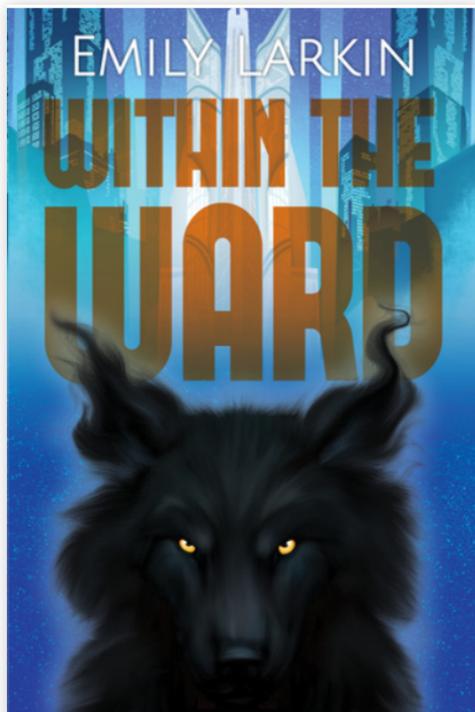




TEACHING NOTES



Within The Ward

By Emily Larkin

ISBN: 9781761110221
Reading Level: 15+ years

Here, Paige is immersed in a dream reality called 'the Journey'.

If patients finish the Journey, then they can go home.

Secrets are exposed as Paige bonds with other teens who don't belong. The Journey is meant to be a cure – but Paige soon discovers dark forces within the hospital, and that the dream reality is the stuff of nightmares. Paige and her friends have limited chances to show progress, before it's too late.

Can they escape the ward? And can Paige find reasons to live?

Themes

- Mental Health • Depression/Suicide
- Friendships and relationships • Grief and Loss • Identity and perception

Note to Teachers: Please take into consideration that *Within The Ward* contains themes (i.e. suicide) that are sensitive and might upset students. We encourage teachers to speak with the school counsellor before embarking upon the study of this novel with their students.

Discussion Questions & Classroom Activities:

CHARACTERS & SYMBOLISM

- a) Who are the most developed characters in the story? Do we understand what these characters want, and how the story's conflict stands in their way?
b) Are Paige, Thomas, Nate, Lucy, and the technician round or flat characters? Why? The following can be reviewed for information about round and flat characters: [Britannica](#) [Youtube](#)

- Ask students to complete the following table:

Character	Round	Flat	Justification
Paige			
Thomas			
Nate			
Lucy			
The technician			

c) Use the following quote from Paige's narration as a discussion point to reflect on whether she undergoes a change:

I'm never leaving him behind, not by choice. The ways I can live are as limitless as the ways I thought I could die. (Chapter 50, p. 282)

2. Depression is sometimes referred to as the 'black dog'. How does the smokewolf in *Within the Ward* build on this metaphor to represent depression?
3. How do the different landscapes of the Journey represent symptoms or experiences of depression?

Journey course	Key features of this course	What this represents about depression
Volcano		
Ocean		
Beach		
Canyons/valleys		

4. What do windows represent in *Within the Ward*? Review Chapter 25, pp. 171-173.
5. Beth's suicide occurs before the novel begins. Why is this, and how do readers come to know Beth?
6. Why is Nate compared to a 'dark angel' (p. 217)? Does he act as a guardian or helper to Paige? Refer to Chapter 33 pp. 234-235 and Chapter 45, p. 269.

7. Describe the mood captured in the following extract from Chapter 8, p. 59:

'Took your time,' Nate says. 'Even with a busted leg, I'm faster.'

Thomas sways a little, holding an arm around his chest. 'I think I broke something.'

'We're nearly there,' I repeat. I might be lying—I probably am—but he believes me and that's what matters.

The ledge leads onto another trail and I take the lead again. The trail twists and the incline becomes less severe, but smoke thickens in my throat.

'This ... makes me feel like I ... didn't appreciate having a chest infection,' Thomas says between coughs. 'That was much better than ... choking ... to death.'

