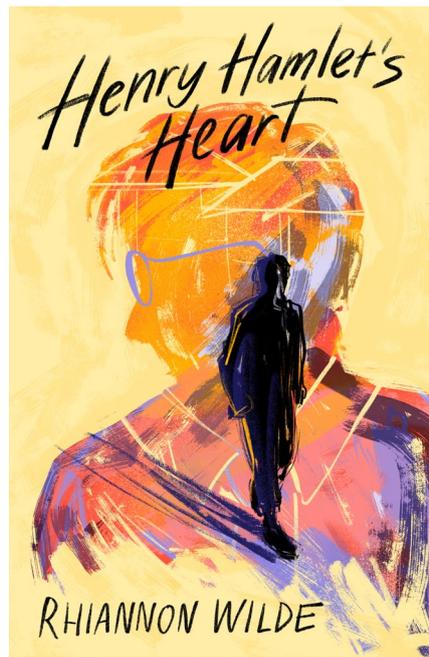


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HENRY HAMLET'S HEART

Rhiannon Wilde



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian
in context with the Australian curriculum
(English)

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SYNOPSIS

Staring down his final semester at Northholm Grammar School for Boys, Henry is juggling study, friends and school captain duties while feeling very uncertain about what lies beyond his school days. Then, when he least expects it, love hits Henry hard. Love that he doesn't see coming. Love he's not quite sure what to do with.

Set in Brisbane in 2008, *Henry Hamlet's Heart* is a coming-of-age novel that explores love, heartache and acceptance with both trepidation and tenderness.

THEMES

- Love
- Coming-of-age
- Doubt
- Acceptance
- Same-sex relationships

WRITING STYLE

Henry Hamlet's Heart is written in first person, present tense. Henry's voice is honest and contemplative, allowing readers to connect with and understand his struggles and deepest fears as he navigates falling in love in a completely unexpected way. It does this through the use of humour, awkward moments, beautiful figurative language and a true sense of romance. The fact that Henry falls in love with his best friend at a single-sex school creates an evocative platform for the themes of acceptance and courage that evolve, especially as the novel draws to its conclusion. Interwoven into the text are poignant extracts from Rainer Maria Rilke, a poet whose intense perspectives about love frame each of the three parts of the book. The narrative approaches same-sex love in a sensitive and delicate manner: love is love. Due to its themes and occasional use of coarse language, it is best suited to older readers.

STUDY NOTES

- The opening pages of *Henry Hamlet's Heart* have an arresting voice. How does this help create a sense of urgency and passion in the text? What are you wondering after having read the first few pages? Why is it important that novels encourage readers to ponder and speculate?
- We learn early in the text that although Henry topped year eleven English, he feels pressured to succeed even though he is unsure of his future direction. Take note of the way this uncertainty is captured as you read. Why does he refer to this as his 'sweaty secret to carry around' (p. 5)? How is this theme continued throughout the text?

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- Why does Emilia refer to Len as ‘an eighties song – “pretty but with dark themes”’ (p. 6)? Why does Henry see himself as ‘song-wise ... the noughties’ (p. 6)? How would you describe yourself song-wise? Why?
- Early in the text, Henry describes the ‘five stages of the Len Effect – jealousy, rage, irritation, resignation and acceptance’ (pp. 15–16). How do these stages play out in *Henry Hamlet’s Heart*?
- Henry says, ‘I wish I didn’t care what people thought as much as I do’ (p. 26). To what extent does this mindset impact on the decisions he makes? What are the dangers of worrying about what people think of us? Does this affect you as it does Henry? Discuss.
- A recurring theme throughout *Henry Hamlet’s Heart* is Len’s insistence that Henry should have ‘actual experiences’ (p. 28). What does he mean by this? How does Henry succeed in doing so? How do these experiences help shape Henry’s future?
- At the bonfire, Len writes ‘Tell him’ on his piece of paper, to which Henry wonders ‘tell who what?’ (p. 40). What were you thinking at this point in the narrative? What goals would you write down and throw into the fire?
- How does the reading of classic novels ‘tell us something about the broader human experience’ (p. 43)? Give examples to support your ideas.
- How is Anne Boleyn’s story a metaphor for Len’s actions in *Henry Hamlet’s Heart*? (See Chapter 4, especially p. 46.)
- Discuss the language choices made to describe the first time Henry and Len kiss (see pp. 85–86). Why, afterwards, does Henry say, ‘it feels like we crossed a line, but I don’t know which one’ (p. 86)?
- Reread p. 91, in which Henry wonders what others will say about the kiss. Discuss the use of language features to authentically connect readers with Henry’s state of mind.
- Throughout the novel, Henry is likened to Nick Carraway from *The Great Gatsby*. For those who have read *The Great Gatsby*, create a comparison of these main characters in both texts. As an alternative, view a film version of *The Great Gatsby* to create this comparison. Also consider how Len is like Gatsby.
- Discuss Henry’s writing on p. 105: ‘I’m losing it because I kissed you / Because I kissed you I might lose you.’ How does this use of chiasmus capture precisely how Henry is feeling so effectively? Try using chiasmus in your own writing.
- Why does Willa say of Len ‘he’s the best, but all walls’ (p. 131)? How does Henry react when Willa tells him she and Len broke up a while ago?
- There are many examples throughout *Henry Hamlet’s Heart* that describe how Henry feels, such as ‘my heart is beating double time, the

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blood being ferried around my veins with palpable heat' (p. 139). Choose some of your favourite descriptions to discuss.

