

# Wintergirls

Laurie Halse Anderson

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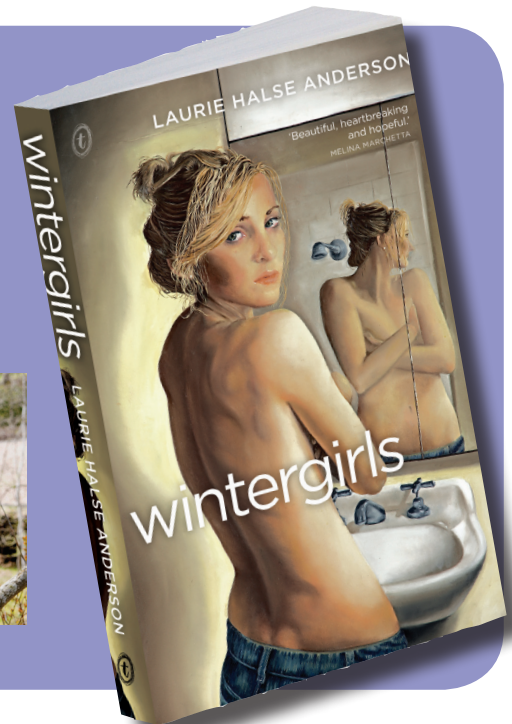
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Recommended for Middle/Upper Secondary

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## Praise

'Beautiful, heartbreaking and hopeful.' Melina Marchetta

## Synopsis

*Wintergirls* is a confronting and disturbing novel about serious eating disorders. It makes us think about families and friendships. It explores depression with its accompanying morbid fantasies and lack of self-esteem. It is about self-discovery and the fact that until you can understand yourself you cannot really help yourself.

Nevertheless it is an absorbing book, not just because you need desperately to know the outcome but also because you become very involved with the protagonist, Lia.

Lia is 18, a school student, living with her father and stepmother. She is very seriously ill, suffering from anorexia. She tells the story so we see everything through her eyes and need to draw our own conclusions about other important people in the novel. Because she is the narrator we are allowed to see into her mind; we understand how she feels about food even if we do not sympathise with those thoughts. We become exasperated and frustrated as she hides the horrific extent of her illness not only from her family, but worst of all from herself.

However she is a most engaging young woman—beautiful with her half-sister and with a wry sense of humour. Serving at the school cake stall (in itself a punishing task she imposes on herself) she notes the vast array of cookies and cakes and wryly thinks, *the moms at this school watch way too many cooking shows.* (p198)

The novel has been criticised for not giving any concrete reasons for Lia becoming so ill. However it shows that there is never one obvious reason. Of course Lia and other characters in the book consciously or

unconsciously lay blame and sometimes we want to do so as well but the book shows the complexity of this disease. We may discuss later some of the psychological and social reasons why girls (and boys) try to waste away and why some succeed but the book makes it clear that there is not one simple answer.

This is a wonderfully written book. As Lia is obsessed with food and with control, so the book is filled with images of food so that it is hard for the reader not to become obsessed also. The imagery is colourful and often very violent. Lia's tight control is obvious throughout the book when she deletes what she first writes: *Because I can't let myself want them because I don't need a muffin.*(p5)

She is also obsessed with guilt—the legacy of the death of her best friend, Cassie, from bulimia. Note the various ways this overwhelming guilt is shown and the effect that it has on Lia.

## About the Author

Laurie Halse Anderson is the author of several books for young adults including the *New York Times* bestselling novel *Speak*. She is the recipient of the prestigious ALAN Award (2008), which honours those who have made outstanding contributions to the field of adolescent literature. Laurie Halse Anderson lives in northern New York State with her husband.

## Themes

- Adolescence
- Anorexia
- Friendship
- Guilt
- Health

**Close study of the text**

**1** The main perplexities of Lia's life are spelled out in the first page. Food. Death. Guilt. Isolation.

*It is not nice when girls die.*(p1)

What makes this statement so stark and shocking?

**2** What is Lia's attitude towards the food that crams these pages?

How does she feel about her stepmother sending Emma off with shop-bought food which she tampers with to make it look home-made? Do you think it is a metaphor for something she sees as false in her family?

What does Lia reveal about how she sees herself when she says, *The glasses vibrate with little screams when I touch them?*(p2)

What is the significance of Lia always seeing food in terms of the number of calories in it?

**3** What does she learn from her car accident?

Why does she see a great cloud of blame constantly hovering over her family? Is this justified or is it a reflection of how she blames herself for everything?

**4** The collapse of Lia and Cassie's friendship was particularly painful, especially in the light of Cassie's death. Cassie poured blame on Lia in a very hurtful way. What did she blame Lia for? What sort of language does Cassie use to describe Lia? Why do you think she says such things? How would you feel if you were Lia?

