

Have You Seen Ally Queen?

Deb Fitzpatrick

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Synopsis

Ally Queen is beginning Year 10 in a new school, in a new town. Her family has moved to the small coastal town of Melros, about 80 kilometres south of Perth. After her mother witnessed a shocking car accident, Ally's parents decided it would do them all good to leave the fast-paced life of the big-smoke for a quieter, simpler, healthier existence in the country. But Ally hates it. She's lonely, she's unhappy and she's bored. The move is the worst thing that's ever happened to her.

And everything about Melros seems to confirm it. The kids at school are nasty, the teachers are weird, and there's absolutely nothing to do in the town. One boy, the unfortunately named Rel, particularly infuriates Ally. The single redeeming thing about the whole situation is the beach, only a short walk across the dunes from her new house. There she can swim, fish, and most importantly, be herself.

But just as Ally begins to get settled into her new life, things get more difficult. Ally's mum has always been unusual, but since she saw the car crash, she has begun acting strangely.

Moving to Melros was supposed to take her away from the stresses of life in the city, but her psychological state continues to deteriorate, and one day she won't get out of bed. They discover that she has post-traumatic stress disorder, and she goes to stay with her sister-in-law while she recovers. With an ill mother, and no one to turn to for support, Ally begins to withdraw.

She won't talk to anyone about her troubles, especially not the nosy school counsellor. She would rather be alone at the beach than with any of the kids at school. She doesn't even want to be around her dad or her brother, who are doing a pretty pathetic job of looking after themselves without Mum. She hatches a plan to hitchhike up to Mandurah and take the train to Perth, to visit her best friend Shelley and just get away from everything.



But before she can leave, she finally finds a friend. On one of her solo trips to the beach, Ally noticed a mulberry tree in someone's yard, heavy with ripe fruit. She picked some, and determined to come back for more. She soon realises that the place with the tree is Rel's - they're virtually neighbours. And to make the situation worse, everyone at school has worked it out too. Now she seems to see him everywhere. She sees him walking to school and coming home, as well as in class. He finds her at the beach and they get talking.

As they spend more time together, Ally realises that Rel isn't as annoying as she once thought. In fact, he's pretty cool. He's what Ally has been missing. When the school organises a camping trip in the Stirling Ranges, Rel is keen to go, but Ally is not so sure. It would be great to spend time with him, but it clashes with her planned trip to Perth. Ally finally decides to go, and it proves to be the right decision. She and Rel have a great time, and find a friendship they had never expected.

Themes

Have You Seen Ally Queen? explores the particular experience of being a teenager in contemporary Australia. Ally's dislocation and subsequent anxiety in Melros is a metaphor for the isolation everyone feels at times, especially as young adults, who are shaping and discovering their identity. Ally's great anxiety, especially at the beginning of the novel, is that she does not have any friends in Melros; they're all back up in Perth, and they're too far away to visit. Ally misses the community and camaraderie that like-minded peers provide. Her family is warm and caring, but she needs other people to give her the necessary support to negotiate this time of flux.

Ally is especially in need of support once her mother becomes ill. Her mother's mental disorder, and her removal from Ally's life as she recovers, presents Ally with a new and far more difficult challenge. How will she deal with her mother's illness? How will she cope living with two domestically challenged fellas? And how will she explain it to all the students and teachers at school? Ally has to grow up very fast, and while at times it seems the weight is going to crush her, she rises to the challenge. She is helped in her struggle by Rel, in whom she finds both the support she needs and the friend she has been missing.

Have You Seen Ally Queen? is a meditation on family, friendship, illness and health. Ally's mother's illness is presented in matter-of-fact terms, allowing the reader to see both the debilitating reality of mental disorder, without stigmatisation. Ally can't deal with these challenges on her own, but with Rel's help she is healed of her anxiety.

