



## RECOMMENDED FOR

Upper secondary  
(ages 14+)

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## KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- **Learning areas:** English
- **General capabilities:** Language, Literature, Literacy, Critical and Creative Thinking, Personal and Social Capability

## REASONS FOR STUDYING THIS BOOK

- Analysing how language and writing evoke mood, tone, tension and characterisation
- Encouraging creative and imaginative writing

## THEMES

- Family
- Friendships
- Art
- Anorexia
- Grief
- Alzheimer's/dementia

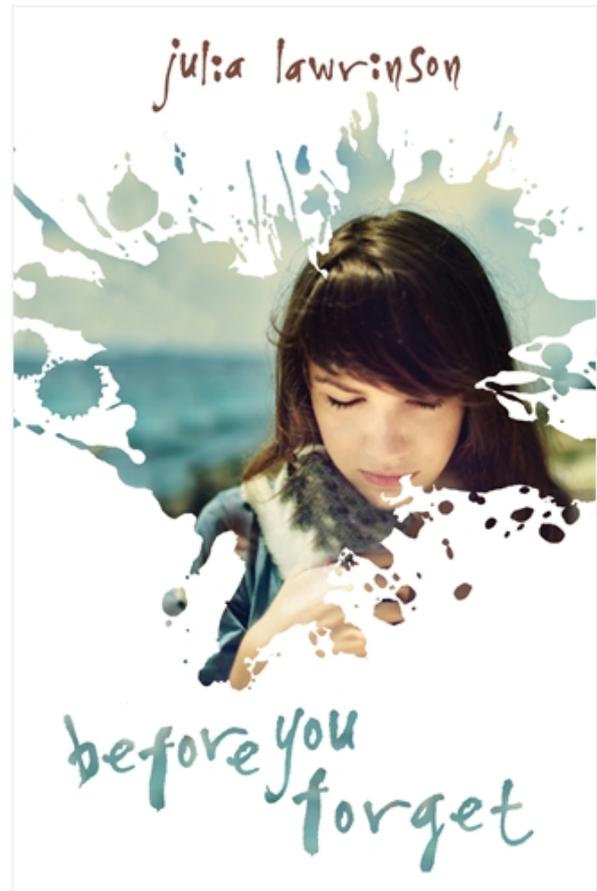
## PUBLICATION DETAILS

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## Before You Forget

Julia Lawrinson

## PLOT SUMMARY

Year Twelve is not off to a good start for Amelia. Art is her world, but her art teacher hates everything she does; her best friend has stopped talking to her; her mother and father may as well be living in separate houses; and her father is slowly forgetting everything. Even Amelia.

At times funny, at times heartbreaking, this is an ultimately uplifting story about the delicate fabric of family and friendship, and the painful realisation that not everything can remain the same forever.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julia Lawrinson hails from the outer suburbs of Perth, and writes for children and young adults. Her first novel, *Obsession*, won the 2001 WA Premier's Prize for Young Adult Writing. Since then she has published more than ten novels, including *Bye, Beautiful*, which was shortlisted for both the QLD and WA Premier's Awards and was a 2007 CBC Notable Book, the popular *Chess Nuts*, which was 2010 CBC Notable Book, and *The Flyaway Girls*. Her day jobs have included weighbridge attendant, whopper maker, English lecturer, Sergeant-at-Arms and Usher of the Black Rod. She loves dog beaches, Jack Russells and New York, and has just completed a Bachelor of Laws with Distinction.

## AUTHOR'S INSPIRATION

Julia says:

This is a deeply personal story. I wrote it in close consultation with my daughter Annie, who was 12 when her father's symptoms of younger onset Alzheimer's started becoming obvious, and at the beginning of year 11 when he was finally diagnosed. The process of losing her father in such a way has been extremely painful: the grief is slow and (as yet) unresolved. She felt that her friends didn't understand what she was going through, and found it hard to relate to her friends who were going through other difficult but more 'normal' problems, like Gemma in the novel. The only person who she felt understood was another friend whose mother was diagnosed with younger onset around the same time. Their relationship helped both of them get through it.

Like Amelia, Annie was in a specialist art program, and she found great solace in her work. She went from being an unfocused student to winning the prize for her subject in year 12: the obsessive energy created by the turmoil her family was in was redirected to her art. She also had an incredibly supportive art teacher, who provided her with some stability when it was lacking elsewhere.

