Stand your ground; defend your feelings. Be honest and hold nothing back. A good therapist will help you understand and process, not argue”. Invite students to think about their own feelings and how they manage them. Encourage them to write a response to Dr Jordan. How does Dr Jordan help Mel manage her symptoms? Why was it significant?

How does personifying aspects of her illness as animals assist Mel? How do the changing statuses of the animals reveal characterisation?

Hamster is Active

Hummingbird is Hovering

Hammerhead is Cruising

Hanniganimal is Up!

Hamster is Running

Hummingbird is Flying

Hammerhead is Cruising

Hanniganimal is Down/Mixed

Invite students to write a poem personifying an aspect of their personality.  
(ACELY1750)

5. The question of truth. Facilitate a class discussion on the role of truth. Find evidence in the novel of what Mel tells her family and friends about how she is feeling and if this contrasts with how she honestly feels. Some of the questions a class could consider are: What role does telling your emotional truth play in your life? Can you tell your doctor and friends the whole truth? Why would some people be reluctant to share their truth? Does Mel demonstrate this when she says, "Hold nothing back? How could I possibly tell that quiet woman in her sterile little office things I'm not willing to tell Dr. Jordan? Things I don't even let cross my own mind? It's inconceivable". Once Mel begins to trust Dr Oswald, why doesn't Mel want to tell Dr Oswald what she really thinks? Why is it hard to tell people who care for you the truth? What can happen with the truth? What does Dr Oswald do to make Mel feel more comfortable in sharing her true feelings? What would make Mel stop telling her truth? This question of truth allows students to evaluate the social, moral and ethical positions represented in texts  
(ACELT1812)

6. Why is talking important? Why do teenagers resist talking to adults about their feelings?

Look at this extract. Annie sees Mel just before she leaves for Paris. Angry at Annie's actions, Mel can't bring herself to tell her aunt what is wrong.

"Mel?" HJ says. "Something wrong?"



Only that I gave away Zumi, my best friend, to someone she wanted more, walked away, watched the bridges burn, and now it was all for nothing.

“Mel?”

I can't explain it. Even if I wanted to, I wouldn't know where to begin.

Why can't Mel tell her aunt what is bothering her? How does not sharing her feelings impact on Mel?

Organise a class discussion on this topic. “Direct questions about feelings are actually a source of irritation to teenagers”.

Another topic for a class discussion could be: Dr. Dharni says, “Not thinking about trauma is like a dog licking a sore on its leg. It might seem like keeping something painful out of your mind is protecting you, but you're actually making it worse, preventing it from healing”. Agree or disagree?

7. What role does the death of Nolan have in Mel's life? What is she trying to suppress or show? What are the consequences?

8. Why is jumping over the window so symbolic? What deeper meaning does it have? What are David and Mel arguing about? Why does it change Mel's perspective about life and David?

9. After reading *A Tragic Kind of Wonderful*, and discussing and thinking about mental illness and friendship ask students to compose three scenes involving two characters. In scene one, have one character trying to deal with an issue and the other character not really engaging with how the first character is feeling. In scene two have character two have an epiphany about how they acted with the other character. In scene three have character two return to character one and tell character one how they would act differently now.

10. After completing the novel study identify and analyse the implicit or explicit values, beliefs and assumptions in the text and the choices the author made to specifically engage with a teenage audience. (ACELY1752)

11. Invite students to create a literary texts with a sustained 'voice', selecting and adapting appropriate text structures, literary devices, language, auditory and visual structures and features for a teenage audience (ACELT1815)

## Friendship and relationships

This novel will help teachers to facilitate discussions with students to think about how the changing nature of friendships and their impact on mental health.

1. Invite the students to do a character analysis of Mel and her friendship with Annie, Zumi and Connor and map out their friendship over the course of the book. What event is hanging over Mel? What issues are the other characters having to deal with? Encourage students to pinpoint the factors that lead to a changing dynamic between them all. What are the first indications that the dynamics in the friendship group could lead to conflict? How is Mel's friendship with Holly and Declan different? Does Mel grieve for the loss of her friendship with Zumi? What role do the residents at the nursing home play in Mel's mental health? What role does the death of her brother play in these friendships?

What role does the character of David play? Why is he different from all the other characters in the book? What makes Mel's relationship with David different? How does being truthful change their relationship? What impact does that have on Mel's mental health?

Invite students to think about their own friendships and relationships. Ask them to think about one event from their own lives and what and how much they would tell their friends and family members. Why would they share some information to some and not others? Invite them to write two scenes conveying that idea. (ACELT1639)

2. Why has the author chosen to tell the story in a mixture of flashbacks, letters and the present day? How does this create emotion and intrigue? Invite students to construct a creative writing piece on one character who is experiencing an inner conflict using a flashback, a letter and a scene from the present day. (ACELT1815)

3. Much of the novel is dialogue. How has the author captured the essence of relationships between adults and teenagers? Invite students to listen and record a conversation at home between their family members and then write four sentences of dialogue to convey what has not been said, then share that with the class and have a discussion about the role of dialogue in developing characterisation and plot.

Similarly, analyse a key passage of dialogue between Mel and her friends and identify the literary techniques evident in the passage and then ask students to create a piece of writing emulating those techniques.

4. Complete the **What if exercise**. Invite students to write about a friendship experience that has left them wondering if they should have acted differently - compose a creative writing piece outlining how they could have acted differently.
5. Invite students to construct an imaginative text that makes relevant thematic and intertextual connections with this and another text (ACELT1644)



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Combining a fiercely engaging voice with true heart, debut author Eric Lindstrom's *Not If I See You First* illuminates those blind spots that we all have in life, whether visually impaired or not.



In addition to writing Young Adult novels, Eric Lindstrom has worked in the interactive entertainment industry for years as a creative director, game designer, writer, and usually combinations of all three. As Editor and Co-Writer for *Tomb Raider: Legend* he received a 2006 BAFTA nomination for Best Video Game Screenplay, and then as the Creative Director for *Tomb Raider: Underworld* he received a 2009 BAFTA nomination for Best Action Adventure Video Game and a 2009 WGA nomination for Best Writing in a Video Game.