

Teachers Notes

by Bec Kavanagh

Black Painted Fingernails

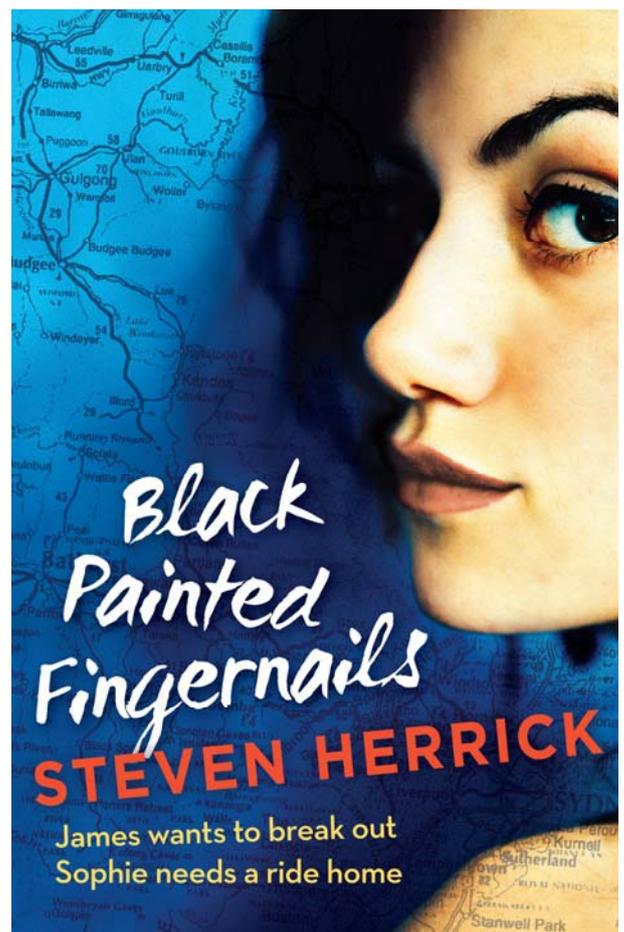
Steven Herrick

ISBN 9781742374598

Recommended for ages 14 yrs and over

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INTRODUCTION

PLOT SYNOPSIS

Black Painted Fingernails is an Australian story about finding yourself and falling in love. Although it is set on a road between small Australian towns, it could be any road and any town as the journey from one point in our lives to another is a universal one.

James is on the road, driving towards a teaching round in the middle of nowhere. Sophie has left her boyfriend hanging on an ultimatum and walked away from her life moments before she receives a text message calling her home. With nothing to her name but her black painted fingernails, she stops James in the hopes of a lift part of the way. Although James and Sophie are complete opposites, they are somehow exactly what the other needs. Their journey together is one of honesty and courage, and takes them to a place that neither had expected to go.

Although the characters in *Black Painted Fingernails* are all out of high school, the issues that they face will be relevant to teenage readers facing their own life choices. The varying ages of the characters means that the readers will question the choices that will face them at any age, rather than being limited specifically to those they will face as high school students. While there are some indicators of the setting and the ages of the characters, Steven Herrick writes the characters in a way that makes them ageless. Unlike many other characters who are defined by their age, these characters experience doubt and uncertainty in a way that makes them incredibly accessible to readers. There is a sense of hope in knowing that some experiences can be shared, regardless of differences. Herrick is a skilled author, who has managed to get inside the head of each and every one of his characters, making their experiences universal and unique at the same time.

A road trip is the ideal setting for the novel, as a lot of the stories that bring Sophie and James together are the kind of stories that only come out after spending an extended period of time with someone. One of the beautiful and intriguing things about the way this book is written is the fact that it *makes sense*. The choices the characters make, the way they connect with each other is so natural that it really feels more like hearing two old friends tell you about their travels than reading a novel. The pace of the journey itself is matched by the pace of the novel, which again gives the sense of travelling and the wide open spaces of the Australian road.

Black Painted Fingernails is a brilliantly realised, lyrical look at the relationships between people at varying stages in their lives and the choices they make that bring them together.

IN THE CLASSROOM

Black Painted Fingernails is recommended for readers aged 14 +. Because the characters are out of high school, some of their experiences could be deemed inappropriate for younger readers. However, this book is written in a way that makes it an ideal platform to discuss the issues that will face its readers. It is also an ideal text for advanced readers in literature circles or extension programs.

In terms of the Australian Curriculum, *Black Painted Fingernails* is an excellent text that can be used to represent Australian Content. These notes will discuss the book in terms of characters and themes and present activities for the English classroom that fall within the Literature and Language strands.

CHARACTERS

JAMES

James is the driver in this story, both literally and metaphorically. He is the only character whose chapters are written in first person narrative.

When he leaves home to set out on his teaching round, he is a mother's boy, the product of a 'safe' environment where most of his choices up to this point have been made for him. He drives a car bought by his parents to a career that was chosen by his mother. Although he is reluctant at first to pick up Sophie, she lights a spark in his nature that makes him think honestly about what he wants from his life.

