



# TEACHERS' NOTES

## RECOMMENDED FOR

Secondary (ages 14+; years 9 to 12)

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## KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- **Learning areas:** English, Arts, Health and Physical Education
- **General capabilities:** Literacy, Critical and Creative Thinking, Personal and Social Capability

## REASONS FOR STUDYING THIS BOOK

- It's a heartwarming story about resilience, grief, friendship and love.
- Tobias is a vibrant new voice on the #LoveOzYA scene.

## THEMES

- Grief
- Friendship
- Identity
- Resilience
- Recovery from injury
- Identity and vocation

## PREPARED BY

Penguin Random House Australia

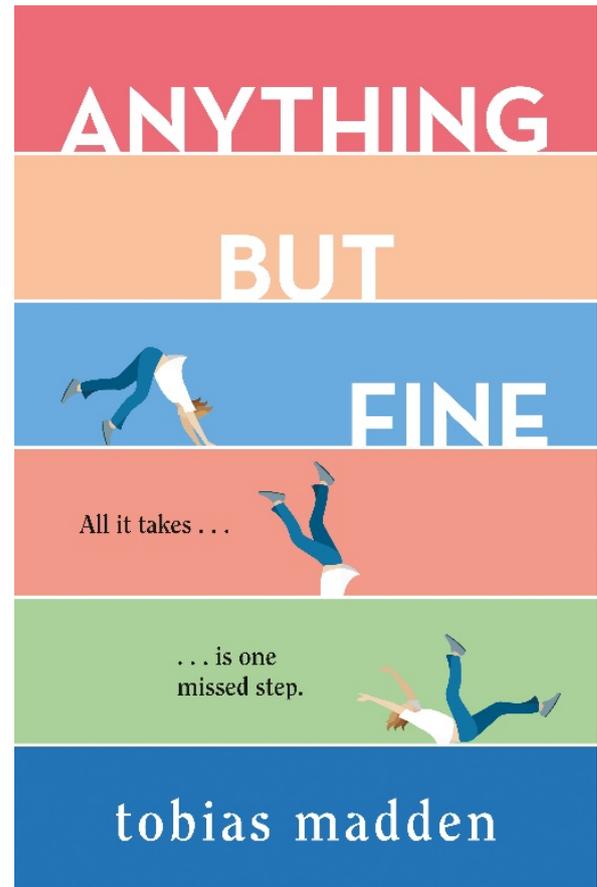
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## Anything But Fine Tobias Madden

## PLOT SUMMARY

*A heartfelt and hilarious Australian YA debut from a rising star.*

Luca is ready to audition for the Australian Ballet School. All it takes to crush his dreams is one missed step . . . and a broken foot.

Jordan is the gorgeous rowing star and school captain of Luca's new school. Everyone says he's straight – but Luca's not so sure . . .

As their unlikely bond grows stronger, Luca starts to wonder: who is he without ballet? And is he setting himself up for another heartbreak?

'*Anything But Fine* is everything wonderful I love in a book: characters so real they breathe, a rollercoaster of a story that made me laugh, cry, and swoon, and vivid, gorgeous writing. Brilliant.' – JENNIFER NIVEN, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *All the Bright Places*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Originally from Ballarat, Tobias worked for ten years as a dancer, touring Australia and New Zealand with musicals such as *Mary Poppins*, *CATS*, *Singin' in the Rain* and *Guys and Dolls*. He now lives in Sydney with his husband, Daniel, and their Cavoodle, Ollie.

In 2019, Tobias edited and published *Underdog: #LoveOzYA Short Stories*, which featured his first published work, 'Variation'. He also co-wrote the cabaret show *Siblingship*, which played to sold-out audiences in Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra.

Tobias is a passionate member of the #LoveOzYA and LGBTQ+ communities, and he currently works full time for a major independent publishing company.



## AUTHOR'S INSPIRATION

Tobias says:

*Anything But Fine* started as a single line that popped into my head at the end of 2018: *The second it happens, I know my life is over*. This instantly became the opening line of the manuscript, a line that remained unchanged through countless drafts and revisions. As

soon as I had that opening line, the rest of the story instantly took shape around it.

I've always loved ballet. It's an art form like no other. A career that demands one hundred per cent commitment and unparalleled levels of artistry, athleticism, and tenacity. I was never a professional ballet dancer, but I often wonder what my life would've been like if I'd chosen to follow that path, rather than pursuing a career in music theatre. I guess, in a way, this book allowed me to explore that alternate universe. The universe where I ditched the singing and acting classes and dedicated my entire childhood to ballet.

I spent ten years of my adult life on stage, performing in musicals around the country and abroad. In 2018, I took a step back from the industry, stopped auditioning, got a part-time job, and focused on my writing.

