

# ***Beneath the Surf***

## **Author: Julia Owen**

### **Synopsis**

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It's summer, 1975 and 15 year-old Yasmin is on holiday with her mum and brother. The trio are staying in a bach and the only things on Yasmin's mind are lying on the beach in her new bikini, working on her tan and meeting cute guys. When Yasmin meets Gail, a 17 year-old surfer chic, her prayers are answered. Gail invites her to a party on the beach where Yasmin meets Gail's boyfriend Doug and his friend Brett. Brett is hot and Yasmin is instantly smitten with him. Gail's friends are older than Yasmin and alcohol flows freely at the party. Yasmin is soon drunk and quickly finds herself in a dangerous position with Brett, who expects more from this first encounter than she is willing to give. Luckily Yas is able to escape from Brett unscathed, but since the pair are holidaying at the same beach, she is forced to see him around and ultimately has to make a decision about whether or not to forgive his behaviour.

As if this wasn't confusing enough for Yasmin she also has to deal with family problems. Yasmin's father was supposed to join the family at the bach but wrote to say he wasn't coming. At first Yasmin blames his decision on her mother – if only she didn't argue with him so much and drive him away. But it turns out that the problems run much deeper than this. Neither her mother nor father have been happy in the marriage and want to live apart. Yasmin doesn't know how she is going to deal with her parents splitting up, especially since her mother is spending a lot of time with Linda, the artist who lives in the bach behind theirs, who also happens to be a lesbian...

### **Text Type**

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*Beneath the Surf* is a fast-paced novel with broad appeal. The story is set in 1975 in New Zealand but many of the ideas and issues raised are topical today. Readers will relate easily to the main character Yasmin and the problems and challenges that she faces. Yasmin is a typical teenager who has issues with her self-esteem. She worries about how she looks and how others will perceive her. In the story Yasmin is placed in many situations where she displays courage and strength of character. She gets herself into a situation where she is at a party with older kids and makes the mistake of getting drunk. This affects her judgement and leads to her getting into a dangerous situation where she is nearly date raped. Luckily Yasmin manages to escape but is then faced with the decision of whether or not to forgive the boy who put her in this position. Through the first person narrative the reader learns about Yasmin's intimate thoughts and feelings as she deals with this ordeal.

In addition to these challenges Yasmin also has to deal with the breakdown of her family – something she struggles to understand and accept. Yasmin shows a maturity beyond her years when she learns about her mother’s friendship with Linda. She puts her own feelings aside and gives her mother the space she needs to explore this new relationship and see if it is what she really wants.

Themes include growing up, relationship break-ups, exploring sexuality and acceptance of differences.

## Sharing the Novel

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***The novel has been divided up as follows: Chapters 1 and 2 (pp. 3-25), Chapters 3-6 (pp. 26-68) and Chapters 7-13 (pp. 69-134).***

During the shared sessions encourage students to ask questions to clarify their understanding of words and ideas in the novel. Have them make inferences from the text and predict what is going to happen next. Encourage students to study the main character and explore how she develops and changes as the story progresses. Have them use their broader knowledge and relate Yasmin’s adventures to their own understanding and experiences. Students should understand the plot, be able to identify important themes and back up their ideas using evidence from the text.

## Introducing the Novel

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Study the front cover of the novel and read the blurb.

- Who is the main character in the novel?
- Where do you think her holiday takes place?
- What does the main character liken her problems to?
- Why does her holiday begin badly?
- What sort of changes do you think are going to take place during the holiday?
- Who else besides Yasmin is going to “come of age”? What does this expression mean?

***Teacher reads Chapters 1 and 2 (p. 3-25) aloud. Students follow along in their books.***

## Comprehension Chapters 1 and 2 (pp. 3-25)

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- Who is the narrator of the story? How old is she? What else do we learn about her?
- Where and when is the story set?
- Where is the family holidaying? Why couldn’t Yasmin’s dad come in the first week?