Style

Have You Seen Ally Queen? is written in a casual and colloquial style that faithfully captures the voice and idiom of the Australian teenager. The story is narrated by Ally in the first person. The chapters are very short, and usually describe just one small event or thought. This creates the effect of a series of personal journal entries, giving the reader the feeling that they are inside Ally's head, experiencing life as she does. Vocabulary and sentence structure are never difficult or convoluted, but the prose bounces along in a light, unprepossessing lilt. Present tense gives the reader the impression of immediacy, allowing them to journey with Ally, both narratively and psychologically, as the story and her character

develop.

About the author

Deb Fitzpatrick lives and works in Fremantle. Her first novel, *90 Packets of Instant Noodles* was published in 2010 and selected by the Children's Book Council of Australia as a Notable Book. An early draft of *Have You Seen Ally Queen?* was shortlisted for the 2007 TAG Hungerford Award.

Author's motivation

(Extracted from a longer author interview included at the end of the notes)

This novel began with Ally's voice — it came into my head and she wouldn't stop talking! I could see that, through Ally, I could delve into the life of a contemporary teenage girl, and that really interested me. Second was the book's location. My husband's family has had a holiday house at Melros, a tiny coastal hamlet just south of Mandurah in WA, as long as I have known him. My stays there have had a big effect on me and have partly shaped my relationship with the WA coast. Through Melros I have learned about swell, reef, seaweed, crabbing and beachcombing. I wanted to record some of that. There's no doubt that some of Ally's experiences and anxieties are similar to my own as a teenager. As a bit of a tom-boy, I certainly struggled with notions of femininity. This was made harder by the fact that I was the tallest girl at school—every year—and taller than a lot of the boys. How I longed to be cute, small and girlish (whatever that is!). Of course, I came to realise the benefits of my height, and I love now that I'm the kind of girl who can sling on a backpack and do a hard, long hike, but it hasn't always been that way.

BEFORE READING

Journal response

Write a journal response considering the following questions:

- What do you think it would be like if your family moved to a country town tomorrow?
- What challenges would you face?
- How would you deal with them?
- Do you think it would be easy or hard for you? Why?

Prediction study

Write a description of the front cover.

What images are used? How are they positioned? What colours are used?

Fill in the following table. Place image conventions in the first column, then describe how they're used on the cover of the novel, and why you think the publishers decided to use them this way.

Image convention	How it's used on cover	Why it's used this way

Image convention	How it's used on cover	Why it's used this way

What connotations does the title have for you? What words, ideas or images does it bring to mind? Discuss what you think the title means.

Based on your study of the cover and the title, write your prediction of the novel.

- What do you think is going to happen in the book?
- Who is Ally Queen?
- What do you think she is like?
- What do you think the book will be about?
- What ideas or themes will it explore?

DURING READING

Plot summary

Keep a note of what happens to Ally in each chapter, and how Ally feels about it. You could draw a table like this (write one sentence in each box):

Title of chapter	What happens	How Ally feels

This will help you to understand how the story develops, and how Ally develops as a character. You can also review the table to remind yourself of what happens in the novel.

AFTER READING

Timeline and graphing activity

Take the information in your table of chapter summaries, and convert it into a timeline of events. The novel takes place over the course of a year. Get an A3 piece of paper, and draw a line along the page, long ways. This line represents the year of the book. Try to work out when each event happens. Include events such as:

- Moving to Melros
- Discovering the seal
- Rel putting the orange peel in his mouth
- Mum staying in bed all day
- Mum moving to her sister-in-law's
- Meeting the school counsellor

- Discovering the mulberry tree
- Meeting Rel at the beach
- Rel giving Ally the bracelet
- Going on the camp

Once you have finished the timeline, add a graph of how you think Ally is feeling at each point in the story. This should be easy if you have kept notes in your table. You may want to discuss these feelings with other students, the class or the teacher.

Chart Ally's emotions. Use the timeline as your x-axis against how Ally is feeling as your y-axis. You could go beneath the timeline if her emotion is negative, and above the line if it's positive. Connect up your dots to form a graph.

