

# The Undercurrent

## PAULA WESTON

ISBN 9781925498233

RRP AU\$19.99

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.

### SYNOPSIS

Eighteen-year-old Julianne De Marchi is different. As in: she has an electrical undercurrent beneath her skin that stings and surges like a live wire. She can use it—to spark a fire, maybe even end a life—but she doesn't understand what it is. And she can barely control it, especially when she's anxious.

Ryan Walsh was on track for a stellar football career when his knee blew out. Now he's a soldier—part of an experimental privatised military unit that has identified Jules De Marchi as a threat. Is it because of the weird undercurrent she's tried so hard to hide? Or because of her mother Angie's history as an activist against bio-engineering and big business?

It's no coincidence that Ryan and Jules are in the same place at the same time—he's under orders to follow her, after all. But then an explosive attack on a city building by an unknown enemy throws them together in the most violent and unexpected way.

Paula Weston, author of the much-admired Rephaim series, returns with a standalone work: a futuristic thriller that is only slightly futuristic—but utterly

and undeniably thrilling. Great writing, heart-burning characters, probing questions about where technology is taking us—and a plot that zips and zings like an electrical current itself. This is a great young-adult writer at the peak of her powers.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paula Weston is a Brisbane-based author. She has more than twenty years' experience as a professional writer—first as a print journalist and then as a government communication and media specialist. She co-owns a writing/design consultancy.

### BEFORE READING

1. Examine the title of the text, *The Undercurrent*. What is the definition of an undercurrent? How may an undercurrent relate to an individual? How may it relate to a society? What inferences can you make about the plot, characters and themes of the novel?
2. What are some examples of current environmental and economic threats facing Australia? What is the Australian government doing to address these issues? Is enough being done? What predictions can you make about the future state of the world if these issues aren't addressed?
3. What does an activist do? Research an Australian activist and create a poster educating others about the work this individual does and why their work is so important.

### WHILE READING

1. 'But Angie knows all too well how easily reporters can pressure decision-making.' (p. 2) How are reporters and journalists able to influence the government? Explain your thinking.

2. 'Pax Federation, strangling our nation.' (p. 8) What is the Paxton Federation? In what context has this company built its wealth? What kind of influence do they have over Australian society? How are they 'strangling' the nation?
3. 'They call themselves the Agitators. It used to be left-wing soccer mums and hipsters who turned up to these protests with their professionally printed signs, pithy slogans and organic snacks. Now it's this lot. Mostly blokes, and mostly under twenty-five like him, venting their rage at the world.' (p. 13) What kinds of people are attracted to activism? Is there a stereotype? Why do you think that the people attracted to being a part of the Agitators has changed so much over time?
4. "I need a job because my mother can't get one," she says, measuring her words. 'And that's because you've threatened to pull advertising from anyone who publishes her work.'" (p. 23) What are the implications if media platforms publish only articles or opinions that align with their advertisers? Is this how media platforms in Australia currently operate? Can you think of any examples of news sources independent of advertisers and therefore independent of outside opinions in Australia?
5. What is a meet cute? What is the meet cute between Julianne and Ryan? How does this scene connect with the broader themes and ideas of the novel?
6. In the Australian society that Julianne and her mother live in, most sectors of society have been privatised. What does it mean if something is privatised? What are the implications?
7. 'The kid needs to vent. Angie's convinced it's what feeds the charge beneath Jules' skin: year after year of repressed rage.' (p. 72) How accurate do you think Angie's reasoning is for Jules' powers? Is her inability to control her power reflective of her inability to manage her emotions?
8. 'Bradford was the kid in school biology whose frog wasn't quite dead but he dissected it anyway because that was the task. He did what had to be done. Didn't think about the frog—or how anyone would take it. Then he sat down and ate his lunch while half the class threw up. He wasn't cruel, Major, he was being pragmatic.' (p. 83) What does it mean to be pragmatic? How does this story of a younger Bradford Paxton reflect his adult views in business and how he treats the natural world?
9. On page 186, Ryan and Julianne visit the creek near Ryan's house. Why is this scene subtly significant? What do their perceptions of the defaced gum tree reveal about their environmental beliefs? More broadly, what does this say about them as characters?
10. 'The conversation with Ryan was more intimate than anything that passed between them against that wall.' (p. 267) What are the differences between physical and emotional intimacy? Is one more

important than the other? Should one come first before the other in a romantic relationship?

## AFTER READING

### CHARACTER

1. 'The current has barely stirred all week. Jules is trying to figure out if she's managing her emotions better or if she's actually in control of the charge—or if they're one and the same.' (p. 374) Are Julianne's powers and her emotions one and the same? Or does Weston include this characteristic merely to construct a bigger metaphor? What do you think this metaphor may be?
2. The backyard she grew up in was scarred with scorched grass and blackened trees from years of practising with her dad, trying to hold in the power in her hands—and failing.' (p. 44) Why is it that Julianne gains control of the power at the conclusion of the book? What has changed that has allowed her to harness the power? Is Weston making a comment about maturity and coming of age?
3. There are a number of different groups 'in play' (p. 98) in the text; the Agitators, Pax Federation, the military and the federal agents. Create a diagram in your book showing how they connect. On reflection, who has the most power amongst these groups? What kind of power is this?
4. Ryan's employment as a soldier provides money for his family and their farm to survive. Why is Ryan's father so insulted by his son helping his family?
5. Throughout the novel, Julianne feels Ryan's energy, which in turn has an impact on her ability to control her power. Why are the two connected in this way? Is this because of their physical attraction to one another or is there another reason?