- What does Henry mean when he says, 'nothing's changed except all of it' (p. 144)? Why is this line repeated again later (p. 146)?
- Why, when sitting next to Len on the bus to camp, does Henry say, 'any initial confusion has congealed into a blob of intense, searing embarrassment' (p. 148)?
- When Len is fixing Henry's cut leg, why does Henry say, 'I am literally bleeding love' (p. 154)?
- Henry begins to realise that 'it doesn't feel like a phase. It feels like *alive*' (p. 158). Write a private reflection of a time that you too felt that your feelings were *alive*. How does Rhiannon Wilde connect so well with readers by eliciting empathy?
- On their way back from camp, Henry and Len listen to Elliott Smith's 'Between the Bars'. Henry calls it one of his 'cry songs' (p. 160). Read the lyrics of this song. How does it reflect how Henry is feeling?
- At the start of Part II, Rainer Maria Rilke declares that 'love is difficult' (p. 163). What does he mean? How is this reflected in *Henry Hamlet's Heart*?
- Why does Len remind himself that 'we're all just tiny specks of nothing, and soon our petty problems will be puffs of dust' (p. 181)? Do you agree with Len's outlook? Discuss.
- Reread the section on p. 184 in which Henry describes the jacaranda trees in Brisbane. How is this passage an allegory for the changing relationship between Henry and Len?
- Why, after talking to Lacey, does Henry begin to doubt pursuing a relationship with Len?
- Why is Henry fearful of others knowing about his relationship with Len? (See p. 191.)
- Why does Henry think that *The Catcher in the Rye* suits Len (p. 201)?
- Compare the relationships that Len and Henry have with their fathers. How is it easier for Henry to tell his dad about Len than it is for Len to truly open up? How does Len's relationship with John affect Len's other relationships?
- What does Ms Hartnett mean when she says, 'life has a way of pushing you towards the path you're meant to walk' (p. 226)?
- Why, at the dinner party to commemorate Sarah, does Henry 'stay silent' during Len and John's fight (Chapter 21, beginning p. 236)? Why then, later in the novel, does Henry decide to speak up? What does this tell us about Henry's journey?
- Early in Part III, Henry says, 'today is drawn in grey; it cloaks me when I step into it. It's drizzling but only slightly, the rainclouds almost as

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lethargic as I am' (p. 248). How is this different from how Henry felt in Parts I and II? Why has his outlook changed so dramatically?

- Why does Henry describe his heart as being a 'shredded pulp' (p. 249)? What advice would you give Henry about his situation?
- Why does Henry prefer it when Len calls him Henry rather than Hamlet? How is 'Henry' different from 'Hamlet'?
- After the break-up, Henry sees Len everywhere – 'He's there in old house fronts and tired trees poking up from cement. He's the bridge and the river. Each towering building. The burnished sky' (p. 254). How does this show just how important Len is in Henry's life? Why does Henry now think he has to 'un-know' Len (p. 254)? Why is this impossible?
- Discuss the clever use of language choices and formatting in the verse at the top of p. 256. How does Henry's writing show restraint? Why is this an attribute?
- After Ems reveals why she and Eamon broke up, she says, 'the rules are different for boys – you can get away with stuff like that and it won't make anybody like you less' (p. 262). Do you agree with this? Why? Discuss.
- What does Gran mean when she says, 'it's the greatest honour, you know, love. To have your heart broken' (p. 267)?
- Why does Henry end up reciting the Rilke quote that Len chose? (See p. 270.)
- Listen to and review the lyrics of 'Lucky You' by The National. Why is this the perfect song for Len and Henry to dance to at Gran's wedding? Why did Henry request this song?
- When asked what he has learned about himself on the last day of school, why does Henry decide to share his story with everyone? (See pp. 280–282.) Why is this scene such an important inclusion in the novel?
- The author goes to great lengths to describe the setting of Brisbane. Take note of these descriptions. Create a vision board of Brisbane as depicted by Rhiannon Wilde that combines images and extracts from the novel. In small groups, use images and figurative language to describe your hometown if it was to be the setting of a novel.
- What role does Gran play in *Henry Hamlet's Heart*? How does her marriage to Marigold help support the narrative's themes and plot?
- Discuss the quotes by Rainer Maria Rilke that preface each of the three parts of *Henry Hamlet's Heart*. How do these extracts help frame each section? What have you discovered about love from these quotes, as well as from *Henry Hamlet's Heart*?
- How does a character such as Emilia help balance the narrative? Why is she necessary?
- What role does the death of Len's mother, Sarah, play in the decisions he makes?

