



# Dancing Barefoot

## ALICE BOYLE

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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.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Credit: Lise Leitner, 2022

Next Chapter program, and in 2021 she won the Text Prize for her debut novel *Dancing Barefoot*.

Alice Boyle is an English teacher and author living in Naarm/Melbourne. She has written for SBS Voices and the Wheeler Centre, and her short story 'The Exchange' was published in the Black Inc. anthology *Growing Up Queer in Australia*. In 2019 she was highly commended for the Wheeler Centre's

### SYNOPSIS

Patch (Patti) Smith is figuring things out. Some things she knows for certain—she loves to draw, she loves hanging out with her best friend, Edwin, and she has a huge unrequited crush on Evie Vanhoutte.

When Patch puts Evie's name down as her tent partner for Mountford College's annual Wilderness Camp, she writes it off as a moment of temporary insanity. Patch doesn't expect that Evie—beautiful, popular, star of the basketball team—would ever want to be friends with her. Patch is a misfit. She's not good at sport. She lives with her dad and her brother above their record shop on Sydney Road. She's a scholarship kid on the fringes of the Mountford College elite. But when Abigail Richards, the Queen Bee who hates Patch and just happens to be Evie's best friend, tips a bottle of ink all over Patch's school uniform, Evie comes to the rescue. It's not long before Evie is inviting Patch and Edwin to sit with them at lunchtime, and to hang out with her on the weekend. But what does it all mean?

Edwin, who has just started the first major steps of his transition, has been out-and-proud for years. But nobody knows that Patch is gay. She hasn't even told her best friend. Everything is happening so fast, and Patch has no idea how to make sense of who she is and what she wants. When Evie tries to kiss her at a party, Patch misinterprets something she says and storms out, convinced that Evie has been stringing her along to make her look foolish. Even worse, she's convinced that Edwin has betrayed her by revealing her secret.

The Wilderness Camp couldn't have gotten off to a worse start. But it turns out that being trapped in the bush together for five days is exactly what everyone needs to get things off their chests. Patch might even get her happy ever after. *Dancing Barefoot* is a joy-filled queer romance that celebrates music, individuality and friendship.



## BEFORE READING

1. 'Dancing Barefoot' is the title of both the book and a song by Patti Smith, an influential female musician described as 'the punk poet laureate'. Listen to the song—how does it make you feel? As you read think about the song (and singer)'s influence on the story. Does it affect your emotional response to the book?
2. What kind of expectations does society place on people based on the way they look? How does this create stereotypes and ideas about what and who we find attractive?
3. Author Alice Boyle has said that she 'began writing *Dancing Barefoot* because I wanted to see more lighthearted, fun, positive representation of the LGBTQIA+ community in local YA fiction'. Discuss the way that the LGBTQIA+ community has been represented in other books you've read. Why is it important that there are lighthearted, positive LGBTQIA+ narratives?

## WHILE READING

1. Author Alice Boyle has created a playlist of the songs mentioned in *Dancing Barefoot*. Feel free to listen to it while you read: <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4KtPXqkYOipSvKrUgg4cJr?si=c5121963fb294f07&nd=1>  
Are you familiar with any of the songs or artists?
2. What do you notice about the music and musicians referenced in the book and on the playlist? Why do you think the author has chosen to include so many female and queer musicians?
3. How would you describe the first encounter between Patch and Evie? What does it reveal about each of them?
4. What is Patch's real name? Why is she embarrassed to use it?
5. How does Patch feel about her dad dating? What makes her see things differently?
6. How did Patch and Edwin become friends? Why does Evie feel threatened by their friendship?
7. Why does Patch think that her crush on Evie is 'embarrassing'?
8. Why does Patch's dad come down on her so hard for wagging English? Is he being unreasonable?
9. When Edwin came out to Patch, how did she show her support for him?
10. What do Patch and Evie have in common? Describe the role that music plays in bringing them together.
11. Does Abigail's reaction to Patch coming out surprise you? What has happened to Abigail that makes her reach out?
12. Why doesn't Patch want to kiss Evie at Abigail's party?
13. What does Evie say to earn Patch's trust back?

## AFTER READING

### CHARACTER

1. Why don't Abigail and Patch get along? Why do you think Abigail tips ink onto Patch at the beginning of the novel? Do those motivations change the way you feel about Abigail's behaviour?
2. How does Evie's friendship with Patch allow her to explore different aspects of her personality? What do you think she means when she tells Patch that people didn't believe she'd 'dare' to kiss her? Why do you think Evie might feel that she has to behave in certain ways?
3. Why doesn't Patch's dad tell her when he starts dating Bernie? How is his narrative surprising or unusual compared to the way that dads are represented in other books you've read?

### THEMES

#### Identity

1. How have Edwin's friends, family and peers reacted to his coming out? Given his mostly positive experience, why does it take Patch so long to share her identity with him? Do we owe other people the truth about our identity?
2. At one point, Patch describe Evie as a 'goddess' and herself as a 'slug'. Do you agree with her descriptions? Do you think she really believes this? How do you think Edwin, Evie or her dad would describe her?
3. What does music reveal about our identity? What kind of music does Patch listen to? What does this tell you about who she is?

#### Friendship

1. Does it surprise you that Evie is so nice to Patch? How do social hierarchies influence our friendships and relationships at school? Who benefits from these hierarchies?
2. Is Patch a good friend to Edwin? What is your response when she forgets to ask him about his first shot of T? What about when she leaves him behind at Abigail's party?
3. Acceptance is a huge part of friendships, not just in terms of accepting sexuality, but accepting each other's boundaries and feelings. How does Evie react when Patch sets up boundaries about wagging school? How does Abigail react? What does this tell you about each of them? Find another example where a character establishes boundaries, and discuss the way their friends behave. Why are boundaries and acceptance an important part of friendship?

#### Fitting in

1. Patch describes Edwin as having 'enough guts to fly in the face of public opinion'. (p. 3) Does Edwin care about fitting in? Does Patch?



2. Patch says that she avoids the gay label because she's already 'been labelled a povvo scholarship kid, weird dresser and friendless oddball. Adding the gay label to all of that would be a complete overload'. (p. 32) Do you think she's right? Is it easier to fit in, or to be true to yourself? What do you think Edwin would tell her if she said this to him?
3. Where do you think Abigail feels that she fits in (if anywhere)? Why is fitting in even more important to her than anyone else?

## RESPONDING

1. What role do misunderstandings play in the narrative? Write about a time when a misunderstanding between you and a friend led to conflict. How did you resolve it? How do the characters in the book resolve their misunderstandings?
2. Jealousy is a key theme in the novel. Find three examples where one of the characters is jealous of another. How does their jealousy shape their behaviour?

Using one of your examples as a starting point, rewrite one of these scenes from the point of view of a different character. How does writing from their perspective give you insight into the way they're feeling?

3. Alice Boyle has created a playlist to accompany the book, which includes many of the songs mentioned in the story. Imagine that you're writing a story about someone like you. Make a playlist of the music that would accompany it. What does your taste in music reveal about you?
4. 'The thing is, that's not the only way to dare. You can dare to stand out, dare to try, dare to be different. You can dare to put yourself on the line and kiss someone in the bathroom at a party even if you're not a hundred per cent sure that person is going to kiss you back.' (p. 272) Perhaps the most daring thing of all is to be vulnerable in the way that Evie makes herself when she writes Patch the letter. Write a short story in which you dare to do something that you've been to afraid to do in reality.