SOPHIE

Sophie is the complete opposite of James when we first meet her. Where James has come from security, Sophie is stuck in uncertainty. Although James sees a confidence in her that inspires him to take unexpected leaps in his own life, Sophie has come from a background where relationships are broken and damaged. Sophie's journey sees her learning to trust other people as she comes to grips with her past.

Task:

When you begin the book, make a list of Sophie and James' differences. As you keep reading, note the points in the text where they share something.

- Do they become more similar as the story progresses?
- Is there a point where you have more similarities listed than differences?

MICHAEL (JAMES' DAD)

Michael is one of the few characters in the novel who is sure about what he wants. He is the kind of simple figure that provides stability for more volatile characters, and his desire to make his wife and son happy doesn't seem trite, but instead comes across as genuine and warm.

ANGELA (JAMES' MUM)

Angela is perhaps one of the most surprising characters in the book and that is because when we first meet her, she fits into the stereotype of overprotective mother with such force that it is hard to imagine that she could be anything else. It is difficult as a reader to imagine her as an individual because that is not the way she sees herself at first. However, she is a character with surprising strength, and rather than devoting that strength to forcing James to bend to her will, she uses it to rediscover herself. The result is a character that is liberating and surprising, and for teenage readers could be an interesting platform about the identity of parents.

SOPHIE'S DAD

Sophie's dad is a wonderful character and although we only ever meet him through conversation or memories, he comes to life vividly. At first he seems like a typical farmer, more interested in football and his sons than anything else. However, as we see more of Sophie's memories of him, his softer side is revealed.

SOPHIE'S MUM

Sophie's mum is a never-present character that nonetheless has a significant impact on the other characters. She is noticeable in that her absence influences the decisions, and therefore the paths, that Sophie, her father and each of her brothers choose.

Task:

Note the pages where Sophie's mother is mentioned.

- How is Sophie's mother introduced to the plot?
- What is the impact/significance of her absence?

DAVE AND BRAD (SOPHIE'S BROTHERS)

Dave and Brad are fairly minor characters in terms of how much of the narrative is devoted to them. They do however play a part in quite pivotal moments in Sophie's journey. They are really the driving forces when she leaves her home town, they send out the message that brings her back, and, more importantly, they highlight the moment where Sophie lets go of her past and starts travelling in a new direction.

Task:

In groups or individually undertake a character study for one of the characters discussed above.

In as much detail as you can, fill in the following categories using examples from the text where possible.

Name of your character:	
Physical appearance	
Family history	
Relationships	
Living arrangements	
Jobs	
Likes/dislikes	
How they treat the other characters in the book	
Their connections with the other characters	
How they change over the course of the story	

Divide the class into groups of students who looked at a particular character. Get them to discuss their findings and share with the class.

THEMES

JOURNEYS

Each of the characters in this novel is on a journey, yet only some of them have a destination.

Task:

Choose one of the characters from the discussion above and chart their journey (this can be either a physical journey, or one within their own character) based on the following points.

Name of your character:	
What is their original destination?	
How do they intend to get there?	
Where do they end up?	
Who has influenced their journey?	
How does where they end up differ from their original destination?	

Activity:

Students might like to illustrate their character's journey graphically, showing influences along the 'road'.

FAMILY

Black Painted Fingernails offers a unique insight into all members of a family, rather than just the children. Each of the characters is portrayed fully as an individual and yet somehow they come together in family units.

Task:

Read the following article on families from the Australian Bureau of Statistics:

<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4442.0>

- According to the article, what defines a family?
- What is a 'non-resident' parent?
- Based on the information regarding separated parents and their living situations, what was unique about Sophie's living arrangements as a child?
- What kind of family does James come from?
- How does Sophie describe James' family in the text?

As a class, make a list of other types of families.

- Are any of these families discussed in the book?
- Do you agree with the definition of a family in the article? If not, how would you change it?

ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Aside from family relationships, this is a book about falling in love for the first time, or falling in love all over again.

Task:

Choose one of the following couples:

- Sophie & James
- Angela & Michael
- Sophie's mother & father
- Sophie & Cardigan
- Sophie & Carlos

For your chosen couple:

- Make a note of the point in the book where they are in a relationship.
- When does their relationship change?
- How does it change?
- Who instigates the change?
- How are each of the couples different and how are they the same?

TRUST AND BETRAYAL

Sophie opens up to James and tells him things that she has never shared with anyone.

Sophie's mother betrayed her family by leaving them.

Task:

Who else has experienced betrayal in the book? Who has caused it?

- Discuss whether or not the betrayal was intentional, and if so, does that make a difference?

Even though James was not the person who betrayed Sophie, why does she have to come to terms with her past in order to trust him?

- What does this tell you about the nature of betrayal?

John le Carré says *Love is whatever you can still betray. Betrayal can only happen if you love.*

- How does this relate to *Black Painted Fingernails*?
- Do you agree that betrayal can only happen if you love? Base your answer on evidence from the characters in the novel.

