

## TEACHER'S NOTES

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# *If I Tell You*

by Alicia Tuckerman

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Alicia Tuckerman is a driving force for young LGBT voices in Australia. She was raised in rural NSW before leaving home at the age of sixteen to accept a position to study at the Hunter School of Performing Arts.

Described as having an overactive imagination as a child, she recalls writing stories her entire life. Alicia attributes surviving her teenage years to the comfort, release and escape writing offered and she hopes to inspire the next generation of readers and writers to embrace their true passions.

Alicia was inspired to write *If I Tell You* after finding a lack of YA novels featuring central lesbian characters. She draws on her life experiences to explore the joys, triumphs and cruelties of modern day adolescence and considers there is no fantasy world she could create more

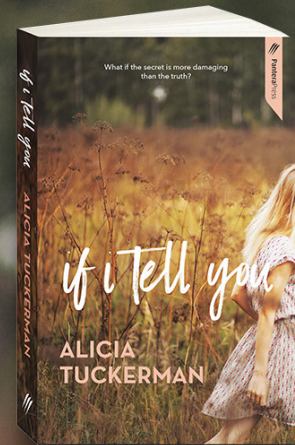
terrifyingly beautiful than the one we're expected to live in.

Alicia is a law clerk and now lives in the Swan Valley region of Perth with her wife and two children. She does most of her writing in the small hours before the kids wake up, or on her daily commute to the office!



WHAT IF THE SECRET IS MORE DAMAGING

Than the truth?



## ABOUT THE BOOK

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*“The second our eyes lock in the dark is all the time I need to know that whatever happens next, my life will never be the same.”*

Life and love don't wait until you're ready, but what if finding yourself means losing everything you've ever known?

Seventeen-year-old Alex Summers lives with a secret and the constant fear someone will find out. But when a new family moves to town, they bring with them their teenage daughter Phoenix Stone. When Alex falls for Phoenix, there is no warning. In a small town with small minds, girls don't go out with other girls, even if they want to.

In fear there is bravery – you can either cling to the edge or have the courage to jump. But what do you do when you're left spiralling through the freefall?

This is a heart-wrenching story of love in an unloving Australian landscape.

# DISCUSSION STARTERS

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## Before reading

1. In looking at the title of the book, what themes might the novel explore?
2. "What if the secret is more damaging than the truth?" is posed to the reader on the cover. What situations can you think of when you might ask yourself, or others, this question?
3. Considering the question, the title and the cover image, what are three alternative titles you might give the novel?
4. This book comes under the Young Adult category. Are there any other categories you would add?
5. How do we champion social change and progression?
6. Tuckerman describes the world we live in as "terrifyingly beautiful." Why might this be?
7. What are your initial thoughts on the book before reading it? Are you judging it by its cover?

## Chapter 1-3

8. The novel opens with Alex's dreams of a wedding. What images and feelings are conjured by this?
9. Why might Tuckerman begin with this dream? What tone does it set for the rest of the novel?
10. The protagonist, Alex, divulges to the reader that she is a lesbian. How does this shatter her illusion of "the perfect wedding"?
11. Marriage equality came into effect at the end of 2017. Given that the story takes place before this constitutional change, how does this affect Alex's struggle with identity?
12. What factors influence Alex to keep her sexual identity a secret?

## Chapter 4-10

13. What is a moral dilemma? Does Alex face a moral dilemma? Why or why not?
14. What does the idea of baking a Victoria sponge represent to Alex?
15. Alex compares taking the step to be with Phoenix to skydiving. What else would you compare it to?
16. Fear is a key theme in the book. Why is Alex scared? Give examples from the text.
17. What does Justin represent, both in his character and his views?
18. What discrimination is Alex facing?
19. Discuss why country attitudes, like those in Two Creeks, might appear this way.
20. Justin asks Alex if Phoenix wants to be "normal" (p.126). What does he mean by this? Is there a "normal"?
21. What would the world look like if we were all normal?

## THEMES

- Fear and bravery
- Friendship and family
- Identity and conformity
- Bullying and acceptance
- Moral duty and dilemmas
- Judgement and prejudice
- Morality and mortality
- Love and hate



# DISCUSSION STARTERS

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## Chapter 11 - 14

22. When Alex and Phoenix go skydiving, it represents a turning point for Alex. Why is this?
23. Why is it hard for Justin to accept that Alex is not in love with him?
24. What sources of pressure does Justin face?
25. Alex's relationship with her mother is very conflicted. Why is this? Give examples from the text.
26. There is a dichotomy in the book between public image and the truth. Discuss.
34. Why do you think Phoenix did not tell Alex about her illness? Do you think it was the right choice? Relate it back to your discussion of moral dilemmas.
35. What decision would you have made if you were in Phoenix's position?
36. Why do you think Alex called her mother after visiting the hospital? What does this moment represent for her?
37. Why do you think people often resort to anger, like Alex's mother, when they are faced with situations they can't control? What does this say about humanity?