We don't respond.

'I *did* break my ribs,' Thomas says. 'I'm sure. At least ... pretty sure.'

8. How do Thomas and Dr James Shephard use humour in this narrative? Can humour be used in healthy or unhealthy ways? Consider Chapter 5, p. 32; Chapter 33, p. 231; and Chapter 23, pp. 150-151.

THEMES

Mental Health

1. Invite the students to write a brief personal reflection (200 words) about their understanding of depression, and whether this has changed since reading *Within the Ward*. Emphasise that this does not need to be shared. After the students have finished, discuss how texts influence individuals and how individuals' interpretations of texts are informed by their backgrounds and experiences.
2. *Within the Ward* suggests that a variety of treatment plans are needed for different experiences of depression. What are some measures characters take to improve their mental health in this novel? Have you heard of the term "suicide contagion"? What do you think it means?
3. Paige's mental health improves throughout the narrative, and is supported by the influence of other characters, such as Michael and Dr James Shephard. How can you try to support a friend who is struggling with mental health issues?
 - a) Complete a class brainstorm using paper, an online Whiteboard, or Padlet.
 - b) Discuss the importance of '[R U OK? Day](#)'. Is it important to check in with friends at other times, too?
4. Is there a stigma towards mental health issues?
 - a) Discuss whether there is a stigma towards mental health issues. [Here](#) is a link to an online pdf by Beyond Blue for more information.
 - b) How can stigma towards mental illness be overcome? Use the quotes below to spark conversation among students:

'Depression is an illness. Yet it doesn't come with a rash or a cough. It is hard to see, as it is generally invisible. Even though it is a serious illness it is also surprisingly hard for many sufferers to recognise it at first. Not because it doesn't feel bad – it does – but because that bad feeling seems unrecognisable, or can be confused with other things' (Haig, 2015, pp. 69-71).

'Stigma is a result of ignorance: people tend to fear what they do not understand. Stigma can lead to hurt, rejection and prejudice against people who are labelled.' (Healthtalk.org, 2019)

5. What strategies can you use to bolster your own mental health? Some suggestions might include talking to a friend, family member, counsellor, or doctor; listening to music; cooking; reading; playing a musical instrument; getting involved in a social club; using art as a form of expression; or exercising. Use a Padlet to brainstorm.
6. Ask students to trace their hand on a paper plate, and then pin the plates to the back of their shirts. Play uplifting music while students use coloured textas or pens to write positive comments about each other on their peers' paper plates. Emphasise that this activity focuses on respecting each other. Once everyone has received at least 3 comments, ask the students to write down 3 things that they like about themselves on the blank side of the paper plate.

Depression/suicide

1. Depression is portrayed in a variety of ways in *Within the Ward*. What are some characters' symptoms or experiences of depression?
2. Depression isn't always easy to spot.
 - a) Research suggests that some people who are depressed shield how they are feeling from others. This is sometimes called 'smiling depression'. Assign students into small groups in the classroom, or Breakout Rooms on Zoom, and ask them to make a list of symptoms of 'smiling depression' by reviewing the following websites: Verywellmind, Healthline, Learning-Mind, Medical News Today

Regroup, and make a class list of the symptoms

- b) How does Thomas attempt to hide his depression? Consider the following exchange where Paige and Michael discuss Thomas, and then write 3-4 sentences justifying whether Thomas experiences 'smiling depression'.
Example from Chapter 22, page 139.

'Paige, I hack into security here ... and you need to know that Thomas is not coping. He puts more energy into maintaining the appearance of control than sustaining a recovery.'

Michael doesn't know Thomas. Thomas is more determined to leave this place than anyone. 'He's not a Depressive.'

'Why? Because he doesn't match your idea of one?'

I have no reply.

'People assume that someone dealing with depression can't get out of bed, or joke, or try to support their friends,' Michael goes on. 'Thomas does all those things, but that doesn't mean he's okay. He cries when you are asleep. He's had recurring headaches ever since he was admitted, and writes letters and asks Lucy to send them ...'