Writing the novel was not quite cathartic, but it helped both Annie and me create something meaningful out of the messy and extended trauma of dealing with her dad's younger onset Alzheimer's. Shaping a novel based on real life is harder than writing from 'pure' imagination, because a story has to be fictionalised and satisfying as a narrative, so my editors had quite a task with the first draft I sent them! It needed to be drawn into a coherent whole

from the fragments I'd collected. (Hecta is the only character who appears as himself, unchanged from the very naughty dog he is!) The final novel does feel like a homage to Annie's dad, a testament to a life. The photo on the back cover is Annie and her dad in Kalbarri, when Annie was 18 months old. Annie particularly wanted that representation of the 'real' aspect of the novel to be there, visible.

I hope the novel does a lot of things: to remind readers of how fragile life can be, and how important our connections to others are; to make people think more about the huge impact diseases like Alzheimer's and other diseases of the brain (including mental illness) have not just on the person with it, but their families; and I hope, too, to redeem suffering through creating art, the way Amelia does in the novel.

Annie's father has been in care for two years. He doesn't remember any of us now, although sometimes he smiles at us with something I like to think is recognition. But Annie was the last person he truly remembered.

## WRITING STYLE

- What is the novel's writing style? Consider how and when information is revealed, and the use of different modes of narrative, such as text messages, flashbacks, dialogue, short scenes, the Twin Towers descriptions. How effectively does this contribute to the novel's storytelling?
- How does the use of art and the Twin Towers tragedy contribute to the story.
- How does the first-person point-of-view affect what is revealed to the reader? What does Amelia know or not know? How might the story have been different if a third-person narration had been used?
- How might the story be different if it had been written from another character's point-of-view? Choose an incident in the story and write it from a different characters' perspective, such as Amelia's dad, her mum, Gemma, Poppy, or perhaps even one of the care workers.
- How does the use of humour by Amelia and her friends contribute to the story of *Before You Forget*, which is not always a happy one?
- How effectively does the use of both comedy and tragedy in the plot of *Before You Forget* convey the complexities of Amelia's life and friendships?



- What did you think of the novel's ending? Was it the best ending for this particular story?
- How does the book's title relate to its content? What does it refer to?

## KEY STUDY TOPICS

### Alzheimer's/Younger Onset Dementia

*'Simon,' the doctor says to Dad. 'Do you know what younger onset Alzheimer's disease is?'*

*Mum stares at the doctor. I stare at her.*

*'Old timers' disease,' Dad says.*

*'Sometimes it happens to people who are younger,' the doctor says. He beckons us to his computer.*

*'Here are the images of Simon's brain.' He points at what looks like a black and white x-ray of some kind of frilled flower. It has a thin white line around it and lots of black space inside it. 'A normal brain should look like this.' He brings up an image on his second computer screen. It's the same flower image outline, but the inside is crammed with what looks a bit like coiled intestines. The doctor points to the black space inside Dad's flower-brain. 'What you're seeing there is where the brain has been shrunk by the disease.'*

*'Oh my God,' Mum says. 'There's . . . there's nothing there.'*

*I feel as if I have stepped into a shower of ice. My father isn't an alcoholic after all. He's not schizophrenic. He hasn't been sleepwalking or having nightmares. He has a disease with a name.*

*But it can't be right. People make fun of Alzheimer's. Old people get Alzheimer's. People with Alzheimer's are old and eccentric and charming and no harm to anyone. They aren't like Dad. They don't yell at their families and storm off in cars and move their pieces the wrong way in chess. They don't bring strange guys home and give them money, lose their keys fifteen times in a day, get lost driving their daughters to their best friend's house.*

*People with Alzheimer's aren't forty-seven years old.*

*People with Alzheimer's don't have seventeen-year-old daughters. (p. 88–9)*

### Discussion

- Do you think Amelia's reaction to her father's diagnosis is authentic? Do his actions and her parents' relationship feel authentic?