- Who is Linda? What is she doing at the beach?
- Who is Tony? How old is he? How does Yasmin feel about him?
- Describe the couple that Yasmin and the others observe on the beach. Why does Linda describe the man as being a “pig”?
- What happens to the man?
- Describe the bach where Yasmin is staying with her family.
- Why does Yasmin feel so embarrassed when she goes to Linda’s bach to borrow milk? What does she learn about Linda during the visit?
- Why does Yasmin argue with her mother? Why does Yasmin blame her mother for her father’s absence?

### Discussion

- What evidence is there in the first two Chapters to suggest that Yasmin’s parents do not have a very happy marriage?
- In what ways is Yasmin’s mum’s behaviour on holiday uncharacteristic? Why do you think this is?
- Have you ever been on holiday to the beach? Where did you stay? What did you enjoy most about the holiday?
- Why do you think Yasmin holds her mother responsible for her parents’ relationship problems? Why is it easier to “hate mum”?
- Make a prediction about what will happen next in the story.

***Students read Chapters 3-6 (pp. 26-68) independently before the next shared session.***

### **Comprehension Chapters 3-6 (pp. 26-68)**

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- Who nearly walks over Yasmin while she is lying on the beach? How does Yasmin feel after she has talked to him?
- Describe the groups encounter with Rod and Jerry. What shocking news about Linda is revealed during this encounter? How does Yasmin feel about this revelation?
- Why is Yasmin so worried when her mother stays out so late with Linda?
- Why doesn’t Yasmin want her mother to know that she has written a letter to her father? What information does the letter contain?
- What does Yasmin learn about the cause of Doreen’s husband’s death at the dairy?
- Why does Yasmin make Tony sit further up the beach? What embarrassing situation does she find herself in after being pummelled by the surf? Who helps her?
- Who is Gail’s boyfriend? Why is Yasmin so excited when Gail describes him to her?
- Why does Yasmin lie to Gail about her age?
- Where does Gail invite Yasmin?
- Who helps Yasmin convince her mother to let her attend the party? What time does she have to be home?

- Who does Yasmin meet at the beach party? Who tries to warn Yasmin about Brett? Why do you think Yasmin decides to drink? What evidence is there in the text that suggests she has had too much to drink?
- What happens when Brett gets Yasmin alone? At what point does Yasmin begin to feel uncomfortable about what is happening? How does she deal with the situation? What would you do if you were in her position?
- What does Yasmin see her mother and Linda doing when she returns home from the party?
- Who does Yasmin bump into on the beach in the morning? What do they talk about?
- Who else does Yasmin see on the beach? Why does Yasmin think that this person is not very happy?

### Discussion

- Describe Yasmin's brother Tony. How does Yasmin feel about him? What sorts of things does Tony do that annoy Yasmin? Can you sympathise with Yasmin's feelings about her brother? Why/why not?
- Why do you think Yasmin's mother is such good friends with Linda? What qualities does Linda possess that appeal to her? How does Yasmin feel about Linda? Why does she feel this way?
- What are some of the dangers associated with drinking too much alcohol? Do you think Yasmin's night may have turned out differently if she wasn't drunk? Explain your answer.
- Do you agree with Brett about Yasmin being a "tease"? Why/why not? What does the way that Brett treated Yasmin tell us about his character?
- What impression do you get about Doug as a person from his conversation with Yasmin?
- Why do you think that Yasmin's mum is "part of the problem"?
- Predict what is going to happen next in the story.

***Students read Chapters 7-15 (pp. 69-134) independently before the next shared session.***

### **Comprehension Chapters 7-15 (pp. 69-134)**

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- Why does Yasmin's mum spend so much time with Linda during the bad weather? What do Yasmin and Tony do to pass the time?
- What bad news does Yasmin's mum give her when the letter arrives from her father? How does Yasmin react to the news?
- Why does Yasmin's father want to leave her mother? Why does her mother want him to leave?
- How did Yasmin's mother find out about her father's affair? How did she feel when she first found out? How does she feel about it now?

