



# Forever & Ever

ALLANAH HUNT

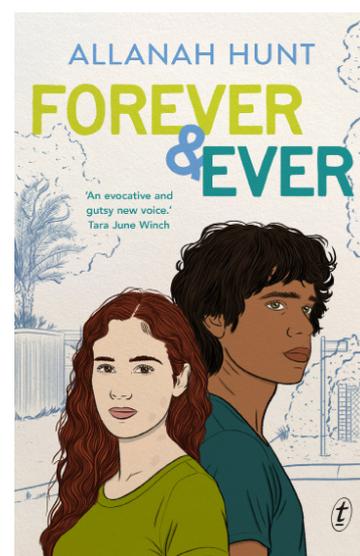
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YA FICTION

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

**Allannah Hunt** is a proud queer Barkindji and Malyangapa woman, and a lecturer at the University of Queensland. Her short stories have been shortlisted for various awards. *Forever & Ever* is her first novel. Allannah lives in Brisbane.

## SYNOPSIS

*Forever & Ever* is a young adult novel about Talia, a 16-year-old white Australian girl, and Johnny, a 17-year-old Barkindji teenager.

Talia doesn't really know what she wants from life. She lives in the small town of Murder Gully where she struggles to care for her mentally unwell mum, to keep connections with her divorced dad, and to figure out her estranged grandmother. Her best friend, Vinnie, helps her feel complete and, for now, she can deal with things.

Everything changes when she meets and falls for Johnny. She falls pregnant suddenly finds herself in an unexpected world full of racism, violence, and isolation. Her dad lets her know he has no intention of accepting a Blak grandchild, and her mum's mental health plunges further, leaving Talia spiraling.

Johnny's life has been very different from Talia's. Born and raised in Bourke, he has always been very aware of how his Barkindji heritage has marked him and his parents as targets for racialised violence. When he moves to Murder Gully, his future is clear: study hard and become the first medical doctor in his family. This would give him the kind of future that has been forever denied to his parents. When he meets Talia, he falls head over heels and for the first time he starts to consider what he wants out of life and not what his parents want for him. But when Talia falls pregnant, his drive to please his parents wins out and he breaks up with Talia.

Talia is bereft. She struggles with her decision about the baby and ultimately chooses foster care. Giving up her baby is devastating, and feels like just one more blow to her mental health after losing the support of her parents and saying goodbye to her grandmother so soon after their reconnection.

Talia reaches breaking point and goes to harm herself. She stops at the last minutes and begins a journey of healing. At the same time, Johnny learns what bravery really means and chooses a life with Talia and their baby. In the end, these teenagers from very different world come together to heal, both separately and together.



## BEFORE READING

Read and discuss the article below entitled 'The Royal Commission Report into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Shows a History of No Police Accountability', linked [here](#).

