

# Teachers' Notes

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## 48 Shades of Brown

### Nick Earls

'Beer, sex, attitude, calculus. All beyond my comfort zone, and the only one likely to change is calculus.'

Dan Bancroft is nearly seventeen. His parents are on the other side of the world. His last year of school looms ominously, and to top it all off, he's fallen hard for his bass-playing aunt's housemate. He can't even make pesto; how will he ever survive?

*Dan is sixteen because it seemed the right kind of age for him to be... Much as I want people of all ages to read the book and get something out of it, it was particularly important to me for it to have the best chance it could of finding teenage readers. Partly, that's motivated by the fact that I know there are at least some people in that age group who will relate to some of the way Dan thinks about things, and I didn't find books like that when I was that age.*

*Since a lot of books for teenagers or with teenage central characters seem to focus on a 'big issue' (and it's usually people much older who get to decide which issues are big), one of the things I want to do is write books that say that regular everyday teenage issues are big enough and important enough to sustain a novel-length story.*

*Nick Earls*

#### **Plot**

Dan Bancroft has almost reached the milestone of his seventeenth birthday, and he is about to embark on that minefield of stress, doubt, confusion and emotional bewilderment – his final year of school. His parents have moved to Geneva for work and after spending the Christmas holidays with them he returns to Brisbane to board with his hip young aunt, Jacq, and her housemate Naomi. Naomi has a boyfriend named Jason and Dan is welcomed into the joys of house-sharing when he hears them having sex through his bedroom wall. Dan's mono-browed schoolmate Chris 'Friction' Burns is somewhat jealous of the situation Dan is in, but as Dan learns, things are very rarely as simple as they seem. Eventually, the lovers break up (to Jacq's quiet delight, as she never liked him) and this precipitates the awakening of Dan's feelings for Naomi, the flaxen-haired Love Goddess. He begins a campaign to win her over, which involves an ill-fated attempt to make pesto and memorising the scientific names for birds... as well as the different names for their colours (hence the book's title). Things, he hopes, will come to fruition at the party Jacq and Naomi hold for their university-student friends, at which Chris and Dan assure themselves of success in the female department by fabricating a series of lies intended to make them appear older and more sophisticated. In spite of this, he winds up alone in his room with Imogen, although the outcome of this encounter is less than fulfilling, and abruptly terminated, due to her advanced state of intoxication. Things, it seems, could not get any more complicated. And then, the morning after the party, Jacq and Dan have a little chat...

## Themes

*48 Shades of Brown* playfully explores several important themes and issues that many young adult readers will find relevant. The most significant are:

Rites of Passage / Development of Identity  
Adolescence and Alienation  
Having (or not having) Control  
Sexuality  
Masculinity

### *Rites of Passage/Development of Identity*

Dan is undergoing an initiation into a world he will soon be part of; a world of independence, romantic liaisons, complex relationships, extended conversations, housework, and other obstacles to happiness. He has to find a way into this world, and in doing so he has to confront his own personality and identity. In this sense, the book is about transition, moving from one phase of life to another. Of course the transition is not easy and part of the steep learning curve Dan finds himself on is learning from mistakes. Dan's personality emerges as the plot unfolds, just as his sense of independence grows, and increasingly, as he encounters challenges and setbacks, he becomes empowered by what he gains from them. The majority of these challenges etc. are informed by stereotypical male activities – drinking beer, chatting up girls – and these provide the masculine tangent of Dan's initiation into adulthood. As much as anything else, Dan's time with Jacq and Naomi allows him to stumble his way along the often hazardous road from innocence to experience, which Dan navigates with mixed measures of adolescent angst, introspection, inadvertent perving and the all-important realisation that being an adult really can be quite complicated. His parents, of course, hope that he will track the course of his year on the postage-pre-paid 'mammal cards' they have provided him with, and these cards become a symbolic bridge between the distinct phases of Dan's life.

