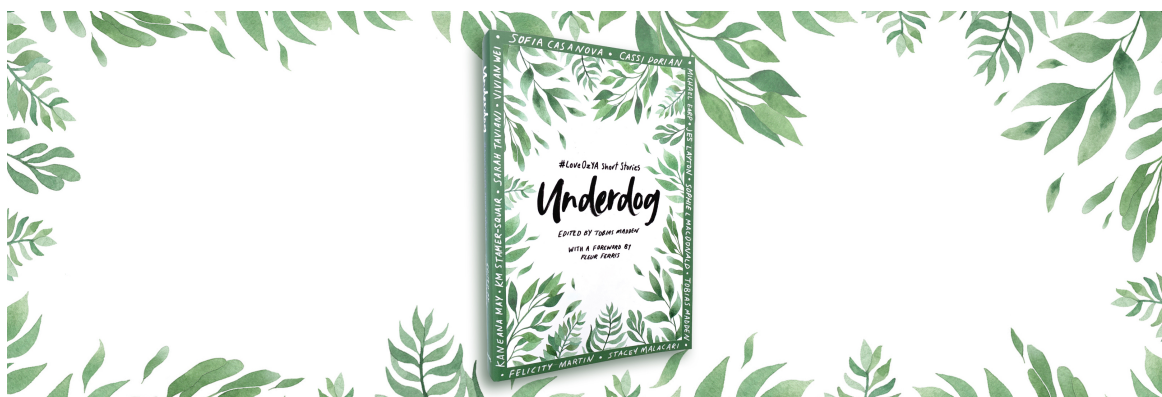


UNDERDOG: #LOVEOZYA SHORT STORIES TEACHERS NOTES



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SYNOPSIS

- *Meet and Greet*: Teen book nerd, Cooper—along with his inner fanboy—attends a writers festival in Melbourne, where he gets to meet his all-time favourite author. Whilst waiting in the signing line, Cooper meets one of his Instagram idols, @ABoyMadeOfBooks. The two boys bond over their shared love of literature, spending the rest of the day together, wandering the moody streets of Melbourne.
- *Breathe Me In*: Mina and her mum relocate from England to a town called Currumbudgee in rural Australia. Mina's new neighbour, Talia, can hear voices in the night, and tells Mina a frightening story about a creature that ends up threatening their lives.
- *Remnants*: In a not-too-distant future, Melody and her family live underground, just like the rest of the world's population. It is too hot to go outside without wearing protective gear. Melody loves piecing together what little information she can find about the past, but then her grandma goes missing and her family is plunged into distress.
- *Mediocre Heroes*: In a dystopian world where everyone has superpowers, Natalie is a member of a support group for people who have none. But she eventually realises she *does* have a superpower, it's just that it's totally lame—so lame that the Super Department won't even recognise it as legitimate. She then finds herself consumed by a hunt for other people like her.
- *The Swan*: One day, whilst crying by a river, Marlowe is attacked by a black swan. The swan then follows her home and haunts her every movement. It often refuses to let her leave the house, it follows her to parties, it gets in the way of her relationships. But the thing is, no one else can even see the swan. Eventually, Marlowe learns to deal with her unwanted companion.

- *A Chinese Menu for the Afterlife*: After the death of her grandfather back in China, the protagonist contemplates her culture and her family's customs in order to come to terms with her grandfather's death.
- *Variation*: Fifteen-year-old Andy is competing at the biggest ballet competition in country Victoria, with hopes of someday training at the Australian Ballet School. The only thing standing in Andy's way is Kyle Shepherd. Andy needs to keep his cool and ignore Kyle's comments if he is going to have a hope in hell of winning the competition.
- *Chemical Expression*: Autumn needs to buy some weed. But not for herself. Their dad is sick and constantly in pain, and the only thing that helps is marijuana. With their dad incapacitated and their mum gone, Autumn is often left to fend for herself. It also means it's their responsibility to find some weed for their dad to alleviate his anguish. No one seems to notice, except Autumn's school principal, who has his suspicions.
- *The Bees*: Not too many years from now, Perth is about to become completely submerged in seawater. Remi's mum plans to drive her and her baby sister to a refugee camp up in the hills, but Remi refuses to leave without her nan. Alone, Remi makes her way across the deserted city to find her nan and take her up to the hills and to safety—that is, if she agrees to come.
- *The Gap Between Us*: A busted tire puts a bit of a dampener on a 'farewell road trip' for Lucy and her best friend, Liz, who is moving to America. The girls bond over shared memories and thoughts of the future. Lucy has no idea what path to follow, and Liz encourages her to pursue her passion for drawing.
- *Afterdeath*: When Hülya wakes up, she knows she is dead. She pieces together fragments of living memory to work out how she ended up dead in her lounge room, and why her boyfriend, Romy, is there in the afterlife with her.
- *Living Rose*: Olive's younger sister, Rose, is everything Olive is not. Rose is popular, relaxed, and dreams of travelling the world. Olive studies and studies and studies. But when a tragic accident occurs, Olive is forced to change her outlook and examine the way she lives her life.