3. Research from BeyondBlue and Black Dog Institute shows that individuals experience depression for

a variety of reasons, and sometimes the cause is unknown. In *Within the Ward*, depression is brought on because of different reasons, including the death of a loved one, fear of failure, guilt, biological reasons, and unknown causes. Write a short exchange between two characters from *Within the Ward* where they talk about why they are experiencing depression, and what depression feels like to them. Focus on capturing realistic dialogue that reflects the age and experiences of the characters. End the scene with hope.

Grief and Loss

1. Grief and loss can be experienced in diverse ways. Find 2 quotes to illustrate what Beth meant to Paige. Refer to Chapter 3, pp. 20-22 and 24; Chapter 8, pp. 57 and 60; and Chapter 19, p. 117.
2. Paige reflects that 'Heartbreak is a disconnect' (Chapter 3, p. 27). What helps her to feel 'connected' again? Each character deals with their grief over the loss of Wally in a different way. Make a list of secondary characters and how they process their grief using evidence from the text. Include Melody, Roz, Hannah, Peter, Auntie Kath and Grandma T.
3. Identify the poetic devices used in the following extract from Chapter 8, p. 47. How do these devices help to express Paige's emotions, and contribute to the narrative's mood in this chapter?

I think of what I can't tell the doctor: I remember how I got here in pieces. Like pencil shavings that you can't put back together.

My mother opened the door, but didn't come inside. No one knew how to treat me anymore. She took a small step, and then leant on the doorframe. 'What are you doing?'

'Nothing,' I said, from my bed.

This irritated her. 'You must be doing something.'

I guess she was right: I was imaging a spot of black, like mould, on my wardrobe. The spot spread, splintering and eroding the wood until it became a vortex, sucking pens and scrunched tissues off my desk; the holographic calendar I used to flip through idly, although I never wrote in it, wavered and got pulled in too, and it was drawing my bed towards it, swelling before me like a yawning mouth. It would keep growing until it swallowed me, my room, the whole house.

Friendships and relationships

1. Are Nate and Lucy unlikely friends/romantic partners? Why or why not?
2. How does Paige's friendship with Nate differ from her friendship with Thomas?
3. Paige reflects that she hasn't gotten to know Denna very well. Why is this, and could this be considered a missed opportunity?
4. Imagine a new character enters the ward at the same time as Nate and Avery. Who is this person, and what kind of friendship could they develop with another person in the ward? Write a short scene using dialogue, sensory descriptions, and actions to show this friendship developing. '

Identity and Perception

1. Complete the following table to explore how the characters' view themselves, and how this differs from how others' see them. Which version is more accurate?

Character	How they see themselves	How others see them
Paige		
Thomas		
Nate		
Matron Fernau		
James Shephard		
Denna		

2. Why is the society of Raydale afraid of 'high emotions'? What is the purpose of the No Tears policy, and why does Dr James Shephard oppose it? For help with this, review Chapter 21, pp. 129-231.
3. Paige sometimes feels like she is broken. Identify two quotes from the story that demonstrate she is capable and brave. If assistance is required, review Chapter 26, pp. 180-184, or Chapter 31, p. 216.
4. Thomas often draws in his journal, and has written entries as well. Is the journal a true reflection of how he's feeling? Why/why not? Consider the following extracts.

Extract 1 – Chapter 3, pp. 22-23

Shaking my head, I watch him draw waves and swirls. Does he enjoy sketching or has it become a habit? No one else carries a journal around.

The triangles he adds to the swirls look like teeth, but I don't mention it because I'm sick of wings and rainbows. Maybe sometime he'll progress to unicorns. After a few moments, I ask, 'What's so great about the Cumbras, anyway?'

Extract 2 – Chapter 33, pp. 230-231

A black wedge calls from the edge of my vision. I reach under the bed and retrieve his journal. I'm scared to touch it, but feel compelled. Opening it, my eyes slide over words.

