



## RECOMMENDED FOR

Upper secondary and tertiary students (ages 14+)

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## KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- **Learning areas:** English
- **General capabilities:** Literacy; Critical and Creative Thinking; Ethical Understanding
- **Cross-curriculum priorities:** Sustainability

## REASONS FOR STUDYING THIS BOOK

- Analysing how language and writing evoke mood, tone, tension and characterisation
- Discussing moral and ethical dilemmas
- Encouraging critical thinking
- Encouraging creative and imaginative writing
- Thinking about the future of society

## THEMES

- Nature vs nurture
- Gene manipulation
- Future societal and technological changes
- Corporations vs government
- Climate change
- Poverty vs wealth
- Survival against the odds
- Creativity

## PREPARED BY

Penguin Random House Australia

## PUBLICATION DETAILS

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9780857988089 (ebook)

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## Special Georgia Blain

### BOOK BLURB

*I am a Lotto Girl. I should not be here. Why haven't they come for me?*

Fern Marlow is alone, datawiped and in hiding. Her mobie says she's Delia Greene, a ReCorp refuse sorter. Every day she queues to work, to earn just enough to stay alive. Every night she dreams of the past and the life she's meant to be living, back at Halston, an exclusive school for those wealthy enough – or lucky enough – to be genetically designed.

Her rescuers said her former life was a lie, that she can trust no one. They also said they'd come back for her, and they haven't.

Fern doesn't know who to believe. To uncover the truth, and save herself, Fern must answer the one question she can't face. Is she special?

**An alarming glimpse into our future from acclaimed Australian author Georgia Blain.**

*'Terrifying, prophetic and beautiful'* – James Bradley, author of *Clade*

## PLOT SUMMARY

*'Instead, I log onto the Wastelands – the data dump where the sheer volume of content guarantees anonymity, where people go to talk, to throw their hopes and dreams, their despair, their pain, their loneliness, a great tangle and mess of words that cannot be unravelled – and I start to tell this story. The names are changed. So are the locations. As for the rest? It's up to you to decide what to believe.'* (p. 8)

*Special* is a beautifully crafted and atmospheric YA novel set in the not-too-distant future, where corporations control everyone's lives from their DNA to their schooling and career. Where a Lotto Girl – designed from before birth to be special in every way – can escape the slums and be given every opportunity to shine at an exclusive boarding school.

When we meet Fern, she is living in a compound at ReCorp, sifting trash to earn enough data credits to buy food and water for survival. We soon learn that this is not the life she was meant to be living – Fern was the lucky recipient of a complete genetic design, thanks to a lottery competition won by her parents.

Being a Lotto Girl meant that Fern's genetic design was manipulated by the BioPerfect corporation. As part of her win, Fern was sent special food as a young child, and given special tutoring. Then, at the age of five, Fern was sent to Halston, a school for genetically designed girls, run by BioPerfect. Most of the girls are wealthy – their parents have paid for their designs. However, Fern, Lark, Ivy and Wren are the current Lotto Girls, who have been given opportunities not afforded to other children from similar low-income backgrounds. Fern's brother back at home in a PureAqua compound, for instance, only receives very basic schooling and lives in a two-room apartment with her parents.

Each of the girls is meant to have particular strengths – Fern's is communication and Lark's is musical aptitude, for instance. However, when Ivy fails at school, doubt is cast on all four girls. Have their designs failed? What will happen if BioPerfect were to consider them failures?

Ivy's disappearance sets in motion a chain of events that will show us how Fern comes to be at ReCorp. Has she been rescued or kidnapped? Fern's rescuers are subversives, who are working against the corporations. They reveal that Fern's design may not be as 'special' as she has been led to believe, and Fern's confidence is shaken. Who can she trust?

When her rescuers' location is found out and they must flee and disband, Fern is datawiped and sent to ReCorp with a new identity.

There she waits, struggling to survive and to not reveal her secrets, as she's been told. But when a long-overdue acclimatisation sickness hits her, Fern needs the help of Chimo, a young man who has earned her trust. Chimo seems to already know about Fern – he can even put her in contact with her brother, Lewis. But what does he really want with her?

Fern must try to work out who is telling the truth if she is ever to find out who she really is.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Georgia Blain has published novels for adults and young adults, essays, short stories and a memoir. Her first novel was the bestselling *Closed for Winter*, which was made into a feature film. Her books have been shortlisted for numerous awards including the NSW and SA Premier's Literary Awards, and the Nita B. Kibble Award for her memoir *Births, Deaths and Marriages*. Georgia's most recent works include *The Secret Lives of Men, Too Close to Home*, YA novel *Darkwater* and *Between a Wolf and a Dog* (Scribe). She lives in Sydney, where she works full-time as a writer.