### STRUCTURE

1. Map the narrative arc of the text, referring to exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and resolution. Does the plot fit this narrative arc? Or is there a different type of narrative arc?
2. *The Undercurrent* has a number of twists and turns in the narrative. With a classmate, take a piece of string and a copy of the novel outside. Every time the plot proceeds straight forward, walk forward, every-time it takes a twist change direction. Every time you move, drop the string to show the visual progression of the plot. As an extension, you may like to annotate the string diagram showing what the twist or turn is.
3. 'Smart. Quick and fearless.' (p. 199) The motif of AFL football is threaded throughout the novel. Ryan himself is an ex-footballer and number one draft pick who longs desperately to play football again. How does this symbol of a football game but also of AFL, reflect the themes and ideas of the novel?

Who are the players? What is the game's objective?  
How does sport reflect culture?

## THEMES

### Hardship and Poverty

1. 'I'm so sick of it, Jules. All the shit that keeps happening to us and not being able to do a thing about it.' (p. 56) What is hardship? How is it currently characterised in Australia? What types of hardships do the characters battle in the book? How can these hardships be helped or improved?
2. 'The new power station's not popular in most parts of Australia but it's given a few of his classmates some cash in their wallets.' (p. 184) Despite her family's history with Pax Federation, Julianne takes an interview with the company. Despite his family's farm being driven to ruin by the Happy Growers, Ryan takes a job with the army which is contracted by Pax Federation. Both Julianne and Ryan decide to desert their morals and beliefs to get a paying job. What do these decisions reveal about the extent of their current hardships?
3. 'How does he think Third World countries are going to pay for all the GMO grain he wants to force our farmers to grow? Most famine is the result of corrupt regimes, not lack of opportunity or know-how to grow crops. Fix that, and half the world won't be starving.' (p. 77) What is GMO? What are the implications of using GMO for crops? Do you agree with Angie's opinion? Are corrupt regimes to blame for famine?

### Technological Advancements

1. 'Why is it so hard for you to believe our soldiers are being used as guinea pigs? What do you think this corporatised army is all about?' (p. 126) Pax Federation is fixated on making stronger and faster soldiers with quicker recovery times. AFL football is a major motif in the novel. What is the connection with the Pax Federation injection program and AFL? What set of ideas is Weston conveying by including this motif?
2. On page 227, Julianne discovers Ryan injecting himself with a bio-genetic drug, a requirement from the army. What justifications does Ryan give for being a 'lab rat'? (p.228) What counter-arguments does Julianne provide?
3. 'You think my cells can do what the greatest minds in history have failed at for thousands of years?' (p. 318) What does Weston propose as the key to human evolution—the mind or the body?

### Privatisation

1. Research the term 'privatisation'. What are some examples of sectors that are privatised in Australia? What are some examples of sectors that are public? Ryan's army unit is 'privatised'. In Australia currently there are two private military companies operating. What are the threats of more privatised military

companies rising in Australia? Why might this be dangerous?

2. 'What I hate is the bastardisation of the Australian Defence Force. Corporate interests dictating where and how our troops serve.' (p. 149) What does Voss mean by this quote? Who should decide where the Australian Defence Force serves?
3. 'Money and influence make people think they're untouchable.' (p. 360) What is the social hierarchy in the text? Illustrate this hierarchy in your book by referring to characters in the book. What are the social values and the concerns of these characters? What does this reveal about their status in society?

### Responding

1. A number of characters in the text are trying desperately to change the fabric of Australian society. What are the different ways these characters try to instil change? What does Weston suggest is the most effective way of doing so? Write an extended piece arguing your interpretation. Ensure that your interpretation is supported by evidence.
2. Resource demand and population growth are given as justifications by Pax Federation to change agricultural farming practices and genetically modify food. Are these valid justifications? Create a 'for and against' list highlighting both sides of the argument. Refer to the perspectives of Jamie Walsh, Angie De Marchi and Tom Paxton for supportive evidence.
3. How realistic is Weston's depiction of a future Australian society? Give reasons. Split the class into two groups for a line debate.
4. Write two separate news articles reporting on the train collision that occurs at the end of the book. Write one from a news source that features advertisements for Happy Growers and one from an online source affiliated with the Agitators. How might these two articles be different despite being about the same event?
5. Create your own voice transcripts, pretending to be the characters Major Voss, Waylon, Frenchie, Ryan and Khan. Your transcript should use the exact dialogue from the text but also reflect the emotions being felt by the characters at the time the dialogue was spoken.
6. '...fearmongering governments, soulless corporations and narcissistic technology' (p. 74) is how Angie describes the current state of the world. How accurate is the summary of your world today? Are there any similarities or connections? Write down the three headings into your workbook and list examples of these beneath.
7. 'They're using her rhetoric—the inspiration for anti-violent resistance—to justify violence.' (p. 209) Create a vlog like Angie De Marchi and write a speech, explaining your opinion on a current environmental issue in Australia.

8. 'We know you can't undo genetic modification once you throw mutant genes into your breeding line. But do people in the city get it when they're sitting in their cafes eating their artisan bread and feeling guilty about global hunger? Do they understand the cost of this mad rush to "fix" the world?' (p. 380) What does this quote reveal about the class divide and perception of poverty in Australia? Create an online survey about resource demand and population growth and ask participants from rural, suburban and city areas to complete the survey. How are the responses different depending on where the individual lives? Why might this be?