

Teachers' Notes

The Things We Can't Undo By Gabrielle Reid

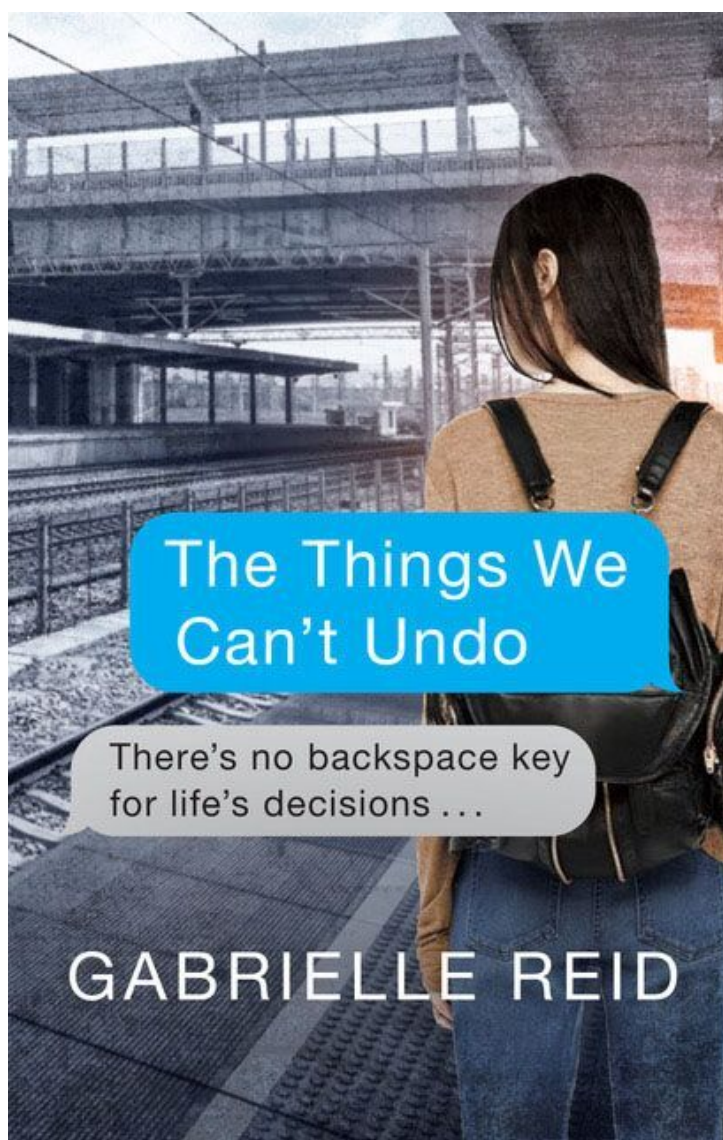
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Recommended for ages 15+

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Synopsis

At a friend's party, sixteen-year-old Dylan and his girlfriend Samantha have sex. In Dylan's mind, all goes well, but Samantha (Sam) seems upset and asks Dylan to leave her alone. He goes out to enjoy the rest of the night with their friends.

In unsent letters and instant messaging conversations, Sam pours out her hurt and confusion, revealing that she didn't want to have sex and felt assaulted. She avoids confronting Dylan, but confides in her best friend, Tayla. A passionate teen feminist, Tayla immediately turns on Dylan and accuses him of rape. Hurt that Sam doesn't defend him, Dylan breaks up with her and fumes at the allegations.

The story of the alleged assault spreads throughout the school and students take sides. Dylan confides in his older sister, Hazel, who talks frankly with him about sex and what Sam might be feeling. He begins to doubt his actions that night. Hazel then finds a Facebook page calling Dylan a rapist. Meanwhile, Sam's instant messages and posts in private forums show increasing anxiety and hint at panic attacks.

On the way to school one morning, a week after the party, Dylan skims the Facebook page and a related Instagram hashtag. He reads several horrible comments before seeing one from Samantha, begging for the page to be taken down. The train he is on stops suddenly. As he is guided off the train with other passengers, it becomes clear that someone has jumped on the track, committing suicide. Dylan sees a police officer carrying Samantha's school bag and realises with dread that she was the one who jumped.

In the wake of Samantha's suicide, Dylan and his friends process shock, grief and guilt. Tayla sends private messages to Sam's social media accounts where she admits her own sense of guilt and deep anguish. Outwardly, she focuses all of her anger on Dylan and uses social media to spur others to "get justice for Sam". The police visit Dylan at his home and in the process of the questioning, they show him one of Samantha's early letters. He realises that his experience of the sex was very different to hers, and wonders if he did enough to get consent.

