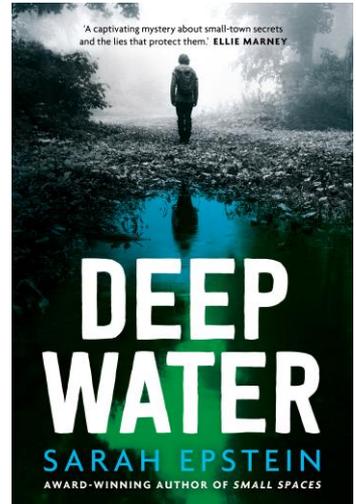


Deep Water

By Sarah Epstein

April 2020 ISBN 9781760877286
 Paperback
 Recommended for 14-18-year-olds



Summary

Henry Weaver is missing

Three months ago, thirteen-year-old Henry disappeared from The Shallows during a violent storm, leaving behind his muddy mountain bike at the train station.

Mason Weaver is trapped

While Mason doesn't know who he is or what he's capable of, he knows the one thing binding him to this suffocating small town is his younger brother, Henry.

Chloe Baxter wants answers

Why would Henry run away without telling her? One of Chloe's friends knows something, and she's determined to find out the truth.

As Chloe wades into dangerous waters and Mason's past emerges, a chilling question ripples to the surface: how far would you go to keep a secret?



'They checked the stormwater drains for Henry first.'

The opening line of *Deep Water* creates an ominous sense of dread that few readers will be able to resist. And what follows in the opening chapter is every bit as mysterious and compelling as any of the classic novels set in small towns riddled with secrets.

Sarah Epstein is a master of foreshadowing and plays with conventions of narrative voice and tense to build upon this initial sense of dread, creating new layers of tension that keep the reader engaged and trying to guess what will happen next.

The story is told through the first-person voice of Chloe using the immediate present tense, and the third-person voice of Mason using the past tense to describe the events leading up to Henry's disappearance. To add even more mystery into the mix, Mason's story includes a ticking clock device – "Fourteen weeks before the storm", "Ten weeks before the storm" – as he counts down to the actual night of Henry's disappearance. And then there is the voice of Henry himself, this time in the mode of the modern epistolary – a conversation with a stranger via electronic messaging.

Deep Water is one of the most compelling mysteries you will read this year. Tension builds upon tension and colours the story and the setting, building up to a cleverly managed and thrilling conclusion.

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Contact Colyn Walsh, Education Marketing Manager,
 Ph: +02 8425 0150 Email: education@allenandunwin.com

Use in the curriculum

Deep Water is a thrilling YA mystery, set in a small town and focusing on the secrets that teenagers hide or discover. It is realist, with no supernatural content. The books in the list of related texts, below, mostly share these features. All of them are excellent titles to suggest for free reading/library borrowing by teenagers.

Students' previous engagement with the mystery genre could be limited to well-known series such as Alex Rider, Veronica Mars and the Agatha Christie books. *Deep Water* represents more sophisticated reading, in that it is a standalone story: readers do not have the crutch of the familiar tropes of a series. It is a novel in its own right, to be engaged with more seriously than a series based on entertaining readers with lighter fare. Themes and character are integral to the novel and the mystery/solution arises from them.

- In the Year 9 & 10 English classroom, *Deep Water* is valuable for genre study. [*Do not, however, confuse it with the 2020 film of the same name, which is an erotic thriller for adults.*] It is recommended for a Literature Circle dedicated to either mysteries alone or a variety of genres.
- It is very rewarding in a study of how the author keeps the suspense and tension up: Sarah Epstein has really mastered this aspect of the genre.
- Character studies, linked to the themes of family and friends/trust and betrayal, would yield suitable literature writing tasks for this age-group.

Themes

- trust
- betrayal
- friendship
- family
- mystery/suspense
- truth/lies

Discussion questions

1. Did the first chapter of *Deep Water* hook you? Were you compelled to move straight to Chapter Two? Analyse your reaction to Chapter One by asking questions such as:
 - What effect did the book's first sentence have on you?
 - Was what you learned about Chloe, Mason and Henry compelling?
 - Did you want to find out more about the mystery of Henry's disappearance?

Now consider elements within the chapter that might have made you react that way. How has the author used foreshadowing to propel readers into Chapter Two?

