

## **OUR LITTLE SECRET – Australian Young Adult Novel**

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**Teaching Notes prepared by:**

**Allayne L. Webster (Author) & Andrea Altamura B.Ed. (Sp.Ed), B.A. © 2022**

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#### **1. INTRODUCTION TO *OUR LITTLE SECRET***

*Our Little Secret* was Allayne Webster's first ever Young Adult novel, accepted by Omnibus Scholastic publisher Dyan Blacklock and published in 2007.

Since publication, Allayne has received countless emails and letters from students wanting to purchase a copy of their own. That's now possible thanks to this updated reprint by Ligature Press.

*Our Little Secret* is a powerful and confronting tale of sexual abuse. It was once viewed as a cautionary tale, but such wording carries the connotation that sexual abuse or rape is somehow preventable; that the victim plays a role in stopping it from happening. The original blurb on the back of *Our Little Secret* finished with the line, 'A story every girl should read.' This was reflective of the period in which this book was first published before the #MeToo movement. The onus should not be on girls/women to read such stories and process them as warnings to 'not go out into the woods' (as was the purpose of many childhood fables.) The onus is on everyone—particularly boys/men who largely

perpetrate such crimes—to comprehend boundaries and consent, to regularly check in with sexual partners, to not take advantage of young and seemingly willing partners when there’s an obvious unequal power balance. The definition of statutory rape is sex with an underaged partner—a partner young enough to be confused and coerced into consent by someone much older than them.

It’s time we educate our adults of tomorrow on personal boundaries. Sex should be a positive experience for *all* concerned. It should not come at the expense of one individual for the gratification of another, no matter the age or the persons involved.

## **2. PRAISE FOR OUR LITTLE SECRET**

***Our Little Secret* was the first ever young adult novel in South Australian history to be entered into Parliamentary Hansard. The novel was discussed in parliament by Senator Nick Xenophon.**

### ***The Advertiser* – by Katharine England, Children’s and YA Reviewer**

*‘Edwina’s mix of feelings ring painfully true: flattery, confusion, fear and the all-consuming shame of being used, of having failed the maturity test, of somehow causing her own suffering. Compelling and cautionary. 4/5 stars.’*

### ***The Advertiser Weekend Review***

*‘It’s hard to put down this gripping, moving, deliberately confronting novel set in a conservative country town.’*

### ***Sunday Age***

*‘Webster’s characters, major and minor, are entirely believable. Confronting and sometimes graphic, the message is one of hope.’*

### ***Sydney Morning Herald***

*‘There are some particularly nice touches in this book. The account of genteel school yard bullying is particularly well done.’*

### ***The Courier Mail – Brisbane***

*‘Allayne Webster gives an incredible insight into the confused mind of someone who is little more than a child, and how adults can easily manipulate them but misunderstand and underestimate them.’*

**Magpies Journal – by Allison Patterson**

*‘Webster has woven a believable, credible tale that successfully draws its female readers into the character and captures the teenage voice. Our Little Secret will be valued by older readers for its honest depiction of rape, power and exploitation.’*

**Viewpoint Magazine – by Soo Lee Tan**

*‘I was unexpectedly mesmerized. Webster conveys Edwina’s sexual naivety completely. She writes a convincing, distressing tale of what Ed believes is a crush, but turns out to be a soul destroying, secretive relationship.’*

**Fiction Focus – by Deborah Roberts**

*‘This compelling story of the most hidden of crimes shows that a culture of silence still permeates our society. Webster succeeds in attributing the blame to all the stakeholders who hold such secrets. This is an important Australian book for the same reasons that Enright’s Blackrock is an important play.’*

**The Adelaidean – by David Ellis, University of Adelaide**

*‘Our Little Secret has gained much attention in legal and political circles, and was launched by independent No Pokies MLC Nick Xenophon. It has received positive reviews in major newspapers and Allayne has been interviewed on air by Amanda Blair.’*

**Mostly Books Bookshop – by Samuel Williams**

*‘Whilst Webster’s novel is quite confronting and vivid at times, it does not exaggerate or sensationalize its subject matter at all. Realism is the name of the game—clear, uncompromising realism. To write realistically from a teenager’s point of view is a difficult task at the best of times. To hold that realism through the tangled emotions of a rape victim would be even harder, but to Webster’s credit, she somehow manages it.’*

**Read Plus — by Fran Knight**

*‘This book will deservedly cause a stir. Salutory because it gives the readers a valuable insight into the minds of such people. It should be read as widely as possible.’*

### 3. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Allayne L. Webster is an internationally published Children's and Young Adult author. She plays guitar/sings and sometimes she illustrates.