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- How would you describe Henry's character? How does he develop and change from the beginning to the end of the text? In what ways is *Henry Hamlet's Heart* a classic coming-of-age story?
- Why do you think the author chose to set *Henry Hamlet's Heart* in an all-boys' school? Why is the acceptance of Henry and Len's relationship by The Boiyss, as well as minor characters such as Martin Finch and Mr Schiffer, critical to the message of the book?
- Martin Finch says, 'We're all icebergs' (p. 285). Write a reflection about how you are an iceberg.
- Discuss Henry's comment that 'I'm too full of today to sleep. My chest is a light globe – bulbous and bright' (p. 306). Describe a time when you have felt like this.
- Rewrite the scene of the gallery show from Len's perspective.
- Discuss the use of parenthesis to share Henry's inner thoughts. How are these thoughts different from his others in the text?
- After completing the novel, reread the prologue in the opening pages. From whose perspective is this written? How do we know? How does this help take readers inside Len's head?
- As you read *Henry Hamlet's Heart*, create a character portrait of Len using extracts from the text to support your ideas.
- *Henry Hamlet's Heart* is told in three parts. Create a story map that outlines the three acts of this story.
- Create a photo gallery that captures your personal journey over the past year.
- Discuss the contribution of figurative language to the text. How does this help show Henry's potential as a writer? Some examples include:
 - He snaps a picture of Ham's marshmallow massacre (p. 6)
 - Shame trickles down my back (p. 21)
 - The traffic noise is swallowed by gum trees and birds (p. 27)
 - We join the steady stream of grey-and-red pinstriped blazers making the climb (p. 31)
 - The sky is starting to turn the vein-blue of a dying afternoon (p. 37)
 - I watch the fire swallow the folded paper in one breath (p. 40)
 - The familiar routine of school, study, sleep, repeat settles over me like an old jumper (p. 42)
 - Silence blows over us, an icy wind (p. 55)
 - It's been raining all week, the world outside smudged pearl (p. 73)
 - The dripping city is quiet around us, still holding its breath in the four-thirty light before it exhales commuters for the day (p. 73)
 - Len's street isn't fully up for the day yet, curtains forming tight-shut eyelids on the houses (p. 75)
 - Every time I have to get a book from my locker and he's at his, it's a defibrillator shock (p. 94)

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- It's humid – the claustrophobic Brisbane kind that clings wet to your skin even when you're asleep (p. 99)
- The sun makes his eyes glow almost green, colour threading through carefully, the way light does in water (p. 109)
- It's a hailstorm in my stomach (p. 112)
- There's a moment slipping through my hands like water (p. 124)
- The day dies around us as he works, the sky turning bruised behind his head (p. 173)
- The stars are waking up, a sequined blanket thrown over our heads (p. 180)
- The mist sticks around all day, a filmy coating hung on everything like magic (p. 204)
- It looks like I'm wearing the weather (p. 204)
- My mood's about as celebratory as a sugarless soft drink (p. 251)
- The end smells like polyester rugs and two hundred bodies under the hot breath of old studio lights (p. 294)

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Henry Hamlet's Heart was initially inspired by the name Henry Hamlet, which I saw on a gravestone during an excursion with my history class to a cemetery. He immediately appeared in my head as a character the next day, fully formed, and rode to work with me every day after that until I wrote him. Plot-wise, this book sprang from the fact that I'd read a lot of (all the) queer stories about best friends when I was a queer teen, but never one where anything really happened beyond a crush. I was listening to local Brisbane band Cub Sport a lot at the time, and their lead singer and keyboardist are queer best friends who eventually got married, to which I thought: *Wow, I would read that story if it were a book.*

Henry Hamlet's Heart is about Henry and his best friend, Len, as they navigate growing up, both separately and together, in the months just before graduating. It charts their complicated journey from friendship to romance against the backdrop of their equally complicated families, tight friendship group, and conservative all-boys' high school. It's about coming out and coming-of-age, and the role that falling in love can play in both.

The intended audience of this book is both those who identify along the LGBTQIA+ spectrum and those who do not. It is pitched at a high degree of inclusivity that I was quite deliberate about. I wanted it to be a story that celebrated bisexual people and stories, without negating or erasing the very real experiences of young gay men, and vice versa. It endeavours to break down toxic masculinity and highlight the beauty of close male friendship, while still exhibiting a cast of strong female characters in Henry's grandmother, mum and

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close friend, Emilia. It is aimed at being a queer love story that normalises all types of love, through a lens devoid of binaries.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rhiannon Wilde was a high school English teacher before switching to full-time writing in Brisbane cafés wearing Elton John–esque outfits. She lives with her partner, several fictional characters clamouring to be written about, and a very anxious cat called Lady Edith Crawley. *Henry Hamlet’s Heart* is her first novel and won the Queensland Literary Awards Glendower Award for an Emerging Queensland Writer in 2019.