2. (a) Why do you think the author decided to use multiple narrators to tell the story of Henry's disappearance? How might your reading experience have changed if the story had been told from Chloe's or Mason's perspective only?
(b) Why do you think the author decided to include Henry's online communications but in a much more limited way?
3. For most of the story Chloe's perspective is told in the present tense and Mason's is told in the past tense.
 - Did the switching between time increase the suspense of the story for you? In your answer give examples from the book to illustrate.
 - **Extension Question:** Did you notice that Mason's story is a countdown to the storm and the tense for his section changes after that point? Why do you think the author might have wanted to use this literary device?

4. 'Everyone may know everyone in small towns, but can we ever truly *know* anyone?' (p. 93) Although Chloe thinks she knows her friends, how does this statement play out in terms of her understanding of Mason and Henry?
5. *Deep Water* is an example of what literary genre?
 - List three reasons why small-town settings are popular in this genre.
6. 'Mark spent all the savings our parents had put away. Pissed it all up the wall. I couldn't finish high school because I had to get a job... And it's hard not to feel resentful about that.' (pp. 178–179)

Mason's interactions with his mother are always negative yet Chloe's conversation with Ivy shows that his mother may not always have been so terrible.

 - Did this scene change your view of Ivy and make her a slightly more sympathetic character? In your answer explain how her background story completed the picture of why she behaved the way she did at home.
7. Mason is a complicated character. What are the issues playing on his mind and how does the author use these issues to heighten the tension of the story? 'It was like a starving creature prowling around the room, sensing weakness and waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike. Whatever his mother was going to do, it would be quick and brutal.' (p. 147)
 - What literary device is the author using here to heighten the dramatic impact of the scene?
 - Can you find other examples of her use of this device in the story?
8. Did you find the ending of *Deep Water* satisfying?
 - Was it predictable or did it take you by surprise?
 - Did it seem a logical progression of everything that had happened up until then?
 - Was it consistent with the characters as you had learned to know them?

Related texts/Further reading

Epstein, Sarah. *Small Spaces*, Walker Books Australia, 2018

Altebrando, Tara. *The Leaving*, Bloomsbury, 2016

Ferris, Fleur. *Black*, Random House Australia, 2016

Jackson, Tiffany D. *Monday's Not Coming*, Katherine Tegen Books (USA), 2019

Lockhart, E. *We Were Liars*, Allen & Unwin, 2014, 2017

Marney, Ellie. *White Night*, Allen & Unwin, 2018

Wilkinson, Lili. *After the Lights Go Out*, Allen & Unwin, 2018

Sarah Epstein on writing for young adults

'My journey to writing YA thrillers and mysteries started back in high school when I wrote a creepy short story for Year Eleven English, and my teacher loved it and told me she was dying to know what happened next. The thrill of writing a dark page-turner stayed with me, and decades later when I wanted to try writing my first novel-length story, I used this as my starting point. I found my sixteen-year-old voice came through very naturally and I could easily tap into those same emotions, frustrations and challenges I felt as a teen.

'Since my debut novel *Small Spaces* was published, I've been thanked by teen readers for not talking down to them or simplifying the plot. They enjoyed the questions and suspicions, the challenge of the mystery, and trying to figure out what was going on. It confirms what we already know: teens are astute and critical readers who are seeking books to engage and entertain them. And they won't hesitate in putting a book down and moving onto something else if it's not hitting the mark. Books are competing with devices, streaming, gaming, social media, YouTube, online chat and texting for a teen's entertainment, so every single chapter, sentence and word in a YA novel has to work incredibly hard to hold teens' interest.

'I think about my teen audience constantly as I'm writing, how they'll react to characters, dialogue, plotlines and themes, and how I can make things relatable to where they are at their stage in life. But essentially the key elements I use to craft a psychological thriller like *Small Spaces* or a suspenseful mystery like *Deep Water* are exactly the same as I'd use for an adult readership. Teens enjoy a page turner as much as anybody else, and they love clues, suspicions, questions and red herrings so they can start forming their own theories, with a twist or two thrown in that may just turn those theories on their head.'

— Sarah Epstein

The author

Sarah Epstein is a writer, illustrator and designer. She grew up in suburban Sydney and now lives in Melbourne with her husband and two sons.

Her first novel, *Small Spaces*, a YA psychological thriller, won a Davitt Award, an Adelaide Festival Award for Literature and was an Honour Book at the Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year Awards. It was also short-listed for another six awards including the NSW Premier's Literary Awards, the Queensland Literary Awards and the Australian Book Industry Awards.