## AUTHOR'S INSPIRATION

Georgia Blain says:

I always carry ideas for books around with me for a long time – and the idea for *Special* first came to me when my daughter was sitting the selective high school test five years ago. These tests are highly competitive and many parents coach their children intensively beforehand, eager for a place in the hope that this will guarantee good HSC results.

The whole notion of selective high schools raises a number of questions: How do we measure and test intelligence? What does it mean if we tell a child that they are special? What are we saying when we describe someone as gifted and talented?

I wanted to write a book about a world in which it's possible for the very rich to buy these commodities – to design their children to ensure that they have advantage, over and above the very significant advantage of money.

But of course when I started writing, questions began to open up in front of me. If we lived in a



world in which comprehensive genetic design was possible and being sold to the wealthy, how would it be marketed – how would we sell creativity as a package? Or leadership? What do we mean by these words? And do we have any right to feel proud of our achievements if our capacity to achieve has just been bought for us? What does this mean in terms of having agency in our own lives?

And so I began to write *Special* – a novel about a group of girls whose parents hadn't bought their design, but who had won a BioPerfect design package in a lottery. These girls are told they are special from the moment they are born, and they are given the benefit of the very best education money can buy, living at the exclusive Halston school for the genetically designed. But as they grow up and gradually discover more about what they have actually won, they are forced into questioning who they are, and they have to discover what strengths they have to draw upon.

Interestingly, this fundamental question of identity also plays out in another way – I was intrigued by how, even today, our data trails (where we go on the internet, who we talk to, what we purchase), leave an image of who we are. In *Special*, this is even more extreme. Every person has an extensive data map defining who they are. But just as we are so much more than our genes, we are also so much more than the data trail we leave behind.

*Special* was probably one of the most challenging and interesting books I've written. Being science fiction, it's something of a departure for me – but it's perhaps not as radical a departure as it first appears. At its heart it's concerned with the fundamental question of the self, a question that is being pushed at the boundaries by science, technology and commerce.

It's a question we all ask: what is it that makes me, me?

### Questions

- What does it mean to be called 'special', or 'gifted and talented'?
- How would you market genetic design if it were available? What attributes do you think would be most desirable to be purchased?
- Think about the data map that defines who you are, for instance on social media and through your other online activities. What data trail are you leaving behind?
- What makes you, you?

## WRITING STYLE

- What is the novel's structure? Consider how and when information is revealed, and how the novel alternates between present and past. How does this structure increase dramatic tension?
- How does the first-person point-of-view affect what is revealed to the reader? What does Fern 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 characters' point-of-view? Choose an incident in the story and write it from a different characters' perspective, such as Lewis, Chimo, Miss Margaret, Lark or Ivy.
- The novel is quite open-ended – the reader only knows what Fern knows, and the truth is a slippery concept in Fern's world. Whose story did you believe – that of BioPerfect, or Rahim and Miss Margaret? What influenced your decision?

## KEY STUDY TOPICS

### Genetic manipulation

- Research the current capabilities of gene manipulation. What is possible now, and what do you think could be possible in future?
- What are the ethical considerations in manipulating genes? Are there enough checks and balances on governments and corporations?
- Research the 2015 High Court case that involved the potential patenting of the 'breast cancer gene' BRCA1. Do you think the correct decision was reached?
- Why did Fern's parents choose to enter the Lotto to have a genetically designed child? Why might they have wanted this, and what might their expectations have been?

### Corporations, media and marketing

- How is marketing different in Fern's world?
- How would life be different if the world were divided by corporations rather than governments, as it is in this novel? What other ramifications might this change have apart from the ones Georgia Blain focuses on in *Special*?
- Do you think the future that Georgia predicts in this novel is likely? Why or why not?



## Creativity

- Consider some of the different forms of creativity in the novel:
  - Fern's mediatreams (films) focusing in on close-ups of nature, such as a bird swooping (p. 71), or 'capturing the intricate beauty of the hives' (p. 187), or the small details of her PureAqua home (p. 308)
  - Fern's miniature boxes she creates from wood and scraps of fabric (pp. 38, 48, 75, 109, 234, 300)
  - The chair in her room at ReCorp, created by a previous occupant (p. 6)
  - Lark's songwriting and singing
- What do Fern's artworks mean to her? Why does she choose to film intricate details rather than the bigger picture? Why does she choose to create miniature art from scraps rather than using the technology available to her?
- What does Chimo mean when he says, 'Living here doesn't preclude you from having an imagination . . . Being a laydee doesn't automatically entitle you to sole ownership of creativity' (p. 43)? Can anyone be creative?
- Create your own piece of art, in one of the forms noted above or a form of your own choosing, to express one of the themes of *Special*.