## WHILE READING

1. 'It had occurred to me we hadn't only moved for the location, but also because of the latest boy who had gone into a cell in Bourke and never came back out. A boy who looked a lot like me.' (p. 21) What do you think this realisation means to Johnny?
2. 'Just like back in Bourke—Mum would pull me to her side when certain white men walked past, mostly police, and we'd keep our eyes down in fear and pretend respect. I would lay awake in bed at night, trying to get that look out of my head. Nothing should've made my mum bow her head like that. Especially not those men.' (pp. 22—23) Why is the situation with the police particularly painful for Johnny? Why does he know he and his mum have to pretend to respect the police, regardless of their behaviour?
3. One of the themes of the book involves how marginalized communities can be mistreated while wider audiences can be unaware of this power dynamic. These communities can include people of colour, people with disabilities, and people with mental health struggles. Why is this power dynamic important to understand?
4. "'I needed to get away,' he said. 'Unlike you, Johnny, I can't leave the pregnancy behind.'" (p. 34) What are extra pressures and risks women and girls are faced with when it comes to unexpected pregnancies?
5. 'Whenever she talked about that [antidepressants], it made me feel funny inside. Somehow, I felt like I'd be copping out if I took that route, like I was admitting I wasn't strong enough to handle taking care of my mum.' (p. 47) Do you think Talia's concerns around antidepressants are common? Why do people think it is 'weak' to need antidepressants but not other types of medication?
6. On pages 85—86, it is revealed that Travis only wants Talia to have an abortion if the baby is Aboriginal. Talia believes in the right to an abortion, but she doesn't want one herself. Why do you think Travis feels this way? Why is it important that Talia be given a choice in what happens to her baby?
7. Johnny draws attention to the more insidious forms of racism, and how someone struggling with racism may not always be who you'd expect. He notes that sometimes people with racist beliefs can be kind and loving in other ways. Why do we assume a bad guy always looks like a 'bad guy'? Why is it important to recognise more inconspicuous forms of racism?
8. Talia realises there are going to be people in the world who will hate her child simply for one part of its cultural heritage. How do racism and powerlessness work together?
9. Johnny struggles with guilt over what his parents have given him and feels that he doesn't fit into the future they have planned for him. How do the limited opportunities and discrimination his parents experienced affect his situation now? How does this complicate how he makes decisions in his life?
10. Talia often represses bad thoughts by pretending everything is fine when it isn't. Why do you think she does this? Do you think it helps her handle her problems? What do you think could change if she opened up a bit more about her thoughts and feelings?
11. Johnny's mum, Sandra, makes the point that Indigenous people have had to fight for the rights that were automatically handed to white Australians. She knows that, whether Johnny likes it or not, he's in the fight now too even if she wishes differently. What pressure does this constant fight for equal rights put on her and Johnny's relationship? Do you think she could have prepared him in a different way? Do you think Johnny would have felt this sort of pressure to do better for his life and his community even without his parents' push?
12. Why do you think the attack from Brad affects Johnny so badly? Do you think Johnny would be judged more harshly for retaliating to Brad's behaviour than Brad would be for initiating the attack?
13. Talia is shocked by just how much racism exists in Australia, even among her friends. Why can it be hard to recognise racism in others if you aren't part of the community on the receiving end of the discrimination?
14. Violence against Blak people not being taken seriously by the police is touched on throughout the book and through the generations, seen when Louise discusses Benjamin's death and how the police had no interest in investigating it. Why do you think police often poorly investigate Blak deaths? Have you ever heard of the term 'the less-dead'? Do you think Talia was right to suggest going to the police?
15. 'I was back on the highway, watching the headlights pierce the night. I wondered what it would feel like for them to cut right through me. Something in the back of my head told me these weren't good thoughts to be having. But I was too numb to care.' (p. 242) Up until this point, Talia described a growing numbness in her emotions, along with bouts of extreme crying. This is the first time she engages in self-harm. Why do you think Talia's mental health deteriorates? What could she have done differently to avoid reaching this point?
16. 'I'd been too scared to see that the future I dreamed about had everything to do with Talia and nothing to do with what my parents envisioned for me. That the man I wanted to be was different from Mum and Dad's version.' (p. 296) Why couldn't



Johnny see what he wanted until after he had broken up with Talia? Why was it so hard for Johnny to choose a different future from the one his parents wanted?

17. Talia's pressures don't disappear at the end of the novel but she starts to find ways to handle them without engaging in self-harm or suicidal ideation. How have Talia's beliefs about mental health, counselling, and medication changed since the start of the book?

### AFTER READING CHARACTER

1. Talia loves fantasy and science fiction and stories that help her forget about real life for a while. What do you think this says about Talia? Is this something you relate to?
2. Talia and Johnny struggle with their futures for different reasons. Talia doesn't quite know what she wants out of life and hasn't really thought much about her future. Johnny doesn't know how to be who he is without his parents' influence. Why do you think they think about the future so differently? How do they help each other understand their own wants more?
3. Why do you think Johnny runs when he learns about the pregnancy? How do you think his actions might have changed had he known Talia's family would react the way they did?