Compare your graph with other students' graphs. Discuss any differences your graph has with theirs. Why did you understand that part of the book differently? Remember, there is no right or wrong answer; treat each other's ideas with respect!

Mapping activity

Create a map of Melros and the surrounding areas.

You will need to collect information from the book about where important locations are. You won't be able to get precise information on every location, so you will need to make educated guesses about where some places are.

Draw your map on A3 paper. Add short descriptions of important events that happen at each location.

Research presentation task

The novel explores mental illness and its effect on families, through Ally's mum's post-traumatic stress disorder.

Discuss your experience of mental illness. Do you know anyone who has been ill in this way? What effect did it have on the person?

In a group, research post-traumatic stress disorder. Create a presentation that answers the following questions:

- What is post-traumatic stress disorder?
- How is it caused?
- What does it feel like to have post-traumatic stress disorder?
- How is it treated?
- What are the best things you can do for someone who is suffering in this way?

Design a public awareness campaign on post-traumatic stress disorder.

- What do people need to know about the condition?
- What would be the most effective way to communicate that information to them?

- How are you going to help people understand and remember the condition?
- How are you going to help people understand how to help people with the condition?

Design a poster that will help people to understand this condition.

Imagine that your poster will be displayed in a train. Create your poster, and present it to the class. Explain how it will communicate with the viewer.

Creative writing tasks

1. Continue the story.

The novel finishes with Mum back home, and Ally and Rel enjoying their new relationship. Imagine what might happen after the end of the novel. Does Ally stay in Melros? Does she visit Shel in Perth? Or does she have adventures with Rel?

Write one or more new chapters that extend the story after the end of the novel. Make sure you write in the same style as the novel. You will need to consider these questions:

- What tense is the novel in?
- Who is the narrator of novel?
- What is the tone of the narration? What kind of feeling does it have?
- What is the style of the language? What kinds of words are used? Are the sentences long or short? Simple or complicated? Formal or informal?

2. Write part of the novel from the perspective of another character.

Choose a character, and write a part of the novel from their perspective. You could choose Mum, Dad, Jerry, Rel, Ms Carey, or even Rel's mum. Write in first person, with your character as the narrator.

You will need to consider these questions:

- What does your character know? What don't they know?
- How do they feel about the events you are describing?
- How would they speak or write? What kinds of words would they use? Would they speak in a simple or complicated way? A formal or informal way?

Debate task

Hold a debate in the class on one or more of the themes explored in the novel.

To do this, you will need to get into groups of three, and then pair up with another group. One group will take the affirmative side, and the other will take the negative side. After you have mastered the particular conventions and techniques of debating, you can prepare your arguments.

Choose one of the three debate statements below:

Statement 1: You can't get through life without friends.

Statement 2: Living in the country is healthier than living in the city.

Statement 3: A person's identity is shaped by the people around them.

Present your debate to the class, with the teacher or other students as adjudicator/s. After the debate, discuss each argument as a class. Was it a good argument? Were you convinced by it? Why or why not?

Interview with Deb Fitzpatrick

Your first book received praise from many reviewers around the country. Has that made you a more confident writer? Why, why not?

Having the positive responses of many to *90 Packets of Instant Noodles* has definitely given me more confidence in my writing. That confidence is gold when it comes to narrative risk-taking, and I'm so grateful for it. It's also left me with a sense of responsibility to fulfil these reviewers' expectations with a second title! But I thrive under pressure and hope very much that I can meet their expectations. It's good to be pushed.

How did the latest novel come about?

The first thing was Ally's voice—it came into my head and she wouldn't stop talking! I could see that, through Ally, I could delve into the life of a contemporary teenage girl, and that really interested me. Second was the book's location. My husband's family has had a holiday house at Melros, a tiny coastal hamlet just south of Mandurah in WA, as long as I have known him. My stays there have had a big effect on me and have partly shaped my relationship with the WA coast. Through Melros I have learned about swell, reef, seaweed, crabbing and beachcombing. I wanted to record some of that.