Allayne is the recipient of three Arts grants and a South Australian Premier's Reading Challenge Ambassador. She has served on literary festival boards and her novels have been listed for various awards.

*Paper Planes* (Scholastic) was a 2016 CBCA Notable, shortlisted for the Adelaide Festival Awards and is included in the Australian Heritage Literary Project Untapped Collection. *A Cardboard Palace* (MidnightSun Publishing) was a 2018 CBCA Notable, published in Sweden. *Our Little Secret* (Scholastic) was listed for the Golden Inkys, and *The Centre of My Everything* (Penguin RandomHouse) was listed in the 2019 Davitt Awards and shortlisted in the 2020 Adelaide Festival Awards. *Sensitive* (UQP) is published in Russia and was shortlisted in the 2020 Australian Speech Pathology Awards. *That Thing I Did – YA* (Wakefield Press) received 5 star reviews and is celebrated in the Australian Book Review as a must-read of 2022. *Selfie – MG/YA* (Text Publishing) is out April 2023.

#### A letter from Allayne about *OUR LITTLE SECRET*

Hello Reader

Thank you for reading *Our Little Secret* and for choosing it as a text to study and explore consent.

When I first published this novel, I wanted start an open and honest conversation about rape and sexual abuse. Regrettably, upon publication I was told my book could not be marketed to schools in the usual manner (via catalogues and recommended book lists) because of its confronting content; it had to be discovered organically. Times have (thankfully) changed and I'm glad I've lived to see it. I'm especially grateful to Ligature Press for

republishing my novel. Hopefully during its second life it can be discussed more openly.

Sexual abuse statistics in Australia are estimated as high as one in three. This means that you or your students may have experienced rape or sexual assault, or unwanted sexual advances such as unsolicited pornographic images. I ask that you go lightly, that you employ self-care, and that if you feel triggered by this novel, that you refrain from reading it. No one should be obligated to confront painful memories and experiences when they're not ready to.

Conversely, this book may open a conversation and allow for some students to feel safe, to feel like they have a voice; to be able to point to this book and say, *That's me*.

For those who read this novel with no experience of sexual assault (thank goodness!) I hope it engenders increased empathy and understanding. Victims of sexual assault are traumatised not *only* by their initial experiences, but by those that come later when they try to seek help: judgement, condemnation, victim blaming and shaming are all common place. We can choose to be better than that. We can offer support. But first we must understand and this is where the power of story takes the reigns.

**Excerpt from Allayne's Booktopia Blog, published online 2022, about censorship:**

**"Not long after I published my debut *Our Little Secret* (Scholastic, 2007), I received an email from a renegade librarian: *Your book is on an underground censorship list shared between schools*. I scoured the list she'd secretly forwarded and there was my book about rape—a book I'd**

written years before the #MeToo movement. I've since visited schools and been told, *Perhaps don't discuss that one.* (\*Now in 2022, the government wants the curriculum to include teaching consent. I was fifteen years too early.)

In 2018, I wrote *again* about sexual assault in *The Centre of My Everything* (Penguin RandomHouse). By then the conversation had changed and yet *still* a teacher told me my novel was kept in a filing cabinet and students had to request it. I'm especially grateful to that teacher. I've portrayed such a scenario in *That Thing I Did*.

'Challenging' books are published because they're considered important to the kids who need them (read: kids who've experienced trauma). By placing them in the library, we hope they'll make their way into the right hands. But we don't necessarily centralise these books, study them or normalise them. It's been suggested that it's because teachers are often the victims of trauma and the conversation is too triggering.

That? That I understand. That I totally sympathise with. But keep a book under lock and key? Refrain from purchasing it? Exclude it from the marketing guide? How do you build empathy and understanding in kids who *don't* have firsthand experience with trauma? (Sidenote: thank goodness they don't.)"