## MORE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- At Halston school, Fern and the other Lotto Girls have a Discussion Hour with Miss Margaret each evening, an informal debate to explore an issue. Organise your own philosophical discussions on some of the topics in the novel:
  - What is chance and what role does it play in our lives? (pp. 95–96)
  - 'Nothing sharpens the mind like emptiness' (pp. 28–29)
  - 'The point of having a gift is to better the world' (p. 30)
  - Which is more important in shaping one's identity: nature (genes) or nurture (environment and upbringing)?
- Use Worksheet: Debate to organise a mock trial in the classroom.



## FURTHER READING FROM PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA



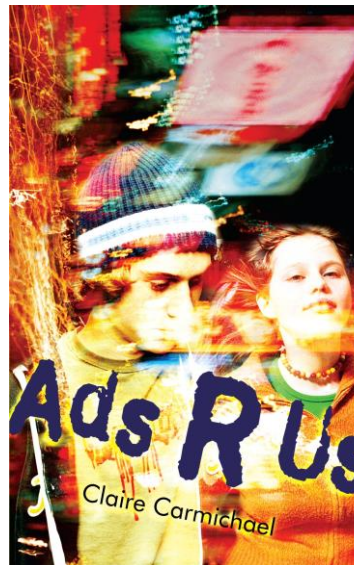
*10 Futures*  
by Michael Pryor

*Ten possible futures. Two lives. One enduring friendship.*

Sam and Tara. Best friends in a future when artificial intelligence organises our lives, and micropets are the latest craze. Best friends when rationing means cold showers and no internet. Best friends when genetic matching makes asking a girl on a date a minefield of epic proportions.

But will they still be best friends in a future when plague wipes out most of humanity? Or a future when the Inquisitor asks Sam to choose one betrayal over another?

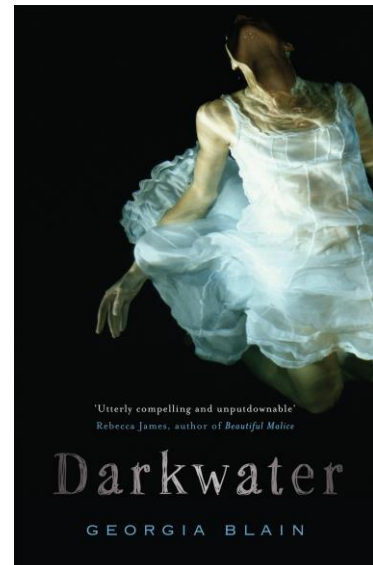
*Teachers' resources available.*



*Ads R Us*  
by Claire Carmichael

*Ads R Us* is set in a modern industrialised city in the near future, where advertising is a constant stream of inescapable information, and corporations sponsor everything from music to schools. Barrett Trent has been raised outside the mainstream society in a Luddite cult called Simplicity, but following the death of his uncle, he goes to live in the city with his Aunt Cara, Uncle Adrian and cousin, Taylor. But his aunt and uncle have a hidden agenda – they work for a company called Ads for Life, which promotes advertising and uses it covertly for political gain. They see Barrett as the perfect guinea pig for their experiments into the effect of advertising on an untouched mind. But Barrett may prove harder to crack than they think.

*Teachers' resources available.*



*Darkwater*  
by Georgia Blain

*A beautifully atmospheric mystery about family, politics and murder in an idyllic Sydney suburb.*

Amanda Clarke is dead. Her body was found floating facedown by the riverbank, and no one knows what happened. As rumours fly and fear grows, it seems that everyone suspects Lyndon, one of Amanda's friends. He's known for his temper, his cruelty and his criminal family – and now the police want to talk to him.

It's the end of summer, 1973, the heat is enough to melt asphalt and a sleepy riverside suburb is losing some of its innocence. Fifteen-year-old Winter went to the same school and hung out in the same places as Amanda. As she finds herself alone in trying to defend Lyndon, Winter learns that you can never really know someone – and the answers she has been looking for are closer than she has ever wanted to believe.

*Teachers' resources available.*



## WORKSHEET: DEBATE

Choose six people in the class to take part in a mock trial, then divide them into two groups of three – Team A and Team B. They will be the speakers of each team while the rest of the class function as the jury. Team A will represent the plaintiff, Fern. Fern wants to sue BioPerfect for their unethical treatment of her. Team B will represent the defendant, BioPerfect. Each team can use the table below to formulate their arguments (and anticipate their opponent's strategy).

Arguments for	Arguments against



## ORDER FORM

TITLE	AUTHOR	ISBN	SCHOOL YEAR	RRP	QUANTITY	TOTAL
Special	Georgia Blain	9780857988072	10-12	\$19.99		
Darkwater	Georgia Blain	9781864719833	9-10	\$18.99		
10 Futures	Michael Pryor	9781742753768	8-10	\$18.99		
Ads R Us	Claire Carmichael	9781741660470	8-10	\$17.99		
				<b>TOTAL</b>		

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