

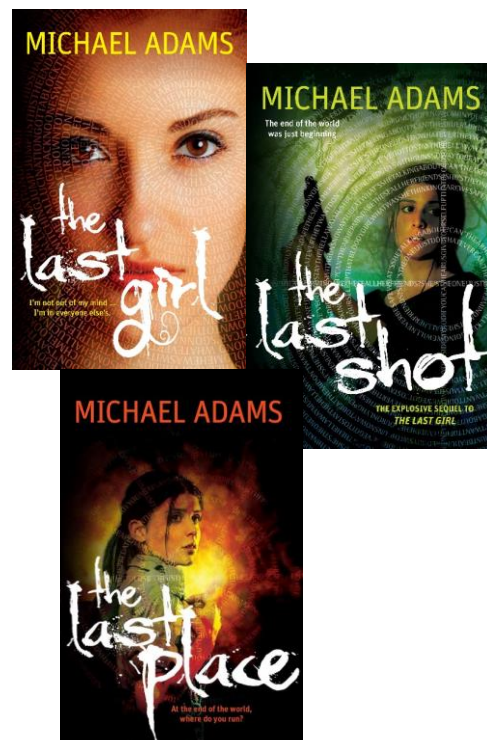
Author's Notes for Teachers

The *Last* Trilogy by Michael Adams

The Last Girl ISBN 9781743316368
The Last Shot ISBN 9781743316733
The Last Place ISBN 9781743316740
 Recommended for ages 14-18 yrs

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INTRODUCTION

IN BRIEF

The *Last* trilogy is an apocalyptic thriller series that I hope gives teenage readers explosively entertaining action while presenting thought-provoking themes relevant to their real lives.

The Last Girl, *The Last Shot* and *The Last Place* “bring home” the end-of-the-world scenario by situating it within a geography, culture and technology instantly familiar to contemporary Australian readers. Where a lot of popular YA speculative fiction series take place in far-off dystopian American futures, this series takes place in a near-future urban, suburban and regional Australian landscape.

In the *Last* trilogy I wanted to explore the power of positive and negative thinking; technological alienation and privacy in a connected world; family duty and societal obligation; freedom and control; compliance and resistance/pacifism and violence.

First-person past tense is used in *The Last Girl* and first-person present tense is used in *The Last Shot*. This paves the way for their unification in *The Last Place*, which takes place in parallel present-past chronologies leading to the finale. I changed tense for the second book to give a greater sense of urgency. In switching between tenses in the third book I sought to maintain this narrative drive while creating a mystery that can only be solved when the two timelines reunite. The books are also written with an eye for pop culture, which I hope adds to real-world authenticity and increases reader accessibility.

WHAT IS THE *LAST* TRILOGY ABOUT?

While end-of-the-world scenarios are familiar to teenagers—thanks to movies, TV, books, comics and video games—I wanted the *Last* trilogy to present a unique apocalypse. There would be no comet, no virus, no alien invasion, no zombie uprising. Instead, humanity would be destroyed by a sudden global telepathic outbreak called “The Snap”. With everybody able to hear what everybody else is thinking, chaos, madness and violence would erupt across suburbs, cities and nations. The aftermath would be a landscape littered with billions of catatonic people, all of whom will die of dehydration and starvation in a matter of days or weeks. Some may be saved by the heroine Danby and her friend Nathan’s medical intervention, but many more can be resurrected by the strange power possessed by Jack, a charismatic young man whose dreams of a new world may involve sacrificing what makes people human.

WHO’S IN IT?

The *Last* trilogy is populated by realistic and relatable characters.

Danby is an ordinary Australian teenager who is thrown into an extraordinary battle for survival and gains a position of leadership through hard-fought experience. She is a heroine who can’t rely on special powers or training for her survival but she is resourceful and self-possessed. In order to prevail and save her little brother Evan, Danby must find new reserves of will and strength, trust her own instincts about who is an ally and who is an enemy, and confront the grimmest choice imaginable: whether killing can ever be justified.

The first two books take place over the space of just two weeks, with the third charting the next three months, so readers get to see and feel how circumstances incrementally change Danby’s character. Danby is strong, brave, thoughtful, empathetic and vulnerable. But as the series progresses, she risks becoming as ruthless as the enemy she despises. Her journey is a springboard for discussion about how character is shaped (or even deformed) by action and circumstance.

I wanted Danby to be surrounded by characters drawn from contemporary Australia: Danby’s brother Evan has a learning disability; Danby’s best friend Jacinta is the daughter of Chinese immigrants; Nathan is a Sri Lankan medical student with a mental illness; Jack is a down-and-out

busker; Marv is a hard-working electrician of Aboriginal descent; HB is a divorced middle-aged woman. It could be a good starting point for discussions about diversity in fiction.