It wasn't until I started pitching *Anything But Fine* to publishers two years later that I realised I'd subconsciously written an entire book to help me process this enormous, life-altering change in direction. I don't know how I didn't put two and two together at the time; I'd written a novel about a young dancer coming to terms with the loss of the one thing that defined him, when I'd lost the very same thing myself. And while ballet was taken away from Luca because of a horrific injury and I'd chosen to give up my career on stage, the process of grieving that loss remained the same.

For dancers – and many other creatives – identity and vocation are one and the same. When someone asks you about yourself, the first thing you say is, 'I'm a dancer'. It can be dangerous to have your self-worth wrapped up entirely in one aspect of your life – especially something as fragile as a career that relies on the physical body – but it's often necessary if you wish to succeed in your chosen field. The same goes for athletes and sportspeople and anyone whose identity is tied to their vocation, rather than who they *are*.

Once I had the idea for the basic plot, the rest of the story fell into place quite easily. It made sense for Luca's dad to be experiencing his own form of grief. It felt right for Luca – an openly gay teen in a country town – to befriend someone at his new school who also felt 'othered' by their peers. And it seemed perfect for Luca to fall for someone whose greatest passion in life had nothing to do with their chosen career path, but who was struggling with their identity in a different way.

*Anything But Fine* was a joy to write, and I hope readers connect with the deeper elements of the story, but – more than that – I hope the book makes them smile, and that they love spending time with these



characters. I hope teen readers in particular (but definitely adults, too) walk away from the story knowing it's okay if they don't have a clear idea of where they're going in life. That it's okay to take a long and winding path if they need to, or – if it feels right – to step off the path completely.

### Questions

1. Do you know anyone whose identity is strongly defined by their vocation, such as a dancer or sportsperson? What are the potential risks and rewards of such a strong link between identity and vocation?
2. Why do you think Tobias needed to grieve the loss of his music theatre career, even though he chose to change career?
3. What examples can you find in the story of characters being 'othered'? How are those perceptions and comments challenged?

### Activities

- Use Tobias's first line, '*The second it happens, I know my life is over*', as the creative starting point to plan and write your own short story. Who is speaking in your story, and why is their life over?

## PRE-READING QUESTIONS

1. Look at the cover. What can you tell about the book from the images used?
2. How has the designer used the typography, placement of illustrations and colours to communicate what the book is about?
3. Look at the strapline on the front cover – can you think of other lines that might have worked?
4. Do you think the cover would be as affective without the strapline? Why or why not?
5. Look at the front inside cover of the book and read the quotes from other YA authors. Research these four authors and the books they have written. How are their books similar or different to Tobias's? What are some common themes?

## WRITING STYLE

### Questions

1. After reading a few chapters, stop and think about how you would describe the style of the writing in *Anything But Fine*.
2. How does the author use humour throughout the story? Can you find examples of humour being used to defuse the tension in a scene?

3. Look at the length of the chapters throughout the book. Do you think the length of the chapters suits the writing style? How would longer chapters have had an impact on the pacing and tone of the narrative? Can you think of other novels you have read where longer chapters suited the writing style?
4. What are some other literary devices the author has used to create a sense of tone and mood?
5. There are a lot of conversations held via messaging services and text (for example, the *Bunheads* 4Lyf chats). Do you think that the outcome of some of these conversations would be different if they had been held in person? How do you think this would this have changed the story?
6. Why has the author chosen a first-person point of view to tell this story?
7. Why has the author chosen to write the story in present tense?

### Activities

- Luca's voice is the driving force throughout the story. Choose a scene in the narrative and write it from another character's point of view (e.g. Jordan, Amina, Robert or Gibbo).
- Look at how the author has structured the opening of the novel – using a short introductory paragraph. Do you think this is an effective way to open the story? How would the story feel without this paragraph? Can you think of films, TV shows or other books that also start with the narrator's short summary of momentous events, before the narrator goes on to explain more about what happened?
- Music and dance are important elements that have been woven into the narrative. How have they been used to add an extra layer to the story? Can you find examples of music or dance (apart from ballet) driving the narrative throughout the novel?

## THEMES

### Grief and loss

#### Questions

1. Luca is grieving after his accident for the loss of the future he'd built for himself. Do you think this connects to the loss of his mother? Why or why not?
2. How has the author woven the theme of grief or loss into the story in different ways? Can you find other examples of loss throughout the narrative involving characters other than Luca?



3. Read Chapter 42 when Luca goes back to the dance studio. Why could this scene be considered important? How does it affect Luca's personal journey through the narrative?

#### Activities

- Choose three or four characters from the book. Write a description of how that character is 'grieving' in some way. Do you think they have resolved this by the end of the book?