'It's four weeks today since I got back, and today my life seems nothing like those cards. There's a certain dagginess about them, sure – a dagginess I want to look like I'm no part of – but they've been some kind of connection with the safe world of last year. I'm not sure I realised that until last night, when this year's world suddenly moved beyond homework and thwarted desire, to nude men in the garden and drunk girls in my bedroom. The cards are my only regular connection to the domesticity of BeigeWorld, the last bit of it I've got, and living there suddenly seems like something that happened a long time ago.' (pp. 211-212)

### *Adolescence and Alienation*

As far as we know, Dan is an only child and this may account for a certain degree of his social awkwardness evident at the beginning of the book. He finds it difficult to sustain conversation (particularly with Naomi p. 16-17) and somehow assumes responsibility for the silences that fall between them. Dan appears to be alienated from Jacq and Naomi – the clearest example of this is his age (he is nearly seventeen, Naomi about twenty and Jacq twenty-two) and the fact that he is, in many ways, still an adolescent when he arrives at the house. The misunderstandings over calculus (p. 77), Dan's lack of experience with domestic chores (p. 53), his limited cooking repertoire (p. 56) and even the fact that he has to wear a school uniform all point to a sense of apart-ness that diminishes as the novel progresses. There is, of course, the strong physical distance between Dan and his parents. But while Dan is in some ways removed from the world inhabited by Jacq and Naomi, he is also physically very close to it, so that adolescent preoccupations with sex (for example) are constantly presented to him, as evidenced by the noises heard from Naomi's room when she has sex (p. 18).

This notion of close distance is mirrored beautifully by Nick Earls in his use of Baz Luhrmann's film of *Romeo and Juliet* as an English topic that Dan studies, and particularly the essay he writes, in which he discusses the fish-tank scene. (The brief gist of Dan's essay is that the fish-tank actually makes the two lovers appear very close to one another while keeping them at a strictly defined distance.)

#### *Having (or not having) Control*

Dan seems to find comfort in order, which is manifested in the consistent and habitual method with which he puts on his socks and shoes (left sock, right sock, right shoe, left shoe p.43). This is also reflected in his reaction to the first time he hears Naomi and Jason having sex – he tries to divert his attention away from it by focusing intently on arranging his socks neatly in one of his drawers. One could also argue that both Dan and Chris spend the first half of the novel rather naïvely pretending that they can control the appeal they are bound to have over women they will meet at the party, mainly by lying. (Though Chris is more guilty of this – it's his idea – and is therefore perhaps even more lost in this environment than Dan.)

The importance of remaining in control is also embodied in the scene at the party where Dan and Imogen end up in his room and Imogen vomits on Dan's face, bed and *Romeo and Juliet* essay (p. 194). This also perhaps emphasises that no matter how hard Dan tries, no matter how many shades of brown he commits to memory or how much pesto he makes, things may never quite occur as he plans them, and the potential for things to go wrong (or at least have a less than ideal outcome) is constant. This is one of the important lessons Dan learns by the end of the novel; that the harder he tries to manipulate or interpret or a situation, the less control he has over its consequences. Hence, among other things, the formulation of the No-Plan Plan at the end of the book.

#### *Sexuality*

'It's amazing how totally aware you can be of the mechanics and how little you can still know.' (p. 48)

There are two distinct strands to the theme of sexuality in the novel. One is Dan's emerging awareness of his own sexuality (which is gradually focused on his developing feelings for Naomi) and, in the beginning, its failings. His final year of school begins, his experience with the opposite sex has been limited to '... Two girls taken outside at school dances, but only because they both genuinely wanted fresh air (my dramatic increase in heart-rate and level of palm-sweat amounted to nothing).' (p. 49) The other strand of this theme is embodied in Jacq's growing realisation of her own attraction to Naomi, revealed to Dan the morning after the party. This admission, doubly convenient by also serving as an unexpected plot twist, allows Nick Earls to touch on the issue of sexual minorities, which lends the novel another dimension of depth and relevance.

Dan's sexual innocence ends the day he arrives at the house, at the very beginning of the novel, when Naomi and her boyfriend Jason make love in the room next to his. Until this point, Dan's sexuality has remained something of a blank canvas – escorting girls outside at school dances is 'not sex, it's not close. I know more than enough to know that.' (p. 49) The irony is that while he finds himself physically closer to the act of sex (it takes place 'less than half a metre from my sock drawer' { p.41}), he remains extremely distant from any chance of experiencing it directly. His emerging sexual feelings for Naomi are exacerbated by the fact that he frequently hears her having sex, she subsequently breaks up with her boyfriend, and on one occasion he inadvertently catches a glimpse of her breasts as she waters her basil outside his bedroom window (p. 116).