WHERE ARE THE BOOKS SET AND HOW DO CHARACTERS NAVIGATE THE LANDSCAPE?

The Last Girl takes place in Sydney's inner western suburbs before Danby flees to Parramatta, Penrith and then the lower Blue Mountains. *The Last Shot* continues in the Blue Mountains and Penrith before shifting to Richmond and the wilderness of the Hawkesbury region. *The Last Place* sees Danby slogging through the Central Coast as she heads for Port Macquarie on the mid-north coast.

The action occurs in suburban homes and cul-de-sacs, shopping centres and showgrounds, deserted highways and strange theme parks, while characters navigate the broken landscape on foot, bikes, canoes, horses, four-wheel drives, speedboats, motorcycles, all-terrain vehicles, military choppers and ultra-light planes.

The locations and modes of transportation provide a rich but realistic experience. I was excited to write about places I know well and that readers might also know. In using familiar places and challenging means of getting around, I wanted readers to ask themselves how they would react if their environments suddenly turned deadly and how they'd escape such desperate circumstances.

THEMES FOR CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

THE POWER OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE THINKING

What we think ultimately determines everything else. If our civilisation was facing annihilation by comet, zombies or aliens, our best chance for survival would be to marshal our collective knowledge, set aside our differences and tackle the problem together. But, faced with centuries-old problems—war, disease, pollution, starvation, etc—this is precisely what we haven't done and aren't doing. In the *Last* trilogy the characters were destroyed by their inability to "think together". I wanted to show that the things that could destroy humanity are already threatening us as a civilisation: fear, greed, anger, prejudice, tribalism and hatred. The books ask if we can ever really rise above these impulses.

TECHNOLOGICAL EVOLUTION AND THE FUTURE OF PRIVACY

The *Last* series is set in a near-future world that I wanted to be familiar to readers as an extension of their own. Danby's cohort are obsessed with social media, the latest flexiphones and the newest virtual reality glasses. Yet Danby is also aware of the addictive and alienating nature of this technology, largely as a result of having been raised by a single father whose connective devices have separated him from her. After "The Snap", Danby and Nathan speculate as to what caused the telepathy. Though they aren't able to arrive at definite answers, they conclude that humanity's telepathic evolution was accelerated by our technological obsession with instantly sharing everything.

Scarily, we really are moving towards such a world. Within a generation it may well be possible to control our devices with our minds and communicate via technologically enabled telepathy. If you could mentally upload every thought to Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, would you really want to? What if "privacy settings" were such that you didn't have a choice? What would it be like to have the inside of your mind plastered with as many ads as your Facebook page or Twitter feed? Is the private self a large part of what makes us human?

FAMILY RESPONSIBILITY AND SOCIETAL OBLIGATION

Danby's goal throughout the *Last* trilogy is to save her little brother. She goes to great lengths to ensure his safety, even to the point of risking other people's lives. Is what she's doing defensible,

given that millions are dying? At the other end of the scale, Jack only raises up those whose expertise can be used to efficiently rebuild society. Is what he is doing sensible and defensible?

While these are extremes within the world of the *Last* trilogy, they also relate to our world. I wanted to ask, 'Can you put the happiness and comfort of your friends and family over the needs of the society?' If we were to face a real end-of-the-world scenario, would it be right for governments to give survival priority to scientists, doctors, generals (and themselves) in the name of giving civilisation the best chance of continuing?

FREEDOM AND CONTROL

Danby and Nathan's medical solution sees a small number of catatonic people restored to consciousness with their telepathy intact. These folks are immediately plunged back into democratic chaos in which they struggle to make decisions and co-exist in the full knowledge of what everyone else is thinking. Is such a world of transparent democracy workable or even desirable? At the other end of the spectrum, Jack's program sees thousands of people resurrected but denied free will so they can work together to restore a functional society. I was interested to explore whether, in times of crisis, such restrictions on freedom could ever be justified and what they might lead to.

COMPLIANCE AND RESISTANCE, PACIFISM AND VIOLENCE

Danby's gradual realisation about the shape of the new world prompts her to question her place in it. How far should she collaborate with Jack to ensure her safety and Evan's? Can resistance be justified if it's motivated by personal concerns? When does resistance for the greater good become justified? Is violence ever necessary and justifiable? And if it is, what does this do to the victims and to the perpetrators? Is there any way back from such a mindset? These are the issues and choices Danby has to confront over the course of the *Last* trilogy.

APOP-CULTURE-LYPSE NOW

A lot of YA speculative fiction takes place in landscapes very distant from ours. But as the *Last* trilogy unfolds in a recognisable place and time, the story is—like readers' lives—studded with pop culture references. The purpose of this is threefold: to inform character; to add authenticity to the world building; to make closer exploration of the text more fun for readers.