Lia blames herself for not answering Cassie's thirty-three phone calls. What would you have done in the circumstances?

It is obvious throughout the book that Lia is constantly consumed with guilt about this. Why do we often feel guilty about friends or family who die suddenly? Other girls tend to blame Lia. Do you feel this blame is wholly justified?

**5** On pp14 and 15 the whole environment seems hostile to Lia. How is this shown in the writing?

**6** How does Lia view school?(p17)

Lia's senses are heightened. She smells food on the breath of everyone who comes near her. Find some examples of this.

How does she see herself on p18? Why is how we see ourselves so important? How does the way we think others see us affect our self-esteem? Can we be mistaken about the way others see us?

**7** How does Lia's thinness affect Emma?

Why does Lia wish she had cancer?

**8** Why does Lia see herself as disgusting?

Show how she describes everything about New Seasons with bodily imagery.

Her fantasies are morbid and shocking and always she sees the grim results as her fault.

**9** Throughout the book, Lia describes herself in the past as a real girl. Why is she no longer real in her own eyes?

How is the difference between the past and the present represented in terms of food? Think of the Thanksgiving meals.

How would you describe the relationship between Lia and her father?

**10** Here we find out more about Lia and Cassie's early friendship and about school politics. In elementary school she describes herself as a number, not a fraction. What does she mean?

**11** How do Lia's delirious fantasies symbolise the horrors she is going through?

**12** How did Lia manage to cheat the Tuesday weigh-in? Why do her father and Jennifer not want to face up to this fairly obvious deceit?

How well do you feel Jennifer is coping with the family situation?

Why doesn't Lia want to be called honey?

**13** Why does Lia buy a digital scale?

Lia says I am supposed to be as big as they want. Do you feel that her anorexia is partly the result of her desire to escape what she sees as other people trying to control her life? What other references are in the novel that underline her need to be in absolute control of her body?

**14–16** She receives the mysterious call from Elijah. As she drives to the motel the eating metaphors continue. The heating is turned to *ROAST*; the windows are fat, the doors skinny. What other food images can you find in these pages?

**17** She returns to the horrors of cutting as the mantra

*::Stupid/ugly/stupid/bitch/stupid/fat/*

*stupid/baby/stupid/loser/stupid/lost::*

echoes in her head. These are extremely offensive words that she uses to describe herself. Does she deserve any of these names? Why does she see herself in such extreme terms?

Can you explain why she returns to cutting herself with a razor?

**18** What are Lia's strategies for dealing with the family dinner?

**19** How does Lia feel about her mother? Which of her parents has a clearer grasp of the gravity of Lia's sickness?

**20** Lia sees people in terms of their BMI; food in terms of calories. She is proud she is the thinnest girl in the room. Why do you think this is so important to her?

**21** What does Lia mean when she says she can feel the shadows slipping out of the dark, coming for me? Why does she feel everybody would be happier if she were dead?

**22** How do you feel about the viewing of Cassie's body? Why does Lia call it the rape of the dead?

**23–24** What do you think of Elijah? Why does she almost feel a real girl on the way home?

How and why did Lia sabotage Cassie's recovery from bulimia? Can this explain why Lia feels Cassie is haunting her?

**25–26** How do the other girls at school worsen Lia's guilt? What do you think of the blog where other sufferers of serious eating disorders write about their fears? Would it make things better or worse for them?

**27** What is Lia's attitude towards the school counsellor and her psychiatrist? Why does she feel this way? Is she justified in her views?

**28** Elijah says that things happen for a reason and that you have to go with the flow and stop resisting. What do you think of this philosophy? Do you believe it would have helped Lia?

**29** Jennifer says Lia is an adult and makes her own decisions? Do you think this is true? How are her decisions driven?

Why is Lia's father so willing to believe her lies about her weight and her eating?

**30–32** How is the statement that the compass is defective a metaphor for Lia's state of mind?

Do you think the mutual parental blaming for Lia's condition has had any influence on her self-blame? Do you have sympathy with her mother?

**33** The red light on her oil gauge signifies something even more urgently wrong in Lia's illness. How do we know this? What is suggested by, *I shift out of PARK and accelerate?*(p144)

**34** Why was there a culture of thinness at Cassie's middle school? How common is this problem at this age?

When the petrol gauge shows empty Lia thinks, no problems. How is this a symbol of the way she thinks about her illness?

**35** Why does Lia feel inadequate as a daughter? Do you ever feel you are following the wrong script? Why do teenagers rebel from the goals and ambitions of their parents? Is this healthy? Is her mother right to be angry?

**36** The question is asked why Cassie (and Lia for that matter) should destroy themselves when they seem to have everything going for them. Lia feels that the question is not why? but why not?