However, although Naomi is highly desirable to Dan, she is also ultimately unattainable. This is the paradox that Dan comes to accept by the end of the novel, but only after his comically innocent attempts to impress her. By the end of the novel, Dan's attentions have perhaps shifted, if only slightly, from Naomi to Imogen, with whom Dan has the rather disastrous encounter in his bedroom during the party. In spite of its premature termination, this encounter allows Dan to significantly further his sexual experiences: 'I know what it's like to have arms around my neck, a body pressed against me. I know

things about the human tongue that I could only have guessed at before. I know that other mouths don't taste like your own, not quite.' (p. 215) Thus, although the encounter may have been sexually frustrating (not to mention messy), it is nonetheless quite meaningful for Dan. As the novel ends, he is optimistic about being able to see Imogen again, who presents a realistic and potentially rewarding relationship opportunity.

The other strand of the theme of sexuality, dealing with Jacq's attraction to Naomi, is less overtly portrayed by Nick Earls but nonetheless significant. It provides a strong element of contrast and a dynamic counterpoint to the progression (without much success) of Dan's affection for Naomi. Jacq's admission renders Naomi 'the only reasonable person in this whole mess' (p. 224), and effectively releases both herself and Dan from any opportunity either of them might have had with their housemate – as though, in both forming strong attractions to the same person, they cancel each other out. They can't both be with her, so neither of them can be with her.

'So what happens from here?'

'I really don't know. Maybe not much. Any idea that we're in competition is, I think, strictly theoretical.' (p. 223)

Jacq's confession remains effective because of the subtlety with which it is handled; it is a non-judgmental, perfectly credible acknowledgement of the existence of sexual orientations and minorities which paves the way for reader acceptance of both this aspect of Jacq's character specifically, and of gay and lesbian people generally. Importantly, her attraction to Naomi (while it is sexual) is also based on genuine regard and friendship and is apparently monogamous, which may help to dispel some of the generalised myths about homosexual people – that they are promiscuous, or incapable of forming attractions other than physical ones and so on. She does not outwardly conform to any accepted gay or lesbian stereotype, which is another reason why her presence in the book as a gay character is so valuable.

It is important to bear in mind, however, that Jacq's attraction to Naomi is, first and foremost, a plot complication.

*I started with the idea of Dan as someone who was very much used to his world and then suddenly saw it disrupted. I wanted to write something about a guy in his last year of school and I thought I'd pick someone very functional, then threaten the apparent foundations of his functionality and see how it went ... I thought through his options ... and once I came up with the Jacq character I suddenly had a story that I wanted to write. Then I thought I'd have another housemate and I thought Dan would take an interest (not a hard choice). And then I thought, what's the last thing he would expect? Jacq wants her too. At that point I had a story compelling me to write it...*

*Nick Earls*

### *Masculinity*

'Beer: three attempts at the drinking of (one of them this week), none of them convincing. If the last mouthful beer is at room temperature, you haven't been quick enough. No-one's said that, but I'm guessing it's true.' (p. 48)

Part of Dan's journey through his adolescence is occupied by his need to become well versed in the traditional skills of a post-adolescent male existence, such as drinking beer and either having sex or trying to. These are areas in which Dan (and no doubt many boys his age) feels he must display some level of competence if he is to be considered a Man. The irony is that his one real chance at fulfilling some of these expectations – in his room with Imogen during the party – is denied him due to an

excessive intake of alcohol, leaving him only slightly further along the road to sexual enlightenment than he was previously.