When the police drop the case, Tayla loses control of the Facebook group and some unfamiliar members plan a night-time protest at Dylan's house. She goes to the protest, but is unable to stop some of the group from throwing bricks at Dylan's house. One of the bricks hits Hazel. At the hospital, Dylan's family confront Tayla and she has an emotional breakdown. Dylan realises that the situation is not going to resolve and all the people he cares about are being hurt. He asks to change schools.

Six months later, Dylan has a new school and a new girlfriend, Mia. He visits Sam's parents and her grave, where he confesses that he hurt her badly and wishes he could take back his actions on that night. Dylan realises that he can move on without Samantha, but she will never be able to recover from what he's done and that will always be a guilt he carries. After Mia's school formal, she and Dylan have sex for the first time. He is nervous and can't help thinking about Sam. He asks Mia if she is sure she wants to go through with it, and she clearly replies "yes".

Key Themes

- consent / sexual assault
- mental illness & suicide
- social media
- friendship
- romantic relationships
- family relationships
- reputation

About the author

Gabrielle Reid has a Masters in Creative Writing (University of Canberra) and a Bachelor of Arts with Diploma of Education (Macquarie University). Her short fiction and non-fiction has appeared in *Page & Spine*, *Tincture Journal*, *Parent Co*, *Story Shack Magazine*, *Riddled with Arrows*, *Kidspot* and others.

Alongside her writing pursuits, Gabrielle has worked as a high school English teacher at various schools across NSW and taught creative writing workshops to senior and gifted and talented students. *The Things We Can't Undo* is her debut novel.



Gabrielle was born in England, grew up in Sydney, lived in country NSW for a while, and moved to Newcastle in 2018. She shares creative writing resources, book reviews and other information about the Australian writing industry on her website www.justkeepreiding.com and can also be found on twitter (@reidwriting).

A note on the Australian Curriculum

Literary texts that support and extend students in Years 9 and 10 as independent readers are drawn from a range of genres and involve complex, challenging and unpredictable plot sequences and hybrid structures that may serve multiple purposes. These texts explore themes of human experience and cultural significance, interpersonal relationships, and ethical and global dilemmas within real-world and fictional settings and represent a variety of perspectives. Informative texts represent a synthesis of technical and abstract information (from credible/verifiable sources) about a wide range of specialised topics. Text structures are more complex and include chapters, headings and subheadings, tables of contents, indexes and glossaries. Language features include successive complex sentences with embedded clauses, a high proportion of unfamiliar and technical vocabulary, figurative and rhetorical language, and dense information supported by various types of graphics and images.
(ACARA, English curriculum)

These notes have been developed in accordance with the outcomes of the Australian English curriculum for years 9 and 10. The overall discussion and analysis of *The Things We Can't Undo* requires students to think critically about how ideas are expressed from multiple viewpoints, and to develop their own opinions on modern ethical issues. There are rich opportunities to consider a wide variety of language devices particularly with regards to how they are used to develop individual character “voice”. The text uses epistolary format combined with chapters of first-person narration to focalise the perspectives of different

characters and makes use of the non-formal language structures used in text messaging and social media. Teachers may use some or all of the questions and activities in this guide to further student understanding of the themes and features of the text.

Considerations for vulnerable students

The Things We Can't Undo tackles sensitive topics including sexual assault (primarily date rape, but assaults of many kinds are briefly mentioned), mental illness and suicide. Teachers should be aware that some students may find the material confronting, and where appropriate teachers may wish to provide their class with “trigger warnings”. It is also suggested that students are reminded about access to supports such as school counsellors, national helplines and websites such as headspace or beyondblue.

Before Reading – class discussion questions

Look at the cover and title. What do you think the book will be about? Why? (ACELY1745, ACELY1749)

Is there an event or decision in your life that you wish you could undo? Were you able to keep it secret from others around you? (ACELT1635)

Why do you think the title and tagline are made to look like text messages? (ACELA1567, ACELA1572, ACELA1556)

Read the blurb on the back cover. Brainstorm what the rumours might be about. (ACELT1771)

Looking at the cover and blurb, who do you think is the target audience for this book. Why? (ACELA1572, ACELT1772, ACELY1745)

During Reading

Comprehension questions, chapters 1-6:

What does Dylan initially think of the sex he has at the party? What signals does he miss that Samantha might not want to go through with it? (ACELY1744)

How does Dylan learn that something is wrong in his relationship with Samantha? (ACELY1744)

“In no part of that do I remember shoving her down and forcing myself into her while she screamed and fought.” (Dylan, chapter five)

“Did he have sex with you?”