There is a touch of romance in this novel – sometimes Ally is romancing a boy, sometimes she's really romancing herself. Which ends up being more important and why?

What an interesting point—I would never have thought of it like that! You're spot-on, of course. Ally's relationship with herself is ultimately the more important of the two 'romances', since she's not able to engage genuinely with Rel until she comes to a state of acceptance about herself. That said, Rel helps her come to that state, so without him she might never have grown in the ways she needs to in the novel. It's a very interesting point, and it's at the heart of the book.

Body image and preconceived notions of womanhood is something you touch on in *Have You Seen Ally Queen*? In what ways have you grappled with this in your life or is it something you've noticed in those around you?

There's no doubt that some of Ally's experiences and anxieties are similar to my own as a teenager. As a bit of a tomboy, I certainly struggled with notions of femininity. This was made harder by the fact that I was the tallest girl at school — every year — and taller than a lot of the boys. How I longed to be cute, small and girlish (whatever that is!). Of course, I came to realise the benefits of my height, and I love that now I'm the kind of girl who can sling on a backpack and do a hard, long hike, but it hasn't always been that way.

Your first book had a boy protagonist who was isolated and needed time to work out what his priorities in life were. Ally seems equally isolated, in her own way. Is this something you relate to as an author and how?

As a writer and a reader I'm fascinated by an isolated protagonist. I think isolation can teach us an enormous amount about our own character. I love the mystery behind the isolated character, and the potential it offers the writer. I know that many writers talk about how isolating writing is, but, to be honest, I revel in that aloneness, and sometimes long for more! Of course, that's balanced by the fact that I have young children and so don't actually get much time to myself at all. For me, the times I have felt most isolated in a disconcerting or even frightening way have been when I have felt geographically isolated. There's something incredibly powerful and unsettling about being in a foreign landscape, even when you are relatively close to home.

What was it like writing a female character after writing Joel in *90 Packets of Instant Noodles*? Was it harder / easier?

It was harder in a way, because I felt a great responsibility to create an authentic female character—and had no excuse if I didn't manage it!

Like a number of novels for young adults, both books feature an emotionally and/or physically unavailable mother – why do you think this theme is something that writers find so inspiring?

Characters that are vulnerable are appealing to me. I want to know them and pull away the layers they have gathered around them to protect themselves, if only for a moment. If a parent is absent, for any reason, I think this rocks us at our very core. Obviously, children are most vulnerable in this situation. In many ways I think writers want to 'save' or protect their characters, and part of writing about them allows them to get closer to that end.

Why is water so important to Ally?

Water is such an evocative element. From the technical point of view, there's much a writer can do with an expressive (and constantly changing) landscape. Subconsciously, Ally sees her own ambivalence reflected in the behaviour of the water, and this provides some comfort to her in difficult times. The ocean in front of her house is by turns both vicious and gentle, just as life is.

How do you stay in touch with what a teenager thinks, feels, talks about and is grappling with?

My own inner teenager is very close to the surface of my adult skin!! That said, I keep abreast of current YA literature and try to read widely. I also love meeting teenagers and listening to their interests and concerns, and I try to take these on board to a certain extent when I'm working on a project.

Tell us about the process of finding the cover for your latest book?

In order to find the right cover for *Have You Seen Ally Queen?*, Fremantle Press made a shortlist of the top three designs, and presented these to several groups of high school students. The students were asked to fill out a brief survey indicating which cover they liked

TEACHING NOTES

best and why. The winner was a standout. From there, final 'treatment' of that original cover design was created, and that's what was printed and wrapped around my book. I'm so happy with the cover and am especially pleased that my readers had a say in it.

For more information about Deb Fitzpatrick go to: www.debfitzpatrick.com.au/