Gorri never felt like home, but Brandon didn't either. The academy is all sharp smiles and quick tongues. To survive you have to compete.

In some ways, this place is the same—only we're competing with another reality instead of each other.

His next entry is a single line:

Paige is my only friend.

After that, pages are filled with bright, intricate patterns and wings made of a thousand windows. Then I turn another page, and smother a gasp. Unlike the earlier, colourful illustrations, this is a black ink sketch. Its lines are skilled and fluid, giving the impression that the picture is alive, moving. The picture is of a young woman, leaning her face into her hand. Hair strays into her weary, stubborn eyes, and her mouth is stubborn.

It's of me.

I breathe in the ink and linger on this sketch, then turn past wing after wing until I reach a written entry:

She doesn't realise what she has to offer.
 I wish I was electric, like Nate. I wish she would truly see me.
 I don't think I've ever been comfortable in myself. Not everyone has a Before and After. Some people don't have a moment or event they can point to and say, 'That's when everything changed.' They were always fighting the shadows.
 I put on a decent show, I think. I don't want to be a 'Depressive'.
 I don't like people seeing me come apart. I'd prefer to make them laugh.

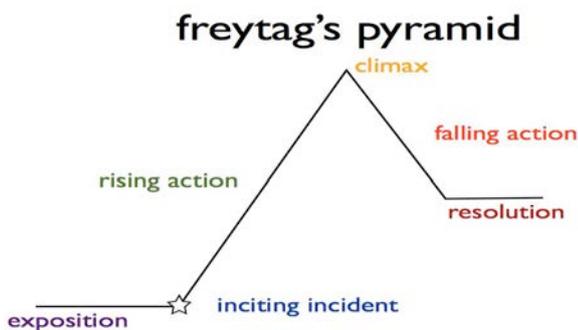
On the last used page, he wrote:

I don't belong here. I don't belong anywhere.

5. Characters such as Nate, Dr James Shephard, and Matron Fernau change their appearances or capabilities in the dream reality of the Journey. What does this reflect about their self-identity? (Review Chapter 11, pp. 73-74; Chapter 36, p. 250-251; and Chapter 40, p. 260.)
6. Paige sometimes feels surprised by Michael. Why is this? How is the young man before her different from the boy she grew up with? (Refer to Chapter 22, pp. 139-140 or Chapter 29, pp. 201-205.) And what does this reflect about individuals' capacity to change?

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND PLOT

1. Why do you think the author chose to narrate this story through different perspectives?
2. Fill a narrative 'gap' by writing a 500-1000-word scene from the perspective of Denna, Thomas, Nate, Lucy, Michael, the technician, or Matron Fernau. Consider the narrator's motivations and backstory. How will these things influence their voice?
3. Identify different plot points in the narrative, using the following diagram and descriptions. Discuss differences of opinion in the class.



[Diagram Source.](#)

Exposition: Introductory information to establish the setting and provide background information about the characters.

Inciting incident: A moment or event that acts as the catalyst for the rising action in the story and causes a significant change in the protagonist's life.

Rising action: Events and choices that drive the action towards the climax. The rising action often involves making allies, friends and enemies; encountering setbacks; and finding solutions or partial-solutions to problems.

Climax: The moment of greatest tension in the story, where the protagonist is tested and the deeper truth of their identity is revealed.

Falling action: Events that follow the climax and portray its aftermath to lessen the narrative tension.

Resolution: The ending of the story, which often establishes a 'new normal' for one or more characters. Resolutions may involve various degrees of happiness or sorrow; involve a plot twist; or feature a level of ambiguity. However, resolutions usually stay true to the overall tone of the narrative and suggest how the protagonist has changed, even if they do not neatly tie up all the loose ends.