### STYLE AND STRUCTURE

1. In the novel, rivers play different roles for different cultures. Talia sees the river as something to be wary of, liking it even if she doesn't understand it. For Johnny and some of the other Indigenous characters, the river is viewed as a gateway to home and is one of the first places Johnny's mum goes to when they move to Murder Gully. Why do you think Indigenous characters view the Murray and Darling rivers differently from non-Indigenous characters?
2. Johnny and Talia's chapters take place over different timelines, with Johnny thinking about the past and Talia thinking in the present. Why do you think the author chose this structure?
3. A lot of the novel's violence happens out of view, like Mr Wells' beating up of Indigenous people, the murder of Benjamin, and boys dying in custody. Why do you think the author has chosen not to show this violence?

### THEMES

#### Mental health

1. On pages 79–80, Talia doesn't realise she is having a panic attack even as she is experiencing one. This is common for Talia as she doesn't often understand what is happening to her in the moment, such as depression and other post-partum experiences.

Do you think that Talia would have handled these things differently had she understood what was happening to her?

2. Why do you think Talia eventually sought help after her final attempt at self-harm?
3. How do you think things would have been different if other characters (Janet, Johnny, Brad Kenner) had known a little more about mental health and its management?

### Inequality and discrimination

1. As the novel shows, people in marginalised communities can often be victims of violence by those hoping to exploit their vulnerabilities. This is evident in the treatment of Indigenous peoples, including the murder of Benjamin, the attack on Johnny, Vinnie's situation, and the racial vilification of unborn Indigenous children. Talia eventually becomes aware of such often invisible power dynamics? Why is it important to understand these dynamics?
2. Why do you think there is still modern-day racism regarding interracial marrying? To what extent do you think changes in laws actually equate to social change?
3. Read the blog post below by fantasy author N.K. Jemisin entitled 'Confirmation bias, epic fantasy, and you', linked [here](#).

Throughout the book, Talia acknowledges how there was so much racism going on around her that she was oblivious to. Why do you think that is? Why is Johnny so aware of race relations but Talia is not?

### Home

1. Johnny's mum often talks about how she is searching for her home, something she seems to have lost since moving from Bourke. What do you think she is searching for and hoping to find for Johnny?
2. Johnny says that he has found his *milimpilyi* in Talia. What does he mean by this?
3. Do you think it fair that both Talia and Johnny are expected to know what they want their careers to look like in high school?

### RESPONDING

1. 'I held Talia's hand and we spent the rest of lunch break thinking up ridiculous career prospects, from hand model to video game influencer. I went back home and instead of studying, sketched that scene in my mind's eye.' (p. 129) Come up with a list of quirky careers that actually exist. Research to find out how you those careers work.



2. 'I believe we all have memories we can't bring to the front of our minds. They are there, informing the person we become. We just don't realise it. I often wonder what memories I can't recall. I hope they're happy ones; I'd hate to think I was formed out of sadness.' (p. 238)

Research an important ancestor in your lineage (this can be mother, father, grandfather, great-grandmother) and share something perhaps you didn't know about them.

3. 'One of the times when I was dodging doing some study, watching an unlikely-animal-friendships reel on YouTube, from a cat adopting ducklings to a dog being best mates with a deer, I randomly typed Barkindji into Google. To my surprise, results came up. A lot of them. It did something funny inside me to realise I wasn't as invisible or forgotten as I was often made to feel.' (p. 251)

Research some language words from the Indigenous group whose land you live on. Find some of their definitions and share with the class.

4. 'It's pretty good,' I agreed. 'But I kind of prefer the stories from our voices.' (p. 63)

What do you think Johnny means by this? Do some research and find some stories that are #OwnVoices. How have these stories impacted you?

Write a paragraph about the history of Indigenous voices being silenced in colonial Australia. David Unaipon's story is a good place to start. How important it is for Indigenous peoples to speak for ourselves?