#### 4. STYLE

*Our Little Secret* is told from the perspective of protagonist, fourteen year old Edwina Saltmarsh. Written in first-person, the reader is privy to the thoughts and emotions of Edwina who's central to the story as it unfolds. What's portrayed is confronting. Edwina *is* naïve and this is not her fault. She's a product of her environment, of conservative values. Her naivety is deliberate in

its portrayal—it's so that the reader is forced to question and interrogate unconscious bias. Victim blaming is rife in our society. It's an added level of trauma survivors of sexual abuse must endure. There is only one person to blame: the perpetrator. In this story, Edwina's perpetrator is Tom Atkinson, a man in his early 20's.

## 5. THEMES

### Friendship

*Our Little Secret* contains strong themes of friendship, notably between Edwina and her best friend, Becky Cooper. The reader learns very early that Becky's older sister, Anne-Marie, has been raped on her way home from school. Edwina and Becky navigate the fallout of that event, about whether or not to talk about it and what to do about it. When Edwina is assaulted, the knowledge of what's happened to her best friend's sister doesn't make it any easier for Edwina to reach out. Edwina struggles to speak and to ask for help. Her relationship with Becky becomes strained and misunderstandings occur leading to a total communication breakdown. Ultimately though, the story is one of sisterhood and hope as the two girls find a way back to each other.

### Family

Family dynamics are shown from the perspective of Edwina. Her family unit is: mum, dad, and two younger brothers. Her mother is religious and regularly attends church. She's portrayed as high-strung, self-interested, and acutely concerned with what others think of her and how she's perceived; her children's behaviour is viewed as a reflection of her. Edwina's father is portrayed as somewhat removed, under the thumb, and devoid of responsibility. Edwina's brothers are constantly warring with each other *and* Edwina, adding to the chaos that is Edwina's life. A grandparent makes a brief appearance as a small sidenote character.

### Relationships

*Our Little Secret* explores the dynamics of multiple relationships, but most notably of that between Edwina and her abuser, Tom. Tom is introduced as a sporting teammate of Edwina's father. Very early he displays classic grooming behaviours—to which Edwina is oblivious. In her mind, Edwina is participating in a secret forbidden romance. She's initially complicit, believing Tom could

actually be in love with her and that this is what lovers do: they engage in sexual activity. As the story progresses, Tom's controlling tendencies escalate until he begins to repeatedly rape and sexually abuse Edwina. By then, Edwina is so confused she doesn't comprehend what's happening to her. The reader sees glimpses of Tom's violence and knows that Edwina somehow computes this too, leading her to mentally disassociate as a form of self-preservation.

Another notable relationship in *Our Little Secret* is that between Edwina and her school teacher, Ms Landy. Ms Landy is the first person Edwina confides in, as often is the case with children—they seek the assistance from a teacher or caregiver. During gentle private discussions with Edwina, Ms Landy coaxes the truth. She educates Edwina, explaining concepts such as grooming, coercion and control. She also manages to quietly reveal that she, too, is a victim.

### **Peer pressure**

Pressure to conform and comply is obviously central to this story, but there are additional notable portrayals of peer pressure, such as when Edwina decides to smoke cannabis with her friends one night after school. She's subsequently picked up roadside by Tom who couches himself as a saviour preventing her from getting into trouble with her parents. Instead, he takes her to his farm and rapes her. He intimates that the weed Edwina smoked means she doesn't know what she's doing, implying what he did could be her fault. Edwina internalises this and this becomes her narrative.

## **6. DISCUSSION AND GUIDED READING QUESTIONS**

### Prologue and Chapter 1

- The township of Wattleton is the backdrop for Edwina's story. What do you learn about the town and the people in it? How does Edwina perceive her surrounds? Is it through her lens or the adopted lens of others?
- The story begins in a church. Discuss the role of religion and how it might compound the narrative.
- We briefly meet Tom in the first chapter. What does he say or do that gives a window into who he is?



## Chapter 2

- Becky and Edwina discuss Becky's sister, Anne-Marie and her behaviour since she was raped. What discussions do they have that display a disconnect in terms of comprehending the impact of what's happened to Becky?
- Becky shares the details of a recent sexual experience with a boy, Matty Rogers. What aspects of her story reveal the event was consensual? Why is this important to the rest of the story?