And then there's the housework. Of course, Dan is living in the wrong house entirely (quite possibly the wrong decade, in fact) if he thinks there is going to be any alignment whatsoever with traditional gender-based domestic roles. 'My lack of connection with chores became obvious earlier in the week when it became apparent to the others (before it became apparent to me) that the fungating stack of crap in the kitchen was my responsibility ... It was quite embarrassing. I had no idea that was how it worked. It's like being in a new country, this house, sometimes.' (pp. 55-56)

These notions of equality, independence and the acceptance of responsibility, with which Dan struggles to cope initially, undermine traditional masculine expectations, and they provide further challenges for Dan to overcome on the way to both being accepted by Jacq and Naomi as a credible housemate, and to becoming comfortable with his identity.

There are two significant embodiments of masculinity in the novel, each of them flawed for various reasons. Dan's father is both physically and emotionally removed from him and there are undercurrents that the relationship between them is not as fulfilling as it could be. 'This is an important year, my father said to me, demonstrating an impressive capacity for the totally unnecessary, and we want you to focus on school... So the money comes in... A lot of money, according to my father. And, all right, it's not as though this is part of a ransom process. It's not as though he's actually valuing me at seven-and-a-half [thousand dollars] plus expenses. But I wish he'd handled it differently.' (pp. 69-70)

Chris Burns, Dan's erstwhile best friend, is flawed significantly by his profound ignorance in relation to matters female. His attempts to display his manliness are often comically undermined as an effective counterpoint to Dan's rather more sincere attempts to attain a satisfactory level of masculinity. The most effective example of this in the novel is the passage depicting Chris' arrival at the house before the party (pp. 170-171). His 'performance' at the party is also significant for the way that it presents both the façade and the reality of less mature adolescent masculine behaviour; he initially lies in order to make an impression, succeeds only in making a fool of himself – 'I'm sorry, but he didn't impress a lot of people last night' (p. 223) – and eventually withdraws into a little-boy world of playing hand-held computer games with two other 'cyber-losers'.

## Style

*...I never felt it was hard to write from Dan's point of view. I think and play and plan for ages and I don't start writing until I can hear everyone talk and until I feel I can inhabit the central character's head.*

*...For me as a reader, the present tense perhaps implies that everything is up for grabs. You're in the moment and, in the case of my novels, horrendous embarrassment, a dramatic change in your luck or something else may not be far off. Perhaps it also seemed like the way Dan had to live this year, very much in the moment, piece it all together bit by bit, trying to make sense of each bit as it comes. I wanted to get the feeling of that across, and wanted to create no opportunity for the wisdom that can come with hindsight.*

*Nick Earls*

*48 Shades of Brown* is written in the first person from Dan's point-of-view, lending a tight sense of first-hand immediacy to events as they unfold. This is further heightened by Nick Earls' employment of present tense, which very much bases the novel in the 'now' and adds a further dimension of intimacy to the action. This use of narrative technique achieves several aims, the most important of which are to heighten the sense of tragi-comedy (so much so as to make the reader cringe in certain scenes –

the vomiting scene with Imogen is one that springs to mind, but also the conversations Dan has with Naomi in the very early pages of the novel in which Dan's awkwardness is palpable) and to bridge the gap between reader and narrator, drawing us into the world of this inner-Brisbane sharehouse and the tumultuous lives of its occupants whether we want to be drawn in or not.

As the narrative voice of the book is Dan's, the tone is a conversational one, underscored throughout with casual humour and sound insight. Dan's view of his world is not limited but it is tempered by his frustrations – at not being a better conversationalist, at not being smarter or a few years older, at not being more relaxed about things – and this is apparent in the choice of language he often uses. Much of the narrative consists of Dan musing over situations that have befallen him, and reflecting on them at length, lending the scope of an interior monologue to some passages of the novel. One of the most important things about Dan's narrative voice is that it is uncomplicated and very fluent, making the novel both very accessible and excellent to read aloud. (The readability of the text is further enhanced by the stylistic absence of speech marks so that the pages appear 'uncluttered'.)