- Yes

Did you give him permission to have sex with you?

- No. I don’t think so.

Well then yeah, that’s rape” (Tayla & Samantha, chapter four)

Compare Dylan’s definition of rape to Tayla’s. In what ways are they different? Do you agree with one more than the other? (ACELT1812, ACELY1742, ACELT1812)

Do you think Dylan will ever read the letters from Samantha? Why/why not? (ACELY1754)

Why does Dylan talk to his sister about what has happened? (ACELY1742)

Why is Samantha angry with Tayla? (ACELY1754, ACELY1742)

Why do you think the teachers are worried about Samantha’s short story? How do the characters in the story reflect what is happening in her life? (ACELY1744, ACELA1553)

“She actually looks scared, and I let go of her wrist and take a step back, turning to Samantha instead. Sam stands there for a minute, head down, like she’s waiting for me to give her permission to move.

‘Just tell her it’s not true,’ I say to Sam. She stares at the floor, saying nothing.”

“Let go of her!’ Tayla yells. I’m not going to give her an opportunity to twist this too. I drop Sam’s arm.” (chapter five)

How does this extract demonstrate the balance of power in Samantha and Dylan’s relationship? (ACELY1744)

Before reading on, write your predictions for what will happen to

- Dylan
- Samantha
- Tayla

(ACELT1771)

Chapters 7-15:

Dylan suggests that most other male students are “on his side” while most female students are not. Why do you think this might be? (ACELY1752, ACELT1639)

“I knew Ryan and Emre would believe me, but Hazel . . . I’m not so sure.”

“If Hazel thinks I did it, she’ll jump on those words. The way I didn’t.” (Dylan, chapter nine)

Dylan believes that he is innocent. Why do you think he worries that Hazel will think differently? (ACELY1742)

“I just don’t know what to do now and it feels like everyone else has the control. I don’t want to see Dylan, but I still have to go to school. I don’t get to be the one to break up with him. I don’t want to have to deal with anyone else’s questions, but the whole grade probably knows that we’re over by now.” (Samantha, chapter six)

“But ultimately, it’s your story to tell, not hers, and the last thing we need is to feel even less empowered.” (Jambo, chapter eight)

“I can’t go back and change it. It’s like I’m trapped in a cage that he and I made together.” (Samantha, chapter ten)

In what ways does Samantha feel powerless? What do these passages suggest about the relationship between self-determination (the ability to make choices for one’s own future) and self-esteem? (ACELT1812, ACELY1749)

Were you surprised by Samantha’s suicide? Why/why not? (ACELT1635)

How does Dylan respond to the news of Samantha’s suicide? Why does he decide not to speak at her memorial? (ACELY1744, ACELY1742)

Why does the school counsellor tell Dylan not to blame himself for Samantha’s death? (ACELY1744)

For each character, fill in the following table. Add your own view. (ACELT1635, ACELT1812)

Name	Assault/not assault	Reasoning
Dylan		
Tayla		
Samantha		
Ryan		
Lockie & Rob		
Emily & Lily		
Amita		
“AngryAmy”		

Choose once scene and rewrite it from the first person narration of either Samantha, Tayla, Emre or Ryan. (ACELT1644, ACELT1773)

Chapters 16-24:

How does Tayla respond to Samantha's death? Why do you think she behaves this way? (ACELY1744)

How does reading Samantha's letter impact Dylan's view of his actions? (ACELY1754)

What information about Tayla could "Bobby Big-one" work out from the Facebook group, even without access to most of her profile? (ACELY1744, ACELY1749)

Consider the protesters who have never met Dylan or Samantha before. Why do you think they chose to attend the protest at Denistone station? (ACELT1639, ACCEL1635)

Cross-curriculum link: geography. Using maps of Sydney, find Eastwood station, Denistone Station, and the location of fictional Eastbank High school (Palmer Ave, Strathfield). Mark Dylan or Tayla's route to school. (ACELT1644, ACELY1749)

"Mum sinks to the chair beside Hazel's bed and presses her knuckles to her lips."

"Mum pulls a thin shawl tighter across her shoulders and shrugs into herself a little."