## Chapter 3

- Edwina's mum has a meltdown over a prize-winning cake she plans to deliver to the country Royal Show. What does this tell you about Edwina's mother and the kind of person she is? How could this make it challenging for Edwina to confide in her mother?
- A hint of tension ensues between Edwina and Becky after they discuss Anne-Marie and her assault. Why might it be difficult for close friends to discuss?

## Chapter 4

- Becky and Edwina are now somewhat estranged. Edwina has her first private encounter with Tom where he intimates he finds her attractive. How does Edwina feel about this? Excited? Scared? And how do those feelings lay a pathway of blame for what comes next?

## Chapter 5

- Edwina daydreams about Tom and about what his interest in her might mean. She gets ahead of herself, dreaming up romantic dreams. She talks about bragging at school. How might a relationship with an older man provide her with a form of currency and why might she think it makes her cool?
- Why is the story of the church fire relevant to the overall narrative? What does that event tell you about the characters and public shame?

## Chapter 6

- Becky and Edwina are speaking again. Becky tells Edwina that she has to flirt with Tom to find out if he really likes her. What is it about this

discussion that could plant a seed of blame in Edwina's mind about what subsequently happens to her?

- Tom covertly rubs his hand up Edwina's thigh when Edwina's father is nearby. What does this tell you about Tom? What does this tell you about Edwina's father?
- Tom sneaks into Edwina's room and kisses her. He tells her that this will be '*our little secret.*' Does Edwina's silence indicate consent? Discuss.
- What is consent? At fourteen years old, what can Edwina give consent to? How can a person give consent? What evidence would there be to indicate consent has been given?

### Chapter 7

- Edwina, Becky and friends decide to smoke cannabis together. Why is Edwina unsure about doing it and why do you think she gives in?
- The girls discuss boys. Edwina, despite her vow not to share the secret, says something about Tom. What's the reaction from her friends and how does it make Edwina feel special? How does it further endorse what's happened between Edwina and Tom?

### Chapter 8

- Edwina is under the influence of cannabis. She's picked up roadside by Tom who takes her to his farm. How does Edwina behave towards Tom in the car? Does she perceive herself to be in any danger?
- Tom rapes Edwina. Edwina's reaction is to leave her body, to disconnect, to see herself as flying above two random people on the ground. Why would a person do that and why is Edwina's rape portrayed in this manner?
- Tom says that Edwina doesn't know what she's doing because of the weed. What is he *really* saying about control and who has it?
- Is the power equal in this relationship? What evidence do you have in the chapter to support this?
- Reflecting back on our knowledge of consent, under what conditions is a person unable to give informed consent? How is that relevant in this chapter?

### Chapter 9

- Edwina defaces her school book. How is this symbolic of her feelings?

- A library volunteer mutters, *'Kids today, honestly!'* What does this tell you about the adults in Edwina's life and the prospects of her being understood if she speaks up?

### Chapter 10

- Edwina must attend an old-fashioned dance where they play wartime songs. Not only is Edwina at the mercy of Tom and her school mates, but she's dragged to events by her mother and against her will. Where is Edwina's power and agency? Does she have any at this point in the story?
- Edwina speaks of what happened between her and Tom as being her fault. Why does she think that? Discuss.
- Edwina must dance with an elderly man. Why does Ed dance with someone she doesn't want to dance with? What evidence in the text is there to support why she might do this?
- What is manipulation? How is it significant to this 'relationship'? What does Tom say to Edwina to manipulate her?
- Tom performs oral sex on Edwina despite her protesting she doesn't want it. Penetration equals rape—object, fingers, tongue, penis. What evidence is there in the text that this is not an act Edwina consents to?

### Chapter 11

- Tom insists Edwina perform oral sex on him. What is it about the surroundings/environment in which this occurs that increases Tom's power and diminishes Edwina's?
- What evidence is there in this chapter that Tom is in control of the situation and what happens when they're together? What ability or agency does Edwina have to change what is happening? How could someone else knowing about it change the balance of power?
- Tom dispatches Edwina in a forest and tells her to run like it's some kind of game. Then he disappears, returning much later so that Edwina is frightened and grateful to see him. He rapes her again. How calculated and premeditated are his actions? Discuss 'isolation' as a control tactic.