- How do you think you would have reacted to the doctor's diagnosis? Do you know anyone with dementia?
- Do you think Amelia's flashbacks to early happy scenes with her dad, or childhood memories, such as the beach scenes, build a good insight into the father/daughter relationship?
- Amelia doesn't like telling others about her father's diagnosis. Why is this? Do you think it is a reasonable response, or would it have been easier if she shared more?
- Does this novel make you think more about the huge impact diseases like Alzheimer's and other diseases of the brain (including mental illness) have not just on the person with it, but their families?

### Art – Philosophy/Self-Portraits (Brett Whiteley & Frida Kahlo)

*There's one by Brett Whiteley. I know about him because of a case study I did on him in year ten. His self-portrait is mostly of a room – a room painted this intense blue that imprints itself on the back of my eyeballs. Sydney Harbour is off to one side, the same blue as the walls. There's a coffee table, chairs, a couple of twisted nudes. And in the bottom right of the picture there's a looking glass, with Brett Whiteley reflected in it looking completely, utterly miserable. You can't tell what he's looking at, but his mouth is turned down and his eyes are totally mournful. So you've got the beautiful blue and the miserable man. (p. 28)*

*She's standing there, her hand on one hip, one lip curled in disgust. She's in front of a painting – a tiny painting. The painting shows a woman in what looks like some kind of jungle. She has a cat behind one shoulder and a monkey behind the other. Her hair is wound up on top of her head, and there's some kind of scarf on top of that: two white butterflies are sitting very still on top of her head. She's got a chain of thorns around her neck, and what looks like a dead bird as a pendant.*

*Like Gemma says, the woman isn't pretty. She has a monobrow and a faint moustache. If she went to our school she'd be the subject of a relentless campaign to tidy herself up. But the expression on her face makes my heart hurt. Brett Whitely looked miserable, sure. This woman looks like the suffering of all the generations has passed through her and is showing on her face. (p.29)*

*'Your symbolism needs to be powerful,' Ms M is saying, walking around the room, oblivious to our little*



altercation. 'It needs to be expressive of what is most troubling to you, or what makes you happiest. What makes you yourself. What speaks to you most in this world.'

Ms M is pacing around behind us, gesticulating as she talks. She gets very passionate sometimes.

'Think of Gauguin, and his self-portrait,' she says. 'He paints himself with a nude Tahitian woman on a bed in a frame behind him. The woman is facing away from the viewer. What do you think he's saying in that?' (p.79)

### Discussion

- Who were Brett Whiteley/Frida Kahlo/Gauguin? What were they known for? What time in history were they alive and in which part of the world?
- What is abstract art? What is self-portraiture?
- How does their art relate to the plot and themes of *Before You Forget*?

### Anorexia

I open Gemma's page again. She's already got comments.

Yeah babe, nobody gets it. That's why you've got us!!!

This disease teaches you so much. Especially about what and who matters in your life.

Stay strong, stay thin.

I think for a minute, then say:

Maybe if you talked to your friends instead of blocking them out you'd know who cares about you and who doesn't.

She'll know it's me, even though I've posted as Anonymous. I wanted to write PS Eat a pie but I figure that if I want her to talk to me, I should probably leave that out. (p117)

### Discussion

- How does anorexia feature in the book? What does it reveal about Gemma and Amelia's friendship?
- Do you think Amelia's response to Gemma's illness is authentic?
- How is humour used to portray their relationship?

### Twin Towers

#### Discussion

- How does this feature in the book? How do the events of the Twin Towers relate to the plot and themes of the book?
- How does Amelia consider it to be a metaphor for life? Do you think this parallel works?
- Do the interspersed scenes work – do you think there could have been been more or less?

### Creativity

#### Activity

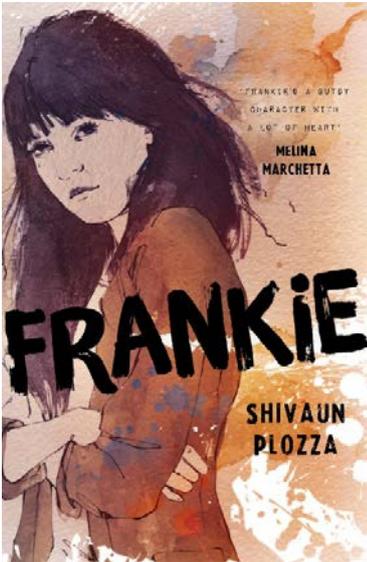
Consider some of the different forms of creativity and communication in the novel:

- Art
- Text messages
- Internet
- Tarot cards
- The 'protest' posters Amelia creates from Poppy's painting

Create your own creative work, in one of the forms noted above or in a form of your own choosing, to express one of the themes of *Before You Forget*.



