



# Sunny at the End of the World

**STEPH BOWE**

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Fiction

RECOMMENDED READING AGE: 14+

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## CURRICULUM GUIDE

The following teaching guide has been designed to embrace shared curriculum values. Students are encouraged to communicate their understanding of a text through speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing.

The learning activities aim to encourage students to think critically, creatively and independently, to reflect on their learning, and connect it to audience, purpose and context. They aim to encompass a range of forms and include a focus on language, literature and literacy. Where appropriate, they include the integration of ICT and life skills.



Credit: Darren James

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Steph Bowe** was born in Melbourne in 1994. Her first YA novel, *Girl Saves Boy*, published in 2010, was aptly described by Rebecca Stead as 'full of the absolute truth—life is complicated'. Steph went on to publish two further YA novels, *All This Could End*, which was longlisted for the 2014 Gold Inky Award, and *Night Swimming*, a Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA) Notable Book in 2018, when it was also longlisted for a Sisters in Crime Davitt Award. Sadly, Steph passed away on 20 January 2020, after a courageous battle with a rare form of Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma. She was twenty-five.

## SYNOPSIS

It's 2018 and a highly contagious virus has ripped across the world, culling most of the population. In Sydney, a select group has been spared, put to work in a mysterious underground research facility. Those who remain above ground are now mostly lumbering zombies, roaming the earth with rotting bodies and empty brains. But despite being infected, seventeen-year-old Sunny isn't one of them. While she hungers for flesh and her body decays, somehow her mind remains intact, along with her wit, charm and curiosity. Orphaned and on the run, Sunny forms an unlikely alliance with fellow teen Toby and Ronnie, a baby he has rescued and must now fight to protect. But eventually they are captured and separated. While kept prisoner to be studied in the dubious facility, Sunny keeps her sentence a secret—until she can't any longer.

Cut to 2034, when she teams up with teenager Vee and pulls off a hectic escape. Together they road trip through the apocalypse hellscape of the Gold Coast in search of survivors, friends and family, and of answers to the questions that worry them: Was this virus an unfortunate accident or a planned attack? The act of scientists, governments—or aliens? Where are Toby and Ronnie now? Who can be trusted? Who will survive?

Told from three perspectives and across dual timelines, the story masterfully unfolds at a cracking pace, culminating in a shocking twist. With its snappy dialogue and delightfully morbid humour, *Sunny at the End of the World* is a fun and thought-provoking read from a much-missed Australian YA talent.

## BEFORE READING

1. Take a careful look at the cover, including the title, the illustration of the characters and setting, the font and the palette used. What do you predict

will happen in this story and what do you think the title could mean?

2. Read the blurb. Does this remind you of any other books you've read where the world as we know it has ended? Why do you think readers are drawn to apocalypse stories and what do we get out of them?
3. Consider the book's opening line: 'Three days after the outbreak, my parents and I discussed exactly how we would kill each other.' Have you ever thought about what you'd do in a zombie attack? Would you try to escape—how and to where? Would you stay and fight? Brainstorm your unique skills and advantages in this situation, and come up with a zombie survival guide.
4. In a note at the front of the book, there is an explanation about the author Steph Bowe's life and work, and the circumstances of this novel's publication after her death. Does this make you feel a particular way towards the book?

### WHILE READING

1. What is the incident that makes Vee start to doubt the intentions of John and the facility?
2. Why does Sunny's father make the decision to leave Sunny and end his life?
3. Toby describes himself as a 'cowardly lion' when he leaves Tessa behind. Why, and what choice would you have made in these circumstances?
4. Where do Sunny and Toby first meet and what is the significance of this place?
5. Vee observes that, compared with her relatively peaceful time underground, 'Life on the outside seems to involve constant confrontation.' (p. 188) Do you think there are other advantages to living in a controlled facility? What are some things that Vee experiences for the first time upon escaping from the facility?
6. Why is Sunny keen for her and Vee to find the collective of survivors on the Gold Coast?
7. What does the gradual decay of Sunny's body over time add to the story?
8. How and why were Freya and Toby made into cyborgs?
9. Sunny has a number of theories about the zombie virus, its survivors and the facilities built underground to avoid it. As she puts it, 'Nobody likes the inexplicable.' (p. 106) What are her theories and why do you think we as humans feel the need to come up with our own theories to explain the unknown?
10. How do the characters cope with the extreme nature of their circumstances?
11. When discussing the game, Sunny tells her parents at the end, 'I'm not sure whether you can win or lose.' (p. 252) Do you think there were winners and losers in this story?