ACTIVITIES

STEREOTYPES

This novel sets up of various stereotypes and then, through the actions of the characters, breaks them down. Discuss the following stereotypes. In groups, make a list of the characteristics that you feel define them. Find examples in the text where the characters break free from these definitions.

	Defining characteristics of the stereotype	Examples where character breaks the stereotype
The over-protective mother.		
The Aussie farmer		
The free-spirited love interest		
The sensitive boy		

CROSS-REFERENCING – POINTS OF INTERSECTION

In the chart below (it will need to be enlarged), cross-reference the characters.

- Where do they meet in the book?
- What is their relationship to each other at the start? At the end?
- How do they influence each other?
- What do they think of each other?

	Sophie	James	Angela	Michael	Sophie's dad	Dave	Brad
Sophie							
James							
Angela							
Michael							
Sophie's dad							
Dave							
Brad							

VIDEO

In pairs (where access to videos is easy) or small groups (if access is more limited) pick out a scene from the book where Sophie and James are driving together. Based on that scene, create a video diary of their time together.

- You will first need to turn the piece of text into a script for the scene, and then
- Create a storyboard for the shooting of the scene.

As an extension to this task, footage from the various class videos could be pieced together with a narrative and soundtrack to create an Internet book trailer for *Black Painted Fingernails*.

LANGUAGE – POINT OF VIEW

In *Black Painted Fingernails* the author makes use of varying points of view to break up the story. Choose a chapter written in the third person about either James' mother or his father.

- Rewrite the chapter in the first person from the point of view of James' mother or father. Include as much information as you can from the original chapter, but feel free to experiment by adding in other details.

In groups, discuss the differences between the original chapter and the rewritten chapter.

- What details stayed the same?
- Was there more or less room to explore the character when you rewrote the piece in first person?
- By putting yourself in the shoes of one of the more secondary characters, did it make you feel differently about James or Sophie? Why?

RELATED READING

Important: Teachers should note that *Black Painted Fingernails* carries a recommendation for readers 14+ yrs (and will certainly appeal to older readers). The books listed below provide comparative and extension reading for students across a range of reading abilities and maturity levels. Consequently, teachers and parents are strongly advised to preview these novels before recommending them to specific children.

***Guitar, Highway Rose* by Brigid Lowry**

Part love story, part road story, *Guitar Highway Rose* is a witty novel of first love, adventure and being fifteen.

***About a Girl* by Joanne Horniman**

A spellbinding love story between two young women that unfolds like a series of paintings and explores the tender moments that pull them together and the secrets that push them apart.

***Something in the World Called Love* by Sue Saliba**

When Esma moves into 22 Starling Street, she knows she's come to the right place. A place to become someone new. A place to belong. As the seasons change, she finds herself falling deeper

and deeper in love. But not in the way she expects. . . A remarkable novel about friendship, trust and hope - and what it means to love.

***Graffiti Moon* by Cath Crowley**

An intense and exhilarating 24 hours in the lives of four teenagers on the verge of adulthood, of HSC, of finding out just who they are, and who they want to be.

***Queen Kat, Carmel & St Jude Get A Life* by Maureen McCarthy**

A moving novel about three country girls sharing an inner-city house in their first year of university. A novel with political and social themes as well as an incisive portrait of different families, and the relationships between mothers and daughters in particular.

***The Lucky Ones* by Tohby Riddle**

Set in 1980s inner city Sydney, *The Lucky Ones* follows maverick teen Tom, as he tries to make sense of life after school.

OTHER BOOKS BY STEVEN HERRICK

Students may be interested in reading Steven Herrick's verse novels and comparing them to this novel. Examples of his verse novels aimed at teenagers are: ***By the River***, ***Lonesome Howl*** and ***Cold Skin***. All have rural Australian settings.

- *By the River* shares the theme of families.
- *Lonesome Howl* shares the theme of a boy and girl who seem to be opposites finding they are attracted to each other.
- *Cold Skin* is a coming-of-age story set inside a crime mystery in a damaged town.

ABOUT THE WRITERS

STEVEN HERRICK

Steven Herrick was born in Brisbane, the youngest of seven children. At school his favourite subject was soccer, and he dreamed of football glory while he worked at various jobs, including fruit picking. Now Steven writes for children and teenagers and visits many schools each year. He loves talking to the students and their teachers about poetry, and soccer. Steven lives in the Blue Mountains with his wife and two sons.

Steven's other books include 'Do-Wrong Ron' (2003), 'Cold Skin' (2007), 'Lonesome Howl' (2006), 'Naked Bunyip Dancing' (2005) and 'By the River' (2004). Read an interview with Steven Herrick at <http://www.allenandunwin.com/default.aspx?page=311&author=23>

BEC KAVANAGH

Bec Kavanagh is a reviewer, freelance writer & YA fiction specialist. She is the founder of A Thousand Words Festival, which celebrates and encourages the reading and writing of young adult fiction. In 2010 she appeared at the Melbourne Writers Festival and AussieCon4 (the 68th World Science Fiction Convention).