THEMES

Underdog delves into a variety of themes relevant to teenage (and young adult) life in Australia. The text is not intended to be didactic, more so to present different perspectives to teen readers and to let them interpret the stories in their own way. The themes explored by the authors include:

- Identity (cultural, racial, gender, personal, etc.)
- Sexuality (and homophobia, both internal and external)
- Mental health, anxiety and depression
- Death and grief

- Love
- Relationships (platonic, romantic, familial)
- Choices (and decisions that impact one's life in an profound way)
- Climate change and the environment
- Multiculturalism in Australia
- Social media
- Being the 'underdog'

WRITING STYLE

Michael Earp – *Meet and Greet*: 'I chose to write my story in first-person present tense because I wanted it to be a personal experience. I wanted the reader to be right there with Cooper as the day unfolds, and to know what it's like for him to meet his idol and feel that spark of meeting someone new.'

Sophie L Macdonald – *Breathe Me In*: 'The mystical, magical, or supernatural often have a way of working their way into my stories, and this one was no different. The bunyip in *Breathe Me In* is both real and unreal—a thing that will die if you don't notice it at all, but something that will swallow you up if you let it. I wanted the narrative itself to have that feel of both the everyday and the mystical. The bunyip itself can be interpreted in different ways, but I will leave that for the reader to decide.'

KM Stamer-Squair – *Remnants*: 'I used two different narrative voices in *Remnants* to convey an idea of fragmentation. Melody's narrative represents the world through the eyes of a young adult; her first-person account of a dystopian future creates a point of connection between the reader and narrator. Her story is then disrupted with an omniscient third-person narration, which describes events as they occurred in the past.'

Sarah Taviani – *Mediocre Heroes*: '*Mediocre Heroes* is written in first-person past tense. I wanted to create a sense of intimacy with the reader, as though the main character, Natalie, is telling them a story and actively engaging with them.'

Felicity Martin – *The Swan*: 'The writing style is inspired by Edgar Allen Poe and American/Australian Gothic stories. Originally, *The Swan* was supposed to be a fairy tale but it ended up turning quite dark.'

Vivian Wei – *The Chinese Menu for the Afterlife*: 'I chose to write in the creative non-fiction form so I could share my own personal story through my piece. I wanted to share some genuine experiences in my short story so that the audience could really relate to the characters and understand their journey on a more personal level.'

Tobias Madden – *Variation*: 'I wrote *Variation* in two distinct sections, which I then split up into smaller passages throughout the story. The italicised sections describe Andy's performance at the eisteddfod, written in first-person present tense to create a sense of 'real time' immediacy and to place the reader directly in the moment. In the other sections—written in first-person past tense—Andy tells the reader key stories from his past that led to the present moment. For these passages, I chose a colloquial, conversational narrative style.'

Jes Layton – *Chemical Expression*: ‘The story alternates between ‘Now’ segments and ‘Then’ segments. The ‘Now’ segments take place after Autumn has procured drugs for their sick father. The ‘Then’ sections lead up to this moment. The separate segments give the reader an insight into Autumn’s anxiety and motivation, both before and after doing something that is considered ‘wrong’.’

Stacey Malacari – *The Bees*: ‘I write a lot of dialogue because I like the way it builds character. I also try to bring the characters to life via small actions—like the way Remi’s mum crouches down for a moment by the roadside as they are saying goodbye, but quickly pulls herself back together. I prefer to leave the reader wanting more than be overwhelmed with exposition.’

Sofia Casanova – *The Gap Between Us*: ‘I chose to write in first-person because *a*) it captures Lucy’s voice as authentically as possible, and *b*) I find that teens who read YA connect better with characters who narrate in first-person. I also found that Lucy’s own voice came naturally in this way.’

Cassi Dorian – *Afterdeath*: ‘The writing style for this piece is surrealist. It attempts to bridge reality and imagination by creating a link between Hülya’s subconscious mind (her nightmarish existence) and her memories, which are being uncovered as the story progresses. The story is divided between her death and her life—one abstract and exempt from logic, and the other firmly placed in reality—and the closer she comes to the truth, the closer the two become.’