FURTHER READING FROM PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

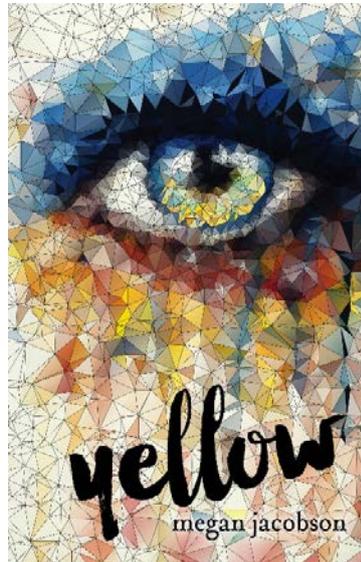


*Frankie*  
by Shivaun Plozza

Frankie Vega is angry. Just ask the guy whose nose she broke. Or the cop investigating the burglary she witnessed, or her cheating ex-boyfriend or her aunt who's tired of giving second chances . . .

When a kid shows up claiming to be Frankie's half brother, it opens the door to a past she doesn't want to remember. And when that kid goes missing, the only person willing to help is a boy with stupidly blue eyes . . . and secrets of his own.

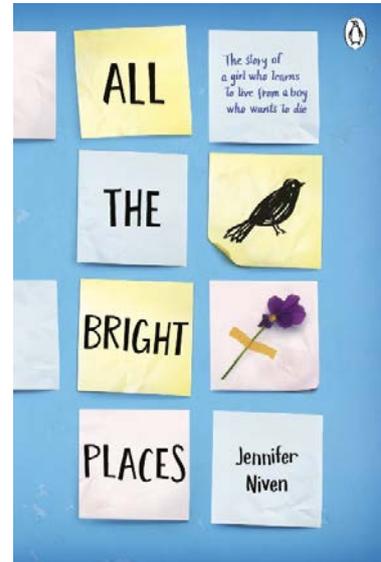
Frankie's search for the truth could change her life, or cost her everything.



*Yellow*  
by Megan Jacobson

If fourteen-year-old Kirra is having a mid-life crisis now, then it doesn't bode well for her life expectancy. Her so-called friends bully her, whatever semblance of a mother she had has been drowned at the bottom of a gin bottle ever since her dad left them for another woman, and a teenage ghost is speaking to her through a broken phone booth.

Kirra and the ghost make a pact. She'll prove who murdered him almost twenty years ago if he makes her popular, gets her parents back together, and promises not to haunt her. But things aren't so simple, and Kirra realises that people can be haunted in more ways than one.



*All the Bright Places*  
by Jennifer Niven

Theodore Finch wants to take his own life. *I'm broken, and no one can fix it.*

Violet Markey is devastated by her sister's death. *In that instant we went plowing through the guardrail, my words died too.*

They meet on the ledge of the school bell tower, and so their story begins.

It's only together they can be themselves . . .

*I send a message to Violet: 'You are all the colors in one, at full brightness.'*

*You're so weird, Finch. But that's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me.*

But, as Violet's world grows, Finch's begins to shrink. How far will Violet go to save the boy she has come to love?



## ORDER FORM

TITLE	AUTHOR	ISBN	SCHOOL YEAR	RRP	QTY	TOTAL
Before You Forget	Julia Lawrinson	9780143574071	8+	\$19.99		
Our Chemical Hearts	Krystal Sutherland	9780143573906	8+	\$19.99		
Frankie	Shivaun Plozza	9780143573166	8+	\$17.99		
Yellow	Megan Jacobson	9780143573333	8+	\$19.99		
All the Bright Places	Jennifer Niven	9780141357034	8+	\$17.99		
The Things I Didn't Say	Kylie Fornasier	9780143573630	8+	\$19.99		
The Piper's Son (YA crossover, 16+)	Melina Marchetta	9780143203421	10+	\$19.99		
The Sidekicks	Will Kostakis	9780143309031	8+	\$19.99		
<b>TOTAL</b>						

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