4. **How do the bRAYne conversations contribute to the narrative? Why do you think the author chose to include a type of digital messaging? Why might these devices be called 'bRAYnes'? (Examples of bRAYne conversations can be found on pp. 10, 160-162, and 271.)**

ANALYSING THE TEXT

1. **Let's look at the messages in the text.**

a) Instruct students to choose one of the following topics to develop an assertion about a message shared in *Within the Ward*:

- Mental health
- Depression
- Hope
- Friendship
- Courage

Encourage students to introduce *Within the Ward* by including what type of text it is, the title, the author's name, the year of publication, and the message that is shared.

b) Ask students to write a 200-250-word paragraph explaining how the characterisation, setting, symbolism, or plot contributes to the assertion they have identified. Students should include examples to strengthen their claims.

2. **Consider the differences between the societies of Raydale and Gorrin. Ask students to write a paragraph outlining which state they would prefer to live in, and why. Draw on evidence from the novel.**
3. **Consider the use of the term 'Depressive' in *Within the Ward*. (If needed, refer to Chapter 22, pp. 140-141.) How can language be used to empower or disempower individuals? Why it is important to see someone as more than a label?**
4. **Comparing literature.**
 - a) Identify how the use of poetic devices such as alliteration, simile, repetition, imagery, and sensory descriptions contribute to the meaning conveyed in the extracts below from *Within the Ward* (Larkin, 2021) and *Girl Running, Boy Falling* (Gordon, 2018).

*Note that both novels are by Australian authors and explore depression and suicide. Furthermore, in both novels, the protagonist's best friend dies by suicide, and the protagonist finds ways to recover hope. While *Girl Running, Boy Falling* is a contemporary YA-drama, set in Australia, *Within the Ward* features a futuristic, dystopian setting.

Extract 1 from Chapter 24 in *Within the Ward* (Larkin, 2021, pp. 155-156)

.I walk out of Shephard's office, and think of Beth. After the funeral, hours stretched into days, and to breathe was to bleed. I no longer understood anything: how Michael went to work and provided technical support to morons who didn't know, and would never know, Beth; why my parents talked in hushed voices when I wanted to shout, and how it was possible to feel empty and jagged inside.

My old teachers, my parents, the Radleys, and even Michael acted like they didn't remember her, and she deserved better. I remembered everything.

A few days, or maybe a week after Beth was buried, I saw my father's Electrific 4.0 parked on the street, plugged into a charger station. I unplugged the cord, and climbed into the car's front seat. It was easy enough to use a recording of my father's voice to turn on the ignition. As the engine hummed to life, I disabled the self-drive function before driving down the street and veering onto the highway. On the far side of the trafficway, tall building bit into the sky. Since petrol-cars were repossessed by the government and Electrifics became standard, the air quality improved dramatically. When Beth and I were kids, everyone wore face masks in the city's heart, and the sky was clouded with grey. Now, a blazing blue sky wasn't unusual.

This was the kind of thing that gave Michael hope for the future, but all I saw was a void. I buzzed the windows down, and drove with the wind lashing my face. And there, on a black six-lane trafficway with vehicles zooming by like blind meteors sucked through space, I screamed my throat raw.

Extract 2 from Chapter 37 in *Girl Running, Boy Falling* (Gordon, 2018)

.Melody has to bag up the sausage rolls and pasties, putting scoops of ice cream in the milkshakes.

She's not a natural at it like I am. She doesn't take pride in it like I do.

She chats too much to the kids she's serving...

She puts too many slices of tomato in the rolls and not enough cheese. She squirts far too much sauce on the pies. She flirts with the girls and argues with the boys. She is, generally, the worst canteen helper of all time. But that's why I love her.

Melody only cares about the things that matter. She cares about feminism, and LGBT+ rights. She cares about psychology. She cares about her friends.

She doesn't give a shit about sauce-to-pie ratios.

We switch, so I'm frying chips and handing over Paddle Pops.

And, before we know it, the bell is ringing for the end of lunch. I'm stuck serving the last stragglers and Melody's taking off her apron and walking out the door without looking back.

And I feel like it's all falling down around my feet. Everything used to be so solid and sure. A perfect, unbreakable little universe. We lived above the clouds and we were okay because we were so strong and so high.

Just us.

Why the hell did Wally have to fall?

