



Be my devil, August, and I'll be yours

RETURN

Fairytale are stupid but you're not

TO

We'll never grow old and we'll never get real jobs

SENDER

I already love her back

LAUREN DRAPER

Reading Notes

ABOUT THE BOOK

After three years away, seventeen-year-old Brodie McKellon has returned to live with her eccentric grandmother above the last remaining Dead Letter Office – the place letters go when no one is left to claim them.

Soon, Brodie is consumed by an unsolved mystery – the unclaimed letters of a group of teens who seemed to vanish many years ago – while also attempting to reconcile with her former best friends, Elliot and Levi.

As the trio is drawn into the riddle of the dead letter writers, they discover that the past is never truly past, and that it's never too late for old wrongs to be put right . . .

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lauren Draper is a Melbourne-based writer and marketing professional. She is a graduate of RMIT's Professional Writing and Editing program and now works in publishing – she loves nothing more than a story infused with magic, hijinks and a touch of nostalgia. Her debut novel, *The Museum of Broken Things*, was acquired after it was shortlisted in the 2020 Text Prize, and went on to be shortlisted for The Readings Prize and Indie Book Awards, and longlisted for the CBCA Book of the Year (Older Readers). She grew up in Western Australia, mostly on land but often in water. She now lives in Melbourne, where she can be found almost exclusively complaining about the weather.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(Spoilers ahead!)

Friendship and family

1. *Return to Sender* features two trios of friends in different time periods. Do you see any parallels between the two groups (Brodie, Eli and Levi versus August, June and Winnie), in personality or in their storylines?
2. 'For a moment, I'm jolted by the memory of a night just like this – the three of us crowded on the couch, arguing about what to watch. Except back then, Elliot's legs weren't long enough to touch the coffee table.' (Page 137) When Brodie comes back to town, things are different: Levi is now a jock and Eli has a boyfriend. How do the three friends adapt to Brodie's return? How does Brodie navigate these changes?
3. It's often said that in a group of three, there's always someone who gets left out. Do you think this applies to these friendships? What circumstances create alliances within the trios? Is there one person who is more 'central' to the friendship, who keeps them all together?
4. The family structures in this book aren't straightforward and nuclear, with two parents and their biological children – we have grandmothers, stepfathers, estrangements and found family. What does this story have to say about who counts as family? At what stage do friends become family?
5. How does the book portray family violence? Consider Dwayne and August, as well as Quinn, Dale and Eli. What are the effects on the children involved?

Grief and the past

6. The adults in Brodie's life keep huge secrets (such as Elliot's father and Quinn's family background) from her and her friends – out of grief. Do you think this is a reasonable explanation? What does grief excuse?
7. When Eli learns the truth about his family and August's death, he goes out on the lake and puts himself in danger. Do you think children have a right to know their past and origin from an early age, or is it better to wait until they are older and understand more? What are the risks of both approaches?
8. 'I think sometimes that I'm forgetting her: the exact pitch of her laugh, the chip that might have been in her right front tooth or her left.' (Page 183) Throughout the story, Brodie is still grieving for her mother. What do you think it means for Brodie to realise that the letters were left by her mum?
9. The story is full of nostalgia and memory: the Dead Letter Office, old yearbooks and photos, Perry's bedroom, even Levi keeping the old Jeep. Why do you think it matters to keep reminders of the past? How do they help us, or hold us back?

Letters and mysteries

10. 'I guess you'd call them love letters. But not really. There's no sordid descriptions or crude euphemisms. They're more intimate than that, filled with hopes and dreams and desires, secrets whispered between best friends at midnight.' (Page 10) Brodie calls the letters between August, Winnie and June 'love letters', but then takes it back. Do you think they are love letters? How do the letters provide insight into their lives and friendship?
11. Why do you think Brodie is so invested in solving the mystery of the letter writers? How much of the eventual solving is luck, and how much is detective work?

12. 'June said I should write a poem, and I tried, but they weren't very good. So I'm writing you a letter instead, and telling myself it's not the cowardly thing to do.' (Page 141) August shares his personal life with June and Winnie primarily through letters. Do you think it's cowardly for him to ask Winnie to a school dance via letter? Is it more (or less) romantic than a poem, or face to face?
13. The town of Warwick has an atmosphere of mystery from the very beginning – from the legend of the Rydal Devil to the strange Adder Stone, to the existence of the last Dead Letter Office. Does it feel like a place in the real world? How does that affect your experience as a reader?

Coming of age

14. Brodie is known in town as the 'McKellon Felon', but this is mostly exaggerated (at least, that's what she says!). How does Brodie's troublemaker past haunt her, and do you think she is ultimately able to overcome this reputation?
15. Brodie's relationship with Levi is mended with increasingly outlandish pranks. Why is this an effective communication method for these characters? How do you communicate with your friends, or patch up conflicts in indirect ways?
16. The characters in this book deal with big issues, but they are still high schoolers going to parties and dances. How do you see their youth in the way they deal with the problems in their lives? How would the book be different if the characters were 14 years old, or 24?
17. 'Back at RAGs, on those long, miserable, lonely nights, I'd close my eyes and picture them like that, and it would bring me some comfort to know that they had grown up and moved on. Survived the small town and found their place in the world.' (Page 116) Part of being young is wanting to leave the place you grew up and believing the outside world will be better. Do you think this is true? Do you think Brodie and her friends would be happy leaving Warwick? Note also that Winnie/Quinn and June/Perry both left, but returned in the end.

BONUS ACTIVITIES

- Levi writes Brodie a love letter that we never see as the readers (page 284). Write what you imagine it might say, or Brodie's reply.
- Read *Tuck Everlasting* by Natalie Babbitt (or watch the film or musical adaptation).
- Watch the movie *Dead Letter Office* (1998).
- Write a letter to a friend and send it in the post. Or get a group together and draw names for a letter exchange, so everyone gets to send and receive a letter.
- Write and design your own Vinegar or Poison Valentine (or even a Poison Christmas card!) for a friend, loved one or enemy (take inspiration from pages 144 and 193).