Danby doesn't live in a vacuum. Like readers, she's familiar with young adult romance novels and abhors the convention of "instalove" — not for her the love-triangle that takes precedence over the end-of-the-world action! Like readers, she has seen end-of-the-world movies—and these preconceptions influence her responses, especially when she starts thinking about zombies!

Readers will find references to real-life touchstones like *Frozen* and other Disney princesses; *Star Wars* and *Apocalypse Now*, Talking Heads, The Rolling Stones and Johnny Cash. There's also a richly imagined in-series culture of performers such as the Lady Gaga-like Princess Hellbanga; trash reality TV shows like *Instant Celebrity*; and insistently advertised products like MobiFone and Roboponies. These are all to make the world feel as amusingly, distractingly and realistically culture-cluttered as our own.

I had lots of fun playing with pop culture reference. For instance, in the first chapter Danby receives a "retro" gift of a CD called *Eye in the Sky* by made-up band Distant Affliction. The song title refers to the real-life track by The Alan Parsons Project, whose chorus is "I can read your mind". Meanwhile, telepathy's word origin is "tele" meaning "distant" and "pathy" meaning "affliction". Another example is when Jack says he was busking and singing "The End" by The Doors when The Snap happened. This is, of course, a black joke—that he'd be strumming such a song right when the apocalypse began. But it's also a clue to his real persona and intention: like the narrator of the song, he is the mask-wearer who wakes before dawn, walks west on the King's Highway (what Sydney's Great Western Highway was called in the 1800s) and does violence to his own father. Such clues and games recur throughout the series—for fun, to reinforce the idea that the telepathic outbreak has

been building for a while before events in the book and to encourage readers to look deeper and explore literature, film, music and science outside of the trilogy.

A few other pop cultural references that might provoke discussion:

"Brooding gloom" — repeated use of this phrase takes you to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a major thematic influence and the inspiration for *Apocalypse Now*, whose helicopter sequences are echoed in *The Last Shot* and *The Last Place*. There is also a reference to a band called "Mistah Kurtz", as the mysterious figure of Conrad's novel is known to the natives. Ties in with the theme: *Compliance and Resistance, Pacifism and Violence*.

"Universe 25" — the name of an in-book musical act. This unusual term refers to the infamously freaky experiment that involved creating a "rat utopia" but which led to a "behavioural sink" in which supposedly content animals lost their minds and became alienated from their community, experiencing catatonic states that preceded death. Is this what happened in *The Snap*? Ties in with the theme: *Technological evolution and the future of privacy*.

The Wizard of Oz — when confronted with real-life trauma and tragedy, we often ask the big "Dorothy" question: is this all a dream? Danby is no different in the *Last* trilogy and her journey parallels that of Frank L. Baum's character in several ways. Readers could be encouraged to find them all and ask whether it makes Danby an unreliable narrator. Ties in with the theme: *Apop-Culture-Lypse Now*.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I grew up in the western suburbs of Sydney and tried to write my first book when I was six. When I was about thirteen I wanted to write horror fiction (like my hero, Stephen King). In Year-Nine I wrote a short story about alien invaders who laid their eggs in people's eye sockets.

Soon after I did work experience with a publisher (Emily Rodda was my boss!) and branched into non-fiction with a sci-fi and horror film quiz book. I even submitted this manuscript and... an encouraging rejection note arrived a few months later.

I eventually tried writing non-fiction and submitted a manuscript of short answer, true or false and multiple choice questions about classic films like *Forbidden Planet* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*. An encouraging rejection note arrived a few months later.

Clearly, apocalyptic sci-fi and horror films and books were a significant influence. But, weirdly, it didn't actually occur to me until I was well into writing *The Last Girl* that I was finally exorcising those old themes and subjects. *The Last Shot* and *The Last Place* continue that exploration, with a big dollop of guerilla-style warfare.

When I'm not writing fiction, I'm lucky enough to make a living writing other things. For nearly a decade I was the reviews editor of movie magazine *Empire*. These days I still contribute reviews, interviews and features to *Empire*, along with *Rolling Stone*, *Men's Style* and *YEN*. I've also worked as a TV host on *The Movie Show* and *The Movie Club* and as a writer on *MasterChef*, *The Renovators*, *Home And Away* and *The Hot Plate*. In 2006, one of my original screenplays was produced by Bryan Brown as part of his *Two Twisted* thriller series. In 2010 I wrote *Showgirls*, *Teen Wolves* and *Astro Zombies*, a comic memoir about watching a bad movie a day for a whole year.

The one thing I'd say about writing is it only happens if you write. That's pretty much what I do, whether it's for an hour a day — or fifteen. Writing articles, television scripts, rough drafts, character outlines — all of it's a great mental game that you can play alone. You write, realise you can do better, revise and rewrite — and do it again and again and again. I subscribe wholeheartedly to the theory that you can get good at anything with 10,000 hours' practice. So simply set aside three hours a day — and you'll be there in about nine years.