## Chapter 15 - 19

27. What do you believe was Tuckerman's intent when creating Van's character?
28. Discuss the symbolism of Alex's first performance.
29. When Alex comes to the pub to give her first performance, her dad makes a speech to the entire audience about her sexual orientation. Why is this an important moment for Alex and her father?
30. How does Alex's relationship with Phoenix change her? How does she grow? Consider the themes of the text when discussing.
31. Why does Alex say that the town motto, *Two Creeks, pride of the Central West*, mocks her?
38. In hospital, Phoenix tells Alex why she didn't reveal her illness earlier. Was this the best environment for this discussion? Why/why not?
39. Alex states: "You went on and on about telling everyone the truth and being brave and telling me I should jump! Were you ever going to tell me?" Do you think Phoenix was being hypocritical? Discuss all possible answers.
40. Why do you think Tuckerman chose not to include details about Phoenix's death?
41. When it comes time for Alex to leave Two Creeks, her mother accompanies her father. Why is this a turning point for the two characters?
42. Why did Tuckerman finish the story discussing the photo of Alex and Phoenix?
43. What do you think this photo represents for Alex?

## Chapter 20 - 23

32. Discuss the concept of escapism and how it applies to the text.
33. Why do you think Gilly is important to Alex?

## ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

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44. How does the environment and landscape shape or reflect the characters?
45. Do you think Alex made the correct choice in coming out to her family, friends and the community? Why?
46. Alex ultimately emerges with a large support network of friends and family. Why is it important for her to recognise this?
47. What fears did Alex have regarding this support network at the beginning of the novel?
48. Do you think a tragic event, such as Phoenix's illness, was necessary for Alex to truly grow into herself?
49. After Phoenix, if you were Alex, what would you do? Go to college, travel, perform etc.

## EXAM QUESTIONS

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- Tuckerman presents a variety of women in *If I Tell You*. In what ways are these characters portrayed?
- Conformity versus the individual is a theme explored throughout the text. How does Tuckerman compare the importance of satisfying both the protagonist's needs and the needs of the community?
- Sexual identity is the pilot theme of *If I Tell You*. To what extent do you agree with this statement?

# ACTIVITIES

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- Before reading the book, complete a Know/Want/Learn chart. Complete the chart and discuss once the book has been read.
- Brainstorm any other issues/themes/ideas the book might explore.
- While reading, highlight quotes that are significant to you. Connect to a theme or explore literary devices.
- One theme explored is the notion of individuality versus conformity. Alex has to find her way out of conflicts with herself and her community. Identify the steps she takes to do this. Locate two quotes and juxtapose them to show how Alex overcomes these conflicts.
- Create a program or campaign for social change on a current affair.
- Write a series of letters from another character's point of view at various stages during the book. What might their struggles be during this time?
- Identify key themes of the book with the class. In pairs or groups (4 people max), collect quotes or identify chapters in the book that explore these themes.
- Many of the book's themes work in a dichotomy. Can you have one without the other?
- Pick two complimentary themes and try to blend and establish a single theme that encompasses both.
- Many of the book's themes work in a dichotomy. Can you have one without the other?
- Pick two complimentary themes and try to blend and establish a single theme that encompasses both.
- *If I Tell You* is set in rural Australia. Tuckerman creates some beautiful images of the landscape throughout the novel. Find some quotes and identify the literary devices.
  - *Option 1:* Locate an image of Australia and write your own passage describing the landscape. Use a variety of literary devices.
  - *Option 2:* Find a passage in the novel describing the setting that resonates with you. Recreate this image in an artistic manner. You might like to paint, photograph, write, draw, build or even perform your response to the passage.
- Brainstorm what traits you believe you possess. Do they match up to a character?
- Provide a quote from the book to match each trait you identify.
- Aristotle explored "virtue ethics" in much of his work. Investigate this concept. Once you are familiar with the idea, provide each character with a virtue you think they possess and discuss their deficiencies and excesses.
- Brainstorm how each character might represent an obstacle for another.
- Create a photo essay or journal to represent a character's transition and growth.
- In *If I Tell You*, the community involves themselves in each other's lives. What is an issue you are involved in with your community? Is it the same as in *Two Creeks*? Describe how it differs. Present your findings in any form.

## FURTHER READING

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- *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* by Becky Albertalli
- *Tomorrow When the War Began* by John Marsden
- *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner
- *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin
- *Rose of No Man's Land* by Michelle Tea
- *Hero* by Perry Moore
- *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio
- *The Glass Castle* by Jeanette Walls
- *I am Malala* by Malala Yousafzai
- *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green
- *I Had Such Friends* by Meg Gatland-Veness
- *A Walk to Remember* by Nicholas Sparks
- *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky
- *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett
- *She Persisted* by Chelsea Clinton
- *The Clockwork Three* by Matthew J. Kirby
- *The Advocate* by Randy Singer
- *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou
- *A Wolf at the Table: a Memoir of My Father* by Augusten Burroughs
- *Faceless* by Alyssa B. Sheinmel
- *Everything, Everything* by Nicola Yoon
- *Untwine* by Edwidge Danticat
- *Far from You* by Tess Sharpe
- *If You Could be Mine* by Sara Farizan
- *Luna* by Julie Anne Peters
- *Great* by Sara Benincasa
- *Shadowplay* by Laura Lam
- *One Man Guy* by Michael Barakiva
- *Adam* by Ariel Schrag
- *Everything Leads to You* by Nina LaCour
- *Otherbound* by Corinne Duyvis



## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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