### THEMES

#### Survival

1. Toby chooses to host an end-of-the-world party even though there is growing awareness at this point of the spreading zombie virus. Why do you think he does this and what does his decision tell us about human nature? Can you find other examples in the book of characters engaging in life when death is all around them?
2. *Sunny at the End of the World* features the spread of a deadly virus but it was completed before the global events of 2020. Do you feel there are similarities between way the author imagined the impact of this virus and your experience of the COVID-19 pandemic? Sunny observes: 'I appreciate how wonderful my life was up until the outbreak, even if I didn't appreciate it all at the time.' (p. 2) Were there things that you only appreciated once you lost access to them?
3. In Gin's explanation about the origins of the virus, she says 'The government destroyed itself because it was the only way to save the planet' (p. 181) and usher in a new generation who would. Do you believe genocide could be justified if it would ensure that humanity would survive?

#### Family

1. 'I considered what my mother and father would want saved. Me. I was the last remaining member of our family, responsible for carrying on our name, keeping our memories alive—memories of my idyllic childhood, of my deceased grandparents, of the little town in Ireland where Mum's family came from.' (p. 62) What do you think your family would want you to keep safe and carry forward into the future? Are there specific items, memories, rituals or stories that come to mind?
2. Toby observes that before the virus hit: 'I was working out what it was to grow up, how you knew it was happening. Your parents (or in my case, parent) pretty much stopped shielding you from everything difficult and uncomfortable in your life. You knew you were growing up when your parents stopped telling you things were none of your concern.' Does this observation ring true to your life? Can you identify moments where Toby, Vee and Sunny are confronted by



new knowledge or difficult experiences that force them to grow up?

3. How does *Sunny at the End of the World* explore the concept of family—family of origin, 'found' family, and pseudo family structures?

## AFTER READING

### Character

1. Why do you think Vee and Toby both seem to trust Sunny almost from the start of their relationship? What is it about Sunny's character that they are drawn to?
2. What does the style of Toby's letters to Ronnie tell us about who he is as a person? Is the way he views himself accurate? Give reasons why or why not.
3. Toby, Vee and Sunny all have different motivations for the journeys they take throughout the novel. What is it that they are each in search of and do they find it along the way?
4. Many acts of violence are performed by the main characters—and yet the reader remains on their side. How does the author achieve this?
5. Towards the beginning of the book, Sunny describes herself as sensible and cautious. Is this how you would describe her by the end? In what ways does she grow and change?

### Style and structure

1. *Sunny at the End of the World* jumps forward and back in time between 2018 and 2034. Why do you think the author chose to do this? Can you think of other novels that use this technique?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this structure, as opposed to a traditional chronological telling?
3. The point of view also shifts between Sunny's, Vee's and Toby's perspectives. What moments of tension and reveal are created by using this technique? Whose sections did you prefer reading and why?
4. What are the differences between the first-person voices of Toby and Vee in terms of their tone and language?

## RESPONDING

1. In justifying the government program, Gin pronounces that: 'Most people are self-centred, bigoted, short-term planners. So we had a population cull. So what!' (p. 180) 'We will rebuild the world better than before.' (p. 182) If you were starting a new society from scratch, how do you think you would avoid repeating the mistakes from the past, particularly with reference to climate change? Come up with a manifesto for your new world order and present it as a convincing five-minute speech or political poster.
2. The Epilogue provides new information that brings into question the entire plot of the novel. How did you feel about the ending? Were you shocked or were there elements that foreshadowed this twist? Re-read the Epilogue and write a Prologue to go at the start of the book, setting the scene when the characters arrive for the Virtual Reality experiment and what they are expecting from it. You could use the point of view of one of the three main characters, or choose a minor character.
3. The speculative fiction genre allows us to project the concerns of the present onto a catastrophic future, and then to ask 'What if?'. What issues from today's world does the author explore in their apocalyptic zombie-filled world? Can you identify a 'What if?' question at the heart of it?
4. Which concerns about modern life would you explore if you were writing a futuristic story, and how would you build a plot around them? Write a blurb or make a film trailer for your story, or choose a chapter or scene to bring to life in the form of a graphic novel or film script.