BOOK REVIEW

THE BRINK

Author: Holden Sheppard
Publisher: Text Publishing
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Genre: Young adult, mystery, coming of age

Tagged: LGBTQIA, mystery, outback crime, coming of age

With his second novel, *The Brink*, Holden Sheppard cements himself as a writer to be reckoned with, combining insight, boldness and delicacy in a compelling mystery–psychological thriller. When 13 high school leavers head for a coastal town north of Perth, they're hell-bent on a week of living wild and ditching the constraints and expectations of school and family. A change of plans lands them on a craggy offshore island, where isolation, substance abuse and festering grievances combine to stretch relationships to the limit. When a body is discovered, all pretences of friendship snap.

In language heartfelt and gritty, Sheppard develops the pulse of the novel – the call to readers to be brave enough to be who they want to be, wisdom relevant to all ages. Sheppard's depiction of setting – the heat, shoreline, rocks and scrub, the fifties-style shacks – is masterful. The landscape is sometimes exquisite, sometimes ominous, but always integral to unfolding events.

[Words: 154]

BOOK CLUB NOTES

Summary

It's November and 13 high school leavers – leaders, friends and hangers-on – hit the road, hell-bent on a week of wildness, of drinking and sex, of ditching the constraints and expectations of school and family, several of them carrying burdens they either don't understand or don't recognise.

A change of plans lands them on a remote offshore island, with the grudging assent of the nearby squatter community. At first, having a whole island to themselves feels idyllic. But gradually the heat, isolation, alcohol and drugs combine with long-held rivalries and insecurities to stretch relationships to their limit.

The discovery of a body obliterates all pretences of loyal friendship, with most of the 10 still on the island revealing themselves to be cowardly and ruthless in equal measure. When a second death occurs, the teenagers become desperate and lawless.

At the heart of this novel beats the theme of facing and overcoming fears; of finding the courage to be the person you want to be, not what others want you to be. It's only when some of the group risk ostracisation and take bold action that there's cause for hope – for rescue, for lawful sanity, and for their future selves.

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About the author

Holden Sheppard was born and bred in the regional city of Geraldton, Western Australia. *The Brink* is his second novel. In the book's acknowledgements, he calls himself 'a lifelong misfit'. "This book," he says, "looks at masculinity and the experience of being a man in the way I would have loved to read as a teenage boy."

Holden's writing career took off in 2018 when he was named one of five winners of the *Griffith Review's* Novella Project for *Poster Boy*. Shortly after, he took out the T.A.G. Hungerford award with his manuscript for *Invisible Boys*. The subsequent debut novel, which explores issues confronting gay males around their sexual awakening, has earned national acclaim.

Holden, who in 2022 lives in Perth with his husband, is an Honours graduate of Edith Cowan University's writing program. He is Deputy Chair of Writing WA and an ambassador for Lifeline WA. He is also a proud bogan, appearing in the 'Bogans' episode of ABC TV's *You Can't Ask That* (Season 7). He finds peace and comfort in being a 'gymrat', playing social footy and working as a labourer.

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Questions for discussion

1. Sheppard's working title for *The Brink* was *Leavers.* Explore the various layers of meaning in the final title. How might a title sway readers' expectations or perceptions, before and during reading?
2. *The Brink*, says Sheppard, "is about wrestling your own identity back from who the world wants and expects you to be [...] about burning your fake persona down to find who you really are – who you really wanna be." Do you think he nailed it?
3. On the eve of *The Brink*'s publication, Sheppard said: "This time around, I know who I am. I know I am not everyone's cuppa tea and I don't give a shit." Do you believe the intense, immediate scrutiny modern writers face could, over time, inhibit 'brave' writing?
4. What do you think of Leavers' Week as a rite of passage? When Kaiya says, 'Just this week, just this once, I want to be bad', (p. 27) do you sympathise?
5. Have you ever revealed a secret and found it to be liberating?
6. How far do the social dynamics in the book reflect your own experience? Do you identify at all with any of the characters?
7. The narration was in first-person, moving between three characters – Leonardo, Kaiya and Mason. Did this work for you? What are the pros and cons of this approach?
8. Language in *The Brink* was idiomatic, intense, gritty and vibrant. Did you, at times, find it confronting or excessive? Might it adversely date the novel?

9. Do you feel the sense of place developed by Sheppard is integral to the novel's action and atmosphere? Can you picture a version of the story in, say, a wintry, urban or verdant setting?
10. What do you think *The Brink* says about our general dependence on being connected – socially and practically – through technology?
11. The novel is tagged by the publisher as being for 'Kids and Teens'. Is this an apt categorisation? What are the pros and cons of publishing industry categories?

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If you liked this book, you may also like…

Invisible Boys by Holden Sheppard (Fremantle Press)

Young Mungo by Douglas Stuart (Pan Macmillan UK)

The Turning by Tim Winton (Penguin Australia Pty Ltd)

Locust Summer by David Allan-Petale (Fremantle Press)

28 Questions by Indyana Schneider (Scribner UK)

The Catcher in the Rye by J.D. Salinger (Little, Brown and Company)