

HAYLEY
SCRIVENOR

DIRT
TOWN

What do we owe the girl who isn't there?



READING NOTES



BLURB

My best friend wore her name, Esther, like a queen wearing her crown at a jaunty angle. We were twelve years old when she went missing.

On a sweltering Friday afternoon in Durton, best friends Ronnie and Esther leave school together. Esther never makes it home.

Ronnie's going to find her, she has a plan. Lewis will help. Their friend can't be gone, Ronnie won't believe it.

Detective Sergeant Sarah Michaels can believe it, she has seen what people are capable of. She knows more than anyone how, in a moment of weakness, a person can be driven to do something they never thought possible.

Lewis can believe it too. But he can't reveal what he saw that afternoon at the creek without exposing his own secret.

Five days later, Esther's buried body is discovered.

What do we owe the girl who isn't there?

Character-rich and propulsive, with a breathtakingly original use of voice and revolving points of view, Hayley Scrivenor delves under the surface, where no one can hide. With emotional depth and sensitivity, this stunning debut shows us how much each person matters in a community that is at once falling apart and coming together.

Esther will always be a Dirt Town child, as we are its children, still.

THE AUTHOR

Hayley Scrivenor is a former Director of Wollongong Writers Festival. Originally from a small country town, Hayley now lives and writes on Dharawal country and has a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Wollongong on the south coast of New South Wales. *Dirt Town* is her first novel. An earlier version of the book was shortlisted for the Penguin Literary Prize and won the *Kill Your Darlings* Unpublished Manuscript Award.



DISCUSSION AND QUESTIONS

A unique feature of this novel is the chorus of children's voices that narrates the 'We' chapters; a collective of childhoods that witnesses all. Some readers may think they have encountered typos when they read the opening of the novel. Two areas of interest are highlighted below:


*It was still dark. Even if the sun had been up, we would not have needed to look around us. It was the same dirt, lazily punctuated here and there by dry grass, the same rust-ringed cement water trough close to the fence line, the same white cypress pines that dotted **our own families' properties**. A landscape as familiar to us as the backs of our own eyelids. And we knew we'd found the spot again by the smell. It pushed its way into **our nose and throat** like a rod of twisted tissue rammed so far it hurt. It was the smell of dead lambs left to rot in the sun. (Page 1)*

The author says: *I'm aware that I start by saying 'our own families' properties', which is plural, but the decision to give the children one physical body in that time and space (the field, where Esther's body is buried) in the next line is deliberate. In this case, while their individual memories include their disparate families, they are only physically in that space in their role as the chorus – i.e. I am signalling that they are not physically there, which is why they are sharing a nose and throat. This is a conscious movement where I wanted it to be 'wrong'. Throughout the book I try and walk this line – having the children have their own individual experiences and memories, while trying to claim something stranger and more unified when they are witnessing moments in a more omniscient way (such as this opening, and also their description of exactly what happened when Esther died).*

1. What do you think about these 'We' chapters? Do you like them? How do they colour and inform the story, do you think? What is the overall effect of this omniscient collective voice, in your opinion?
2. The novel begins with the discovery of Esther Bianchi's body, as witnessed by the chorus of the town's children. Why do you think the author chose to open the book with this scene? What is the effect of this?

We kids had our own name for Durton: Dirt Town. Nobody knew who had said it first – someone must have thought of the idea, holding the pun aloft like a shiny marble in the playground – but by the time we started school it was just what everybody said. Not with malice or even affection, only in a way that showed we had never thought about the place we lived in terms of good or bad. Our town wasn't a choice, for us. It just was. (Pages 52–53)

It had seemed natural that Constance knew what had happened, like the town was a living, breathing entity. Information would be carried on the wings of small, dull-coloured birds and the backs of open-mouthed lizards, drawn through the dry dirt by the whispering of gnarled roots, swept overland on hot breezes. (Page 213)


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3. How does the novel's setting influence both the nature of Esther's death and its investigation? How does the hot Australian summer play a role?
 4. What are some of the references to the Australian landscape and animal life in the book? How do they colour your perception of Durton and its inhabitants? Do you agree with the author that small towns or communities can be like living, breathing entities?
 5. Hayley Scrivenor has chosen to tell this story in several distinct styles, through a mix of points of view. For example, Ronnie's voice is in the first person while Lewis, Sarah and Constance are in the third person. What is the effect of this? How do the different styles and voices shape the reader's understanding of the different characters, and the crime that has occurred?

If you're asking if we knew about Sophie Kennard at the time, then the answer is yes. Or, rather, our parents knew, or should have known, and nobody told us but we knew something was up. After that one Australia Day where the bruise on Sophie Kennard's collarbone glistened, the make-up she'd applied sliding off with her sweat, one of our mothers had pulled us aside and told us to remember that when we grew up we could always come home to her if we needed to. Sophie Kennard had nobody in that town, not like us. (Page 277)

The author says: People are sometimes surprised to find so much darkness in Dirt Town – because, when they meet me, it's fairly obvious that I'm an excitable and cheerful person! To be honest, I was as surprised as anyone to find so much violence and darkness in my book. You do worry, as a fiction writer, why have I chosen to take people here? What does it say about me? And yet I realise in my own reading, I often find consolation in just this kind of writing. I think we do justice to what it is to be human when we show hard things. Of course, I'm sympathetic to anyone who might need to skip over certain scenes, but the impulse – to explore shame, power, violence, innocence, guilt – it's there because we all know these things intimately. We have all hurt and been hurt. That's what the book is about, at its core. Ultimately, that was more important to me than what people might make of what I chose to write about.

6. Violence, both domestic and otherwise, can be found through this book. Were there scenes you found hard to read, or that you felt should have been left out?

The act of forgetting had begun even before the hole was fully covered over ... We know that: none of us can escape who we are when others aren't looking; we can't guess what we're capable of until it's too late. (Page 350)



7. At the end of the novel, Sarah realises she is luckier than Shelly, but no better. While she and Shelly are very different people, both have always tried to help others in their own way. However, both women caused harm to another when they did not intend to, although the consequences in their respective situations are vastly different. What do you make of the consequences for each of the various characters in the book? Do these consequences accord with the seriousness of their actions?

8. Why do you think Shelly succumbed so meekly to her fate: allowing her car to be taken for testing and her DNA checked, for example, which led directly to her being arrested? Why do you think she later allows herself to imagine the accident happened to an animal, rather than to Esther: that she was, in fact, doing the right thing by burying the body and ‘getting it out of the way’?

‘All the people on this side [the trouble-free side] confuse making good choices with having good choices. Do you see the difference?’ (Pages 305–306)

9. What is the point Sarah’s father is trying to make in his conversation with her on pages 305–306? What are some examples from the story in which characters make misleading or incorrect assumptions about other people and their choices?

Part of being a child is not thinking about how the adults in your life get their information. If she’d told me then why Steven Bianchi had been arrested, maybe things would have been different. (Page 105)

We tell this story [about climbing the signal tower as the train goes past] to point out that we all do stupid things as children, and most of us live through them. (Page 236)

10. There are many examples and stories in the book about childhood and the experience of growing up in different circumstances. How can a child’s situation, their parents, the parenting styles used to raise them and the experiences – including traumas – of their childhood have long-lasting effects on their lives? Discuss.

11. The end of the novel jumps ahead in time for many characters. What did this do for your understanding of the novel?

12. Was there a character’s perspective that you would have liked to hear more of? What unanswered questions do you have after reading?