Why did he have to pull us all down with him?

Why can't I stop feeling all this shit?

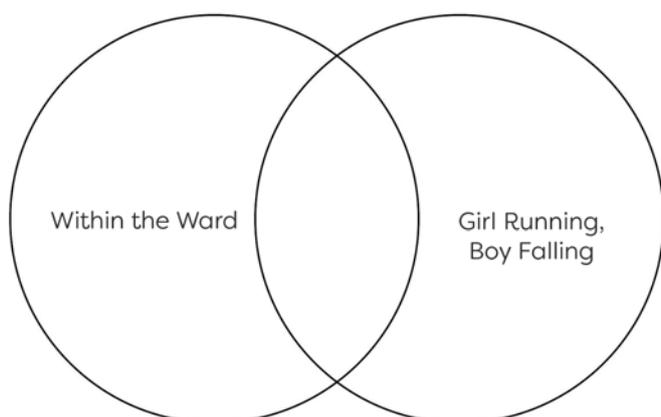
Why can't I be the good griever, who goes to therapy and leans on her friends and cries?

I look down at the pie in front of me on the counter. Just the right amount of sauce. I am a bloody awesome canteen helper.

But the important stuff?

I don't have a clue.

- b) Comment on how the authors' choice of words and sentence length and structure impact the narrator's voice and evoke an emotional response from readers. What is the impact of short, sharp sentences in the extract from *Girl Running, Boy Falling* (Extract 2)?
- c) How do the word choices in these extracts reveal the narratives' respective settings or genres? (Note that a contemporary high-school setting is fitting for a YA drama, while an alternative setting that extrapolates from our current technology is typical for a dystopian narrative.)
- d) Use a Venn diagram to outline the similarities and differences in content and style.



- e) Encourage the students to select 1 extract and justify about why their choice is more effective at sharing the protagonist's emotions. Include examples to comment on the author's style and use of poetic devices.

5. Features.

- a) Compare the portrayals of the smokewolf in *Within the Ward* to the YouTube video entitled 'I had a black dog, his name was depression' by Matthew Johnstone and the World Health Organization. The video can be accessed at [this link](#).
- b) Analyse how language and visual features, including the use of first person, colour, space, and facial expressions, impact the representation of depression in the YouTube video, and aim to influence viewers.

ANALYSING THE DYSTOPIAN GENRE

1. Looking at the dystopian genre.

a) As a dystopian novel, *Within the Ward* draws on genre conventions such as the rebellious hero; futuristic technology; and a cruel, regimented government. How does Paige demonstrate her rebellious streak? Identify 2 examples where she is at odds with Raydale's clinical system.

b) Aside from Paige, does another character act as a rebellious hero in *Within the Ward*? (If Dr James Shephard is nominated as a possible candidate, prompt a discussion about how he differs from other rebel heroes in contemporary dystopian YA fiction. Note that contemporary novels in this category, such *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *Delirium*, often feature female characters who are teenagers, and Dr James Shephard is an adult man.)

2. Does the society of Raydale stifle individuality and expression? What is the rationale for the No Tears policy? Would such a policy be successful in our society? Why/why not?

3. The use of technology.

a) Discuss how the use of technology contributes to the portrayal of a futuristic society in *Within the Ward*. Consider the inclusion of SimEars, bRAYnes, and the Journey.

b) Do bRAYnes resemble smart phones? Why/why not?

c) Split the class into 2-4 groups. Hold a class debate about whether the Journey is a successful treatment plan for depression or not. What are the advantages or disadvantages of using a virtual reality to develop mental resilience?

CREATIVE WRITING EXERCISES

1. Imagine a new landscape in the Journey for patients to explore and progress through. The landscape should be challenging and reflect some aspect of the natural world. Consider how to use symbolism, imagery, metaphor, and allusion to deepen the significance of the landscape and obstacles. Write 500-1000 words describing the characters' experiences of this Journey course.
2. Write an epilogue from the perspective of Paige, Denna, Nate, Lucy, or Michael that shares a positive message about dealing with depression. Consider the narrator's motivations and how the events of the narrative have changed them, as this will influence their voice. Try to write in a realistic style that will resonate with an audience of 15-30-year-olds.

KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

ACEEN004	ACEEN005	ACEEN007	ACEEN009
ACEEN011	ACEEN018	ACEEN020	ACEEN021
ACEEN022	ACEEN024	ACEEN025	ACEEN027
ACEEN028	ACEEN034	ACEEN035	ACEEN038
ACEEN039	ACEEN040	ACEEN041	ACEEN042
ACEEN043	ACEEN044	ACEEN059	ACELA1550
ACELA1551	ACELA1552	ACELA1553	ACELA1556
ACELA1557	ACELA1560	ACELA1561	ACELA1562
ACELA1566	ACELA1564	ACELA1569	ACELT1633
ACELT1635	ACELT1636	ACELT1637	ACELT1640
ACELT1641	ACELT1643	ACELT1644	ACELT1771
ACELT1772	ACELT1773	ACELY1742	ACELY1743
ACELY1744	ACELY1745	ACELT1774	ACELT1814

About the Author

Emily Larkin is a Queensland author who loves stories, spending time with family and friends, and finding wonder in the everyday. Emily holds a Doctor of Creative Arts (Creative Writing) from the University of the Sunshine Coast. She writes for children, teens, and adults – and has a special interest in mental health, and using speculative fiction to illuminate contemporary issues. Emily is a contributor to the *Crossed Spaces* speculative fiction anthology, and is the author of the picture book *The Whirlpool*, illustrated by Helene Magisson (Wombat Books, 2017). Emily has presented at overseas writing conferences, and published short fiction in Australian and international literary journals and magazines such as *Meniscus*, *Seizure*, *Idiom 23*, *After the Pause*, *Flumes*, *Black Fox Literary Magazine*, *The Zodiac Review*, *Number Eleven Magazine*, *Literary Orphans*, *Sad Girls Club*, and *Streetlight Magazine*. Emily enjoys holding creative workshops, works with the Queensland Writers Centre, and is a sessional tutor at UQ and QUT College. She also loves reading and more reading, playing D&D, and cuddling animals. To follow Emily, visit <https://www.facebook.com/ehlarkinauthor> or <http://www.ehlarkin.com/>.



Author Note

I began writing *Within the Ward* as part of my doctoral project, which I completed at the University of the Sunshine Coast. Stories like *The Matrix* and *Divergent* fascinate me, and I wanted to explore mental health in a dystopian setting by imagining what would happen if the existing stigma towards depression was taken to an extreme. From my perspective, dystopian fiction portrays a dark version of the future to shine light on contemporary issues. While a future ‘gone wrong’ might sound like bleak stuff, some of my favourite dystopian fiction is hopeful and empowering! It’s so important to overcome stigma, because everyone is touched by mental health issues at some point, whether that’s personally or through a friend, relative, peer, neighbour, or colleague. According to BeyondBlue (2021), about 45 per cent of Australians experience depression on a personal level. Data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2017-2019) indicates that suicide is the leading cause of death for 15-44-year-olds in Australia. This is a very real problem, and ignoring it won’t make it go away.

Understanding is key to helping each other and treating ourselves with kindness. Because everyone is different, depression can look and feel very different to those who are affected by it. My doctoral research and life experiences proved to me again and again that depression is diverse. To try and reflect this, in *Within the Ward*, the characters experience depression in a range of ways. For instance, Nate sometimes expresses anger, Paige feels hopeless or numb on occasion, Thomas has severe headaches, and Rachel’s fatigue causes her to sleep a lot. These are only some experiences of depression. There are many others, and many possible treatments to help individuals enjoy full lives.

In *Within the Ward*, I wanted to explore Paige’s journey as she comes to understand that depression may be part of her life, but does not limit her potential. I hope that by following Paige and her friends through the dark places, readers can better understand depression and keep in mind the importance of holding onto hope in their own lives.

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