(Dylan, chapter 22)

What do these physical descriptions reveal about Mum's emotions in this scene? (ACELY1745, ACELA1553)

What do Samantha's diary entries from before the party reveal about her mental health and her relationship with Dylan? (ACELY1754, ACCEL1641)

Cross-curriculum link: history. Research how the events of WWI at Gallipoli are viewed and commemorated by the Turkish government and people today. How does this inform Emre's speech? How do you think it might feel to be Turkish-Australian like Emre around ANZAC day? (ACELY1749, ACCEL1639, ACCEL1635)

"You got so caught up in hating Dylan you didn't think about what that word 'rape' means for girls like me." (Amita, chapter 23)

How does Tayla's conversation with Amita highlight a problem with language surrounding consent and sexual assaults? (ACELA1553, ACCEL1635)

If we only ever judged stuff by how much worse it could be, it wouldn't be illegal to steal someone's wallet because hey, at least you didn't steal their car. (Tayla, chapter 23)

Do you think this statement is a fair comparison to the range of sexual assaults mentioned throughout the novel? Why/why not? (ACCEL1635, ACCEL1812)

The final chapter and epilogue end on the words "no" and "yes" respectively. Why do you think the author chose to do this? (ACELY1754, ACELA1553, ACELA1557)

Make a table of phrases or descriptions that highlight how the epilogue parallels the opening scene (e.g. It's Friday night. It's Saturday night.) Why do you think the author did this? (ACELY1754, ACELY1745, ACELA1553)

After Reading

Some chapters are written in first person narration from Dylan's perspective, while others rely on letters, chats and other documents to reveal other characters' thoughts and feelings. Why do you think the author has done this? (ACELA1561, ACELA1770, ACELA1557)

Consider how language and punctuation is used to demonstrate character voice. Choose 2-3 lines spoken/written by one character and try to rewrite them in the voice of a different character. (ACELA1556, ACELA1557, ACELA1562)

"Whatever else I might have done to be a bad boyfriend or to somehow hurt her, I know I'm not a rapist. You don't accidentally rape someone." (chapter five)

"I don't get off on being violent, or go around expecting girls to do whatever I want. I don't spend my weekends trawling parties with roofies in my pocket. I'm not a rapist, and Hazel knows it. Right?" (chapter nine)

"And none of them have read Samantha's letter or know how the words haunt me. I might have done it." (chapter 22)

"That night was . . . 'I search for the right words. 'The biggest mistake I've ever made.'" (chapter 24)

Compare the quotes from Dylan above. How does his perspective change over the course of the novel? (ACELT1771, ACELT1812)

Both Dylan and Samantha are concerned about the impact of the events of the party on their reputations. How does this concern motivate their later actions? (ACELY1754)

In a table or using different colours, record the ways social media is presented as a force for good vs the ways it is presented as something that can be dangerous. (ACELA1553, ACELT1812)

How do the different racial and cultural backgrounds of Sam, Dylan and Emre impact the ways they interact with one another and with other characters in the book? (ACELY1749, ACELT1639)

Intertextual link. Read a synopsis of the play *Othello* by William Shakespeare (or watch a film adaptation if possible). In what ways has the author linked the play to different ideas in her book? Why do you think she chose to have the characters study this text? (ACELA1566, ACELT1774)

Consider the title *The Things We Can't Undo*. Choose one "thing we can't undo" for each character that has the biggest impact on the events of the book. (ACELA1561)

Imagine if Tayla had believed Dylan rather than Sam. What would be different? (ACELT1771, ACELT1773, ACELT1644)

Consider the character of Hazel. Why do you think she supports Dylan? How is the support she gives him different to that of their parents? (ACELY1754)

Come up with an alternative title for the book. Justify your choice. (ACELT1641, ACELT1644)

Activities

Use a platform such as storybird.com to write and illustrate either

1. an alternate ending
2. “six months later” from the perspective of Emre, Tayla & Ryan or
3. a short story featuring one of the minor characters (e.g. Amita, Hazel, Salvatore)

(ACELT1773, ACELT1644)

Create a new cover design (ACELT1644, ACELY1756)

Make a book trailer (in groups) (ACELT1773, ACELT1644, ACELY1756)

Write a letter, email, or tweet to the author. Include any questions you might still have about the story. (ACELT1635, ACELT1812)

Write a book review, including details about what specifically you liked and disliked. (ACELT1771, ACELT1812, ACELY1756)

Make a timeline and mark at least 10 important events in the book. In a different colour, mark the complication, rising action, climax and denouement. (ACELY1745)