### Friendship

#### Questions

1. Luca doesn't communicate with his friendship circle after he first has the accident. Do you think he has good reason for this? What do you think would have happened if he'd messaged them earlier and had maintained contact once he'd started at North?
2. How is the *Bunheads 4Lyf* friendship group (Luca, Talia, Abbey and Grace) affected by Luca breaking his foot? Could it have continued on as strongly if Luca had communicated more, or was the change inevitable? On the other hand, how do you think the group and the friendships would have changed if Luca or one of the others had been accepted to the Australian Ballet School and moved away from Ballarat?
3. By the end of the story, what do you think Luca has learned about friendship?
4. Do you think that Amina, Alicia and Bree were friends before Luca's arrival? Write a play script focusing on the three girls during a lunchtime before Luca's arrival at the school.
5. Amina talks to Luca about Ramadan in Chapter 22. Can you find evidence in the following chapters that Luca might have done his own research on Amina's beliefs? Do you think this helps strengthen their relationship?

#### Activities

- Write a scene of the first meeting between Luca, Jordan, Amina and Grace – the beginning of their new friendship group. (Perhaps at the Christmas ballet recital?)
- Write a transcript of what Grace might have said if she'd left a voicemail to Luca when she called him in Chapter 27.
- Find an instance in the story when Luca isn't being a very good friend. Write a paragraph about how he could have handled that particular situation differently.

- Read the scene between Luca and Grace on pages 71–72. Grace accuses Luca of being selfish and only thinking about himself. Do you think this was justified? How could Luca have handled the situation differently? Do you think Grace was being too harsh? Re-write the scene from Grace's point of view. Remember to include details about what she is thinking and feeling as the scene progresses.

### Identity

#### Questions

1. After his accident, Luca has to find out who he is without ballet. Do you think he has succeeded by the end of the story?
2. Why do you think Luca has such a difficult time putting weight on his foot in Chapter 19? Do you think that this mental block he has with putting his foot down is connected to his sense of identity and self-worth? Are there other places in the story where Luca displays such uncertainty about his future?
3. Who else is struggling with their identity in the narrative?

#### Activities

- Chose two characters from the novel (apart from Luca) and write a scene with those characters in conversation. Let your character explore in that scene their struggles for identity and belonging.
- Write a list of other novels you have read that deal with the theme of identity. Are they all the same genre? Is identity something that can be explored across a wide range of mediums? Why or why not?
- In a group, discuss the difference between a hobby or interest, and a vocation. What messages do we receive in society about the connections between our work, our passion and our happiness? Are the messages positive, or can there be a negative aspect to them?

### Resilience

#### Questions

1. Luca has to rebuild his world after the accident and his dream of being a dancer is taken away. How does this compare to Amina, who finds it difficult to talk to her parents about her dream of being a teacher? Do you think that resilience can be displayed in different ways, depending on your circumstances? Do both Luca and Amina show resilience within the narrative?
2. Society often considers sportspeople, dancers and others who have to maintain a high level of



physical fitness as having resilience. Why do you think this is so? Do you think this translates to other professions as well? (Eg politics, medical research, teaching.)

### Activities

- Research your favourite sportsperson, dancer, celebrity or a person of note whom you look up to. Find out as much as you can about their early years and their childhood. Are there incidents or events in that person's life that have given them the resilience or inner strength to become the person they are now?
- After reading the novel, who do you think Luca and Amina look up to? Can you find evidence of this in the narrative?

*Better, she'd say. Never good. I worked so hard, day in, day out, year after year, to get her to tell me I was good, to give me one compliment, and she never, ever did. I was brilliant. I could do things that literally no one else my age could do. Jumps, turns, lifts, beats, everything. But it was never good. And now all I have to do is walk across the room and I get applauded. Like it's some kind of achievement.'* (p. 141) How would you describe the relationship between Miss Gwen and Luca? Do you think their relationship was a significant one in Luca's life? Can you find evidence of this in the text? How do you think Miss Gwen would have felt about Luca's accident?