### Chapter 12

- Edwina sticks her fingers down her throat and vomits. How does this make her feel and why is it relevant?

- Edwina sights a black blood-blister bruise on the roof of her mouth but she doesn't connect or understand how it got there. What does this tell you about her state of mind? What really caused the bruise?

### Chapter 13

- Tom dumps Edwina and says they can't see each other anymore because she's too young and people will talk if they find out. Do you think Tom already knew that? Do you think he knew it all along? Why would it matter now and is it an excuse?
- What does Tom do to Edwina once he dumps her? Would you think that's a normal way to end a relationship?
- What does Edwina say about living her reality? Why is this time different for her?
- We often hear Edwina blaming herself. Is she really to blame? How do you know this? What is Tom responsible for?

### Chapter 14

- Edwina relays a sexual interaction with a boy from her class, Matty Rogers—the same boy who kissed Becky. How is Edwina's experience different to Becky's?
- Tom may have broken it off with Edwina, but he's still inside her head tormenting her. This is reflective of the trauma Edwina has been through. How is it that you think she has the strength to move on? What skill or behaviour has Edwina learned that has served her going forward?

### Chapter 15

- What do you think Edwina's intention is when she accepts a ride with boys from her school?
- How does knowing that the boys knew about Tom and Edwina affect your view of the car scenario? How was consent gained, or not? Were all parties on the same page? Explain.
- What happens when Edwina fights back and stands up for herself?
- Is the behaviour of the boys different to Tom? How are they similar/dissimilar?
- Anne-Marie takes her own life. How does Edwina react?

## Chapter 16

- The whole town turns up for Anne-Marie's funeral demonstrating that they care. Or do they really? What evidence is there in the text to support either?
- What does Edwina remember about Tom that's significant? How does it relate to what happened to her with the boys from her school?

## Chapter 17

- Becky reveals to Edwina the truth of Anne-Marie's story—that the person who raped her wasn't unknown to her; it was incest, it was her uncle. Edwina is horrified but thinks keeping it a secret is a good idea. Why does Edwina think that keeping it a secret in Wattleton *might* be the right thing to do? Do you agree or disagree? What does Becky believe?
- What support did Anne-Marie and her family receive? What supports do you think they may have needed, or may need now? How could support have changed the outcome? What services are there available related to sexual abuse support?

## Chapter 18

- Edwina watches a news report about a man being gaoled for statutory rape and she asks her mother what the statutory part means. What does it mean?
- Edwina realises the truth of what's happened to her. She describes her secret as a ticking time bomb. Why is this an appropriate analogy? What could be the fallout and repercussions of such a secret for all involved?

## Chapter 19

- What is it about Edwina's artworks that draws Ms Landy's attention and makes her think something could be wrong?
- Art is a form of therapy for Edwina. Why is it good for her?
- How does Edwina feel when Ms Landy starts questioning her?
- Edwina doesn't say much in response to Ms Landy's questions. What is it about her silence that speaks the loudest?
- Ms Landy talks about the code of silence. What is it?

- Edwina’s mother gets angry at her. How does this compound how Edwina already feels?

### Chapter 20

- Ms Landy educates Edwina about grooming. What is it?
- Can only minors be groomed?
- How does Edwina feel about the term ‘rape’ in connection with herself?
- Unprotected sex can lead to pregnancy. Why would Edwina not have even thought of that until discussing it with Ms Landy?
- Ms Landy talks about primal survival instinct. In the animal kingdom, what is this phenomenon? How might it protect Edwina?

### Chapter 21

- Tom announces he’s getting married. How does this make Edwina feel? What does this tell you about Tom’s story trajectory? Is it true to life that he might move on, get married, have children and not be prosecuted for his crimes?
- Edwina visits Anne-Marie’s grave and she and Becky accidentally cross paths. Why does Edwina find it so hard to talk to Becky and tell her what happened?
- What’s powerful about Becky’s response?
- Portray another way Becky might’ve behaved and how it could negatively impact on Edwina.