Kaneana May – *Living Rose*: ‘*Living Rose* is written in a third-person limited omniscient voice, told through the point of view of Olive Atkins. The story is written in present tense, mainly because it comes most naturally to me after years spent writing television scripts.’

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Michael Earp – *Meet and Greet*: ‘This story came about after an event at Melbourne Writers Festival, where I got to meet one of my own literary idols, David Levithan. Afterwards, some friends and I went to a café in Degrares Street and I had a hot chocolate and some chips. It was such a beautiful feeling, to be in friendly company, sheltering from Melbourne’s changeable weather. I had been messaging someone on Instagram that day about our fandom of David, and then when I got home the story just poured out of me.’

Sophie L Macdonald – *Breathe Me In*: ‘Like Mina, I moved to Australia from England and, like most of us who move to a different country, I had many misconceptions surrounding what would be my new home. Prior to the move, I (admittedly ignorantly) thought Australia to be a new country, and I knew little of its myths and ancient history. As I learnt more about Australian stories and culture, I became interested in the ways in which stories could be living, breathing entities, and how a story can be as much a part of the land as a tree or a creature.’

KM Stamer-Squair – *Remnants*: ‘We live in a time of increasing environmental concern and I wanted to pay homage to this. I spent a year of research learning about the effects of the Anthropocene on a planetary scale—how climate change, overconsumption, sexism, racism

and environmental degradation are all interrelated issues. Having conversations about where we are heading is so important. I think we can do great things if we educate ourselves and take responsibility for our actions.’

Sarah Taviani – *Mediocre Heroes*: ‘Whether it’s due to sexuality, intelligence, sportiness, physical appearance, cultural background or some other aspect of life, I think everyone has (at some stage) felt like they don’t fit in. With *Mediocre Heroes*, I wanted to create a world where *all of us* would feel out of place. I also wanted to focus on the things that got me through the tough times—strong friendships, honest relationships, and trying not to let someone else’s opinion shape how I felt about myself.’

Felicity Martin – *The Swan*: ‘*The Swan* definitely borrows themes from *The Raven* (Edgar Allan Poe), but is primarily about dealing with depression and the different ‘relationships’ people can have with it.’

Vivian Wei – *The Chinese Menu for the Afterlife*: ‘As a young, first-generation Asian female growing up in Australia, I’ve always struggled to understand my identity. Being raised in Wagga Wagga, there was no ‘figure’ I could look up to. I wanted this story to be a form of critical pedagogy to educate and challenge readers about the internal conflicts that Australian-born Asians face, such as emotional barriers between cultures and the underrepresentation of Asians in the media. I’ve shared this through the bond of food, something that we can all relate to.’

Tobias Madden – *Variation*: ‘The story is part personal experience, part fiction. Everyone’s ‘coming out’ story is vastly different and, for me, it took years to fully accept my sexuality. This wasn’t so much because I feared the judgement of others, but because I was judging *myself* and suppressing important parts of my personality that I was afraid of. I experienced a lot of ‘internalised homophobia’, just as Andy does in the story, and I wanted to write honestly about what that feels like as a teenage boy in a country town.’

Jes Layton – *Chemical Expression*: ‘I wrote this story because all too often, the only issues queer teen characters face in fiction is the fact that they are queer. As a writer and a queer person, I wanted to show—similar to my own experience—that a teen’s queerness is sometimes incidental and that, often, there are far more pressing issues and concerns that we face growing up. I wanted to show how it’s as much our decisions, as the chemicals inside us, that make us who we are.’

Stacey Malacari – *The Bees*: ‘My motivation for this story can be summed up in Nan’s line, “If the world ended, would you die happy?” Obviously, I take a lot of inspiration from Margaret Atwood, not just *The Handmaids Tale* but also *Oryx and Crake*—that whole idea of a messed-up future composed entirely of elements that are already found in the present (like refugee camps). Overall, the story is about human connections, and the choices we make out of love and loyalty, even when we know it might not be the smartest choice, or the easiest.’

Sofia Casanova – *The Gap Between Us*: ‘I wanted to capture the time after your first year of university, that long stretch of holidays where you’re in a state of limbo and questioning

everything. It's based on my own experience of finding my footing in a society that demands you know how everything works from the get-go. I was also inspired by my friends who have stuck with me since high school through thick and thin. In a way, this is a dedication to them.'