- What does Yasmin remember about the night that her father brought important people home for dinner?
- How does Yasmin's mother act after she has broken the news of the separation to Tony and Yasmin? Is she being fair to her children? Why/why not? How does Yasmin try and help her brother cope?
- Why does Yasmin rush into the dairy? Who does she literally run into in there?
- What does Yasmin thank Doug for?
- What does Brett say to Yasmin when he approaches her outside the dairy? Why do you think Yasmin forgives him so easily?
- When is Brett going home?
- What does Brett reveal to Yasmin about his family situation?
- What does Tony discover on the beach? Why do Brett and Yasmin find this discovery so strange?
- How does Yasmin know that the clothes belong to Doreen?
- What prompts Brett to swim out after Doreen? Who goes for help? How does Doreen react when Brett and Yasmin drag her out of the water? Why do you think she reacts this way?
- What does Doreen confess to Yasmin about her husband's death?
- Who comes from Wellington to collect Doreen from Yasmin's bach?
- What did Doreen throw in the water? Why did she feel the need to get rid of it?
- What does Yasmin do while Brett surfs? How does Yasmin feel about the fact that Brett surfs for so long? How would you feel in her position?
- How does Brett react when he realises that Yasmin is upset with him? What does the fact that he leaves her alone for so long suggest about him as a person?
- What advice does Linda give Yasmin about boyfriends? How does Yasmin react to this advice? How does she feel about what she has said afterwards?
- What does Yasmin learn about Linda and her mum during her conversation with Linda at the beach? How does Yasmin feel about this information? What evidence is there in the story to suggest that Yasmin is beginning to consider the feelings of others more?
- What does Doreen give Yasmin with the note? Why does Yasmin feel embarrassed about this?
- Describe Yasmin's visit to Doreen's. Why do you think Yasmin tells Doreen her problems?
- What comment does Yasmin make in the dairy that puts the shop keeper in her place?
- What does Yasmin miss about home? What does she plan to say to her father when she gets home?
- What going away presents do the family receive from Linda?
- What does Yasmin mean by "it was time to carry on fishing"?

### Discussion

- Why do you think Yasmin's parents decide to split up? Do you think that they are making the right decision? Why/why not? In what ways

can a marriage break-up affect the couple's children? How does Yasmin feel about her parents' decision? Have you had a similar experience that enables you to relate to Yasmin's feelings? If so, describe it.

- Does Brett deserve Yasmin's forgiveness? Why/why not? What evidence is there in the story to suggest that Brett is a selfish person?
- What lessons do you think Yasmin learnt during her beach holiday?
- In what ways has the holiday changed Yasmin's mum?
- Why do you think the author included the sub-plot of Doreen and her husband in the story? Does Yasmin's experience with Doreen teach her anything? If so, what? If you were in Yasmin's position would you keep Doreen's secret? Why/why not?
- Identify an important theme in the novel and explain why it is important.
- Does this novel contain a climax? If so, what is it and why is it important to the novel as a whole?

## Activities

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**Review** – Write a review for *Beneath the Surf* that would be appropriate for publication in a school magazine. Include a brief plot summary, explain the characters and setting, describe the themes and include your personal opinion about the book.

**News Article** – Write a news article about the events that occur on the beach the day that Doreen's husband drowns. Remember to write in the inverted pyramid style and include the 5 W's and H in the first two paragraphs of your article. Include quotes from witnesses and people involved in recovering the body from the surf.

**Static Image** – Design a static image that illustrates an important theme or idea from the novel. Use verbal and visual features to convey your idea. Include a written commentary that explains the theme that your static image depicts and the reasons why you chose to display your ideas the way you have.

**Plot** – Design a story board that shows 10 important events from the story in the order that they occur. Under each illustration include a brief description about what is happening.

**Letter** – Imagine that you are Yasmin. Write a letter to your father that clearly expresses your thoughts and feelings about the marriage break-up and his affair.

**Writing** – Write an epilogue for the story that explains what happened after Yasmin and her family returned home.

**Advertisement** – Design an advertisement aimed at a teenage audience. Your poster should alert teenagers to the dangers of drinking too much and the issues related to this.

**Character** – Complete a character description for Yasmin. Explain how her character develops and changes as the novel progresses. Include information about what Yasmin’s beach holiday has taught her.

**Plot** – Choose an event that occurs in the story. Explain why you think the event is significant and why it is important to the story as a whole.