### KEY QUOTES

1. *'I take a deep breath, lift my chest, and repeat the progression on both sides – chassé, pas de bourée, glissade, jeté. It's such a simple exercise. I've been doing it in class like, five times a week since the dawn of time, but there's something about it that still makes me feel so . . . I dunno. It's kind of hard to explain. It makes me feel strong and super masculine (which, let's be honest, I'm not) but also graceful and delicate at the same time. Kind of like I'm showing every part of myself at full volume. It makes me feel lighter than air, like I could jump right through the roof and up into the sky. It makes me feel so . . . me.'* (pp. 3–4) Do you have something in your life that makes you feel as passionately as Luca feels about ballet? Write a paragraph describing how you feel about your special something.
2. *'Miss Prue rang again today,' Dad says when he drops me off at Ballarat Allied Therapies after school. 'Don't you think it's time you gave her a quick call? Just to tell her you're okay.'* (p. 60) Luca doesn't talk to Miss Gwen after the accident, and only has contact with Miss Prue at the end of the story. Why do you think Luca avoids talking to them? Find evidence in the text to support your answer.
3. *'You still don't get it, Dad. Ballet isn't something I've lost. Something I'm missing. It's me. It's all of me. And it's gone.'* (p. 98) Luca lost his sense of self – his identity – when he fell down the stair and broke his foot. At the end of the novel, do you think he has succeeded in finding who he is without ballet? Or do you think he still has work to do?
4. *'Memories of Miss Gwen suddenly fill my mind. Sitting there in her white plastic chair down the front of the ballet studio, barking corrections at us.*



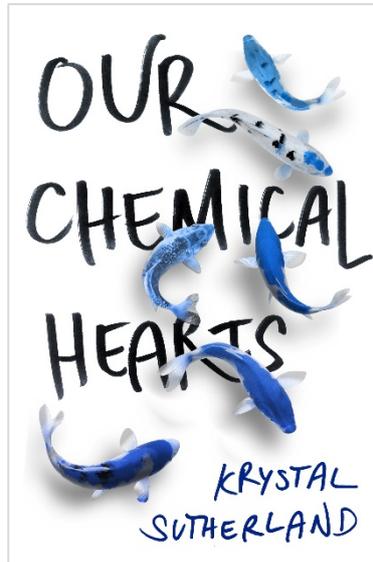
FURTHER READING FROM PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA



*House of Hollow*  
by Krystal Sutherland

Iris Hollow and her two older sisters are unquestionably strange. Ever since they disappeared on a suburban street in Scotland as children only to return a month later with no memory of what happened to them, odd, eerie occurrences seem to follow in their wake.

Now, ten years later, seventeen-year-old Iris Hollow is doing all she can to fit in and graduate high school – something her two famously glamorous globe-trotting older sisters, Grey and Vivi, never managed to do. But when Grey goes missing, leaving behind only bizarre clues, Iris and Vivi are left to trace her last few days. They aren't the only ones looking for her. As they brush against the supernatural, they realise that the story they've been told about their past is unravelling and the world that returned them seemingly unharmed ten years ago, might just be calling them home.

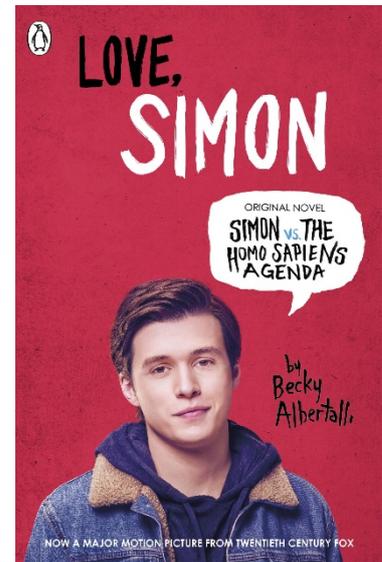


*Our Chemical Hearts*  
by Krystal Sutherland

Henry Page has never been in love. The slo-mo, can't-eat-can't-sleep kind of love he's been hoping for just hasn't been on the cards—at least not yet. Henry's too busy trying to get into a semi-decent college and become editor of his school newspaper, a dream three years in the making.

Then he meets Grace Town, the elusive new girl in school, who wears oversized boys' clothing, walks with a cane, rarely seems to shower, and is hiding crushing secrets. She's hardly who Henry expected his dream girl to be, but when the two are chosen to edit the paper together, sparks fly. After all this time, Henry's about to learn firsthand just how disastrous the road to first love can be – and that sometimes it's the detours that end up mattering much more.

*Teachers' resources available.*



*Love Simon*  
by Becky Albertalli

*Straight people should have to come out too. And the more awkward it is, the better.*

Simon Spier is sixteen and trying to work out who he is - and what he's looking for. But when one of his emails to the very distracting Blue falls into the wrong hands, things get all kinds of complicated. Because, for Simon, falling for Blue is a big deal . . .

*It's a holy freaking huge awesome deal.*

## ORDER FORM

TITLE	AUTHOR	ISBN	SCHOOL YEAR	RRP	QTY	TOTAL
Anything But Fine	Tobias Madden	9781761042027	9+	\$19.99		
House of Hollow	Krystal Sutherland	9780143796992	9+	\$19.99		
Our Chemical Hearts	Krystal Sutherland	9780143573906	9+	\$19.99		
Love Simon	Becky Albertalli	9780241330135	8+	\$17.99		
<b>TOTAL</b>						

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