Cassi Dorian – *Afterdeath*: 'The story is a *Romeo and Juliet* retelling. I wanted to capture a modern Australian take on a classic tale, with characters that reflect the current climate. Racial tensions are always a contentious topic in Australia, and prejudices still exist between cultures. I grew up in an area that was very multicultural and I wanted to explore those dynamics and show that, despite the divide shown in the news, Australia really can succeed as a multicultural nation.'

Kaneana May – *Living Rose*: 'I wanted to explore the relationship between sisters. Some days you get along with your siblings, other days you don't. I also wanted to deal with grief, and (then) gaining strength, touching on themes of judgement and acceptance. Another element I wanted to include in *Living Rose* was the use of technology. Many teenagers are so heavily reliant on their phones, so I wanted phones/technology to feel natural in the story. If you look carefully, there is a reference to an online post in every conversation Olive and Rose have.'

EDITOR BACKGROUND

Tobias Madden (Editor) – Tobias is a writer, editor, and proud Hufflepuff. Originally from Ballarat, Tobias worked as a singer/dancer/actor for 10 years, touring Australia and New Zealand with musicals such as *Mary Poppins*, *CATS*, and *Guys and Dolls*. He now works in Digital Marketing for Bloomsbury Australia. In 2017, he edited an indie anthology called *WOLVES*, and typeset another, called *Seasons of Discontent*. *Underdog* is Tobias's first commercial undertaking as an editor, and he hopes that what started out as a very humble idea will grow into something much bigger: a platform for unpublished #LoveOzYA writers to showcase their work and have their voices heard.

EDITORIAL COMMENT

Underdog is the first #LoveOzYA anthology for unpublished writers. The project was specifically designed to foster the growth of aspiring Australian young adult fiction writers, and to provide them with a platform to have their voices heard.

The *Underdog* team took online submissions of young adult short stories over a period of three months. The original 'brief' read: 'We believe young adult fiction is the perfect form for expressing what it means to be Australian. We are excited to publish short stories that celebrate the diverse, dynamic and ever-changing nature of our nation's culture, or that challenge the idea of what it means to be "Australian".'

After receiving over 100 submissions, the team selected 12 short stories for publication. The primary selection criteria focused on the quality of the writing and the effectiveness of the storytelling. Diversity (in terms of characters and themes) was another element that factored heavily in the final decision making, whilst the team tried to compile an eclectic and 'satisfying' anthology that would give the reader a complete reading experience. The selected stories were then subjected to three stringent rounds of editing by the editor and assistant editor, starting with structural (or 'big picture') edits, followed by detailed line edits, and copy edits.

STUDY NOTES/EXERCISES

- Compare the characters' different experiences of finding/coming to terms with their identity in *Variation*, *The Chinese Menu for the Afterlife*, *The Gap Between Us*, *Mediocre Heroes*, and *Living Rose*.
- Discuss Australia's identity. How do the stories in *Underdog* relate to the identity of our country? How has Australia's identity changed over the generations? Has it changed for the better? What can we do to contribute to a national sense of identity?
- In *Breathe Me In*, Mina calls Australia a 'young' country. Discuss the ramifications of comments like this on Indigenous peoples/culture.
- Compare the characters' different experiences of growing up gay in *Variation*, *The Bees*, *The Swan*, and *Meet and Greet*. Discuss how both external and internal influences affect the characters' perception of their own sexuality.
- The characters in the *Underdog* stories all play very different roles in their families. (see *Chemical Expression*, *Living Rose*, *The Chinese Menu for the Afterlife*, and *Remnants*, in particular). Think about your role in your family. What would be a fictional setting for a short story you could use to describe your role in an exaggerated/dramatised way?
- Which stories deal with mental health, anxiety, and depression? Discuss the importance of young adult stories about mental health.
- Which stories feature flawed characters? Is it important for teens to read stories about imperfect characters? If so, why?
- How does the use of social media affect the characters in *Meet and Greet*, *Living Rose*, *The Gap Between Us*? Is it positive or negative? When is social media beneficial, and when does it become toxic?
- How does the global climate crisis relate to *Remnants* and *The Bees*? What are some other possible effects of climate change that could be used as a setting for a short story?
- Identify the 'speculative fiction' stories in *Underdog*. What kind of stories are best told through speculative fiction?
- *The Swan* is an allegorical story. What is allegory? Brainstorm an idea for an allegorical story of your own.
- *Breathe Me In* uses a fictional creature in a realistic setting. Identify other books/stories that use this technique (called magic realism). Write a story set in the real world, but include a fantastical element.
- Compare the use of flashbacks and flash-forwards—in terms of storytelling and dramatic structure—in *Variation*, *Chemical Expression* and *Afterdeath*.
- Write about a time you were the 'underdog'.