### Chapter 22

- The story finishes with Edwina in a church—where the novel started. What’s changed about how Edwina perceives her mother?
- Edwina is receiving counselling. How might this help?
- How does Edwina now perceive Tom?
- Do we think Edwina will have a happy ending? What might she experience and have to live with going forward?
- Explain what you believe to be a respectful relationship and the role that consent has in respectful relationships.

## 7. KEY CURRICULUM LINKS

**Respect Matters – relevant sections have been sourced:**

<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/resources/curriculum-connections/portfolios/respect-matters/>

### **Rationale:**

“Respect and respectful relationships are important for a cohesive Australian society. Schools play a vital role in educating students about relationships in positive, strengths-based ways. Education provides an opportunity for children and young people to develop and reflect on knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours that relate to respect, inclusion and power. Schools can help students to understand right and wrong and support them to have respect for themselves and others. The Australian Curriculum provides a variety of opportunities to support this learning.

Children and young people form beliefs from the world around them and the values and traditions of their families and communities. What they hear, see, talk about and experience from a young age shapes their view of the world. It is important that all children and young people experience and learn from positive influences where they live, learn, work, and socialise. Schools support students to develop respectful relationships with family, friends and important people in their lives. This education can also support the primary prevention of domestic and family violence by educating young people about respectful relationships and helping them to develop protective behaviours and resilience.”

### **Australian Curriculum Focus - HPE**

In the focus area: Relationships and Sexuality in the Australian Curriculum: HPE, students from Year 3 to Year 10 should learn about matters such as:

- standing up for themselves
- establishing and managing changing relationships (offline and online)
- strategies for dealing with relationships when there is an imbalance of power (including seeking help or leaving the relationship)
- managing the physical, social and emotional changes that occur during puberty
- practices that support reproductive and sexual health (contraception, negotiating consent, and prevention of sexually transmitted infections and blood-borne viruses)
- celebrating and respecting difference and diversity in individuals and communities.

Some of the key skills that students need to develop in order to develop and maintain respectful relationships and effectively negotiate consent are communication and assertiveness skills. These skills are specifically taught through the HPE curriculum. They are also reinforced through other learning areas and through the development of the Personal and Social capability. The Ethical Understanding general capability in the Australian Curriculum also supports students to build a strong personal and socially oriented ethical outlook that helps them to develop an awareness of the influence that their values and behaviour have on others. They develop an understanding of their rights and responsibilities and learn to evaluate the intended and unintended consequences of actions in a range of age-appropriate scenarios.

## **General Capabilities**

### **Personal and Social Capability**

In the Australian Curriculum, students develop personal and social capability as they learn to understand themselves and others, and manage their relationships, lives, work and learning more effectively. Personal and social capability involves students in a range of practices including recognising and regulating emotions, developing empathy for others and understanding relationships, establishing and building positive relationships, making responsible decisions, working effectively in teams, handling challenging situations constructively and developing leadership skills.

Personal and social capability supports students in becoming creative and confident individuals who, as stated in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA 2008), 'have a sense of self-worth, self-awareness and personal identity that enables them to manage their emotional, mental, spiritual and physical wellbeing', with a sense of hope and 'optimism about their lives and the future'. On a social level, it helps students to 'form and maintain healthy relationships' and prepares them 'for their potential life roles as family, community and workforce members' (MCEETYA, p. 9).

VIEW THE FULL RESOURCE: <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/resources/curriculum-connections/portfolios/respect-matters/>

### **Australian Curriculum Focus - English Year 7–10**

<https://www.acara.edu.au/>

'These texts explore themes of interpersonal relationships and ethical dilemmas within real-world and fictional settings and represent a variety of perspectives.' (ACARA)

## **General Capabilities**

### **Ethical Understanding**

'In the Australian Curriculum: English, students develop ethical understanding as they study the social, moral and ethical positions and dilemmas presented in a range of texts. They explore how ethical principles affect the behaviour and judgement of imagined characters in texts and the real-life experiences of those involved in similar issues and events.' (ACARA)

### **Critical and Creative Thinking**

'English ... In discussion, students develop critical thinking as they share personal responses and express preferences for specific texts, state and justify their points of view and respond to the views of others.' (ACARA)