Discuss why she feels this way.

**37** On p163 Lia talks about her ballet teacher? How much influence might her teacher have had on Lia's eating patterns?

What imagery is there on p165 that suggests she is willing herself to die?

**38** Why is Lia so hostile towards her mother?

Cassie's old blog brings back memories of their past friendship. When did they begin to be so obsessed with weight?

**39** How does the spectre of Cassie become more violent? Point out some of the images that are used here in reference to Cassie.

Do you feel that Lia's fight with food is becoming more than dangerous—that she, like her car, will seize up completely?

**40** What is the effect of this chapter?

**41** Is Jennifer manipulating Emma? What other evidence of this is there in the book? Lia's father is once again avoiding the truth. Why? How would you describe him?

Look again at the last paragraph in this chapter. Why is it one of the most chilling images in the book?

**42** When Emma breaks her arm Jennifer tells Lia to stop thinking of herself for once. Do you believe anorexia is the result of wanting to be the centre of attention? Is Lia self-obsessed?

What evidence is there that Lia's delusions about Cassie are becoming paranoid?

**43** Lia's perception of her own body is delusional, too. Where she sees a log, others see a twig. Is this a common reaction in people with eating disorders? Why does Lia assume that the others are wrong and she is right? Does she want to see herself as others see her?

**44** In the midst of her suffering Lia manages to be generous and thoughtful towards Emma and Jennifer. How is this shown?

Why would she volunteer to work on the bake sale given her attitude towards food?

When considering the pros and cons of having a small piece of cupcake she decides she doesn't deserve it. Why does she believe this?

Why does she succumb to the food in the end?

**45** Do you agree that Lia's father and stepmother chose to believe her lies? Why would they do that?

**46** What is the evidence that Lia's father has lost all real contact with her?

In order to get better does she have to start her whole life over again? Why can't she just start eating?

**47–48** *WhatWhyWhenHowWho?* What does she need to know?

Maybe it is someone else's fault.

*Whatever.* What is the significance of whatever?

What does she mean by, *I don't have a father or a mother I just have white spaces with no walls.* (pp213-214)

Has Lia won the wintergirl trip over the border into dangerland?

At 89 pounds she is still filled with self-loathing. What do you think of the images in her head on p 219?

**49–51** Wrist slitting. Emergency ward. Tubes and wires. Lia sees herself as a failure at everything, even death. She is an inconvenience to everyone.

Do you agree that she won't get better because she doesn't want to get better?

What inevitably faces Lia if she doesn't eat?

How and why does her relationship with her mother change?

**52** Why won't Jennifer take Lia back into her home? Do you think this decision is justified?

**53–54** Is it true that her mother and father never hear her, can barely see her? Is she really a doll that they've outgrown, as she tells her psychiatrist?

Dr Parker also says that Lia's fantasies are a metaphorical universe in which she can express her darkest views. How would you explain the ghosts that haunt her?

**55** Is it true that Dr Parker wants her in a box the size of a diagnosis?

**56–58** Back at the motel, what was Elijah's ultimatum? Do you blame him for leaving her?

**59–63** It would be easy for Lia to die. What does she experience, alone in the motel, that makes her fight for her life? How would you explain this experience? Do you find it plausible?

**64–65** *When you're alive, people can hurt you. It's easier to crawl into a bone cage or a snowdrift of confusion. It's easier to lock everyone else out.* (p272)

Has Lia's experience of hurt been worse than anyone else's? Can it be therefore the only reason she chooses the bone cage?

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### General discussion

- Look carefully at the introductory extracts at the beginning of the book. Find out what you can about Persephone. What is happening to Persephone in this passage and how is it relevant to Lia?
- What is the relevance of the awakening of the sleeping princess?
- Has this book given you a clearer view of what it is to suffer from an eating disorder?
- Has it demonstrated the complexity of Lia's illness?
- Has it made you more sympathetic towards someone with anorexia or bulimia?
- How would you respond to someone with this illness?
- It is sometimes said that the media, especially fashion magazines, with their ultra-thin models and digitally altered photos give women a false idea of what is a good body. Do you agree with this point of view?

- Why does our self-acceptance and satisfaction with the way we look play such a big part in our self-esteem?
- How can others deflate our self-esteem?
- What can we do to boost it without harming ourselves?
- To what degree do you see Lia's anorexia as the result of a battle for control over herself and as a stand against the control she sees as being exerted by others, her mother in particular?
- Do you feel that the characters of Cassie and Elijah are fully developed or are they mainly in the book as windows through which we can see Lia more clearly?
- Should any responsibility for Lia's condition be placed on her family and step-family?
- Do you believe that Lia will continue to thaw? Write a description of her and what she is doing five years after the story ends.