## Characters

*When I'm writing a story with a teenage central character, my job is to get that individual right, not to represent every teenager there is (obviously something you can't do anyway). I think some people long past their teenage years freak themselves out when planning to write teen age characters. They either shy away from any sense of the contemporary teenager, or they try to embrace the contemporary all too strongly and can all too easily sound fake. Bad teen age dialogue can be really bad.*

*Nick Earls*

**Dan Bancroft, aged nearly 17:** Young, alone, confused, intelligent, vulnerable, somewhat impetuous, very naïve as the book begins. Has to simultaneously grapple with his final year of school, his burgeoning sexuality and the fact he sleeps on the other side of a thin wall from the flaxen-haired Love Goddess, to whom he becomes hopelessly attracted. As events unfold he matures; he comes to realise that assumption can be the mother of all stuff-ups, and that perceptions can be very tricky things indeed. As if these aren't enough to keep him occupied, he commits himself to making improvements in the all-important area of beer-drinking, makes valiant attempts at the mastery of calculus, and cops a good healthy dose of vomit in the ear. 'Home, as in my previous, beige home, might have bored me a lot of the time, but there were none of these dilemmas.' (p. 42)

*Humour is partly a survival tactic for him... It's also one of his appealing features, and I wanted him to be appealing – a mixture of smart, anxious and appealing... He's a complex person, with several sides to him.*

*Nick Earls*

**Jacq, early twenties:** Dan's aunt, some twenty years younger than his mother; hip, trendy, plays bass in a band. Ironically finds herself in a similar position to Dan when she begins to realise that she too has developed a persistent attraction to her female housemate. Is a mother-figure of sorts for Dan, but only as far as teaching him how to use the washing machine and tasting his home-made pesto. Witty, intelligent, and the unwitting target of Phil the Landlord's affections. Jacq accepts with some nobility the fact that nothing will develop between her and Naomi in terms of a relationship, if only because it would be in violation of the unspoken, unwritten housemate rule: 'Don't jump your housemates... Don't even be so dumb as to get ideas.' (p. 227) By the end of the novel she appears to be heading into a relationship with Lisa, one of her bandmates, in the same way as Dan seems set to 'try again' with Imogen.

**Naomi, late teens:** Caught in the middle in a love triangle about which she knows nothing; has a boyfriend when the book opens, dumps him, seems to be heading into another relationship as the book ends, much to Dan's surprise and Jacq's probable frustration. Her importance in the novel comes not so much through what she says or does, but the fact that she becomes (unbeknownst to her) an 'Object of Affection' for both of her housemates. She is of course the reason for Dan's humorous attempts to make pesto, learn bird names, and so on. She has also has a habit of watering her basil outside Dan's bedroom window while wearing very little (read: nothing) in the bra department. This provides Dan with one of two direct experiences of female sexuality he has in the book, the other is with Imogen in his bedroom during the party in the precious minutes before she vomits everywhere. As the novel ends, Naomi appears to be heading into a relationship with a guy named Matt – although, as Jacq says, '...I've met Matt. He's a dick. Naomi's great, but she has no appreciation of quality.' (p. 287)

Three significant minor characters in the book are Chris Burns, Imogen and Phil Borthwick, the lovestruck landlord.

**Chris Burns, sixteen:** Dan's best friend, painfully naïve where girls are concerned and quite envious of the domestic situation Dan is in. His formative sexual experiences have come via 'a large number of low-grade Internet porn-site addresses' (p. 41) and despite his best (though wildly unrealistic) intentions, he has to make do with experiencing the obviously bawdy lifestyle of the housemates vicariously through Dan. The closest he comes to the 'real thing' are the rumours he begins to circulate about himself and his fictitious conduct at the party. Nonetheless, he and Dan are good mates, though as Dan realises, 'the world's most obvious rule about life [is] 'don't ever, ever take the advice of Chris Burns'.' (p. 286)

**Imogen, about sixteen:** Imogen is interesting on two counts: she provides Dan with the only intimate physical contact he has in the book, brief though it is, and by the end of the book she has assumed very real relationship potential. 'At the party, Imogen seemed like an interlude, a diversion. If I'd been smarter, things might be quite different now.' (p.286) Imogen becomes a source of optimism for Dan, providing a sense of hope that he might find love and happiness (or something close to it) after all.

**Phil Borthwick, mid-forties** Another embodiment of masculinity, though he certainly presents a different facet of the male psyche than the other male characters in the novel. He is hopelessly in love with Jacq, embarrasses himself with a beer jug and a display of nudity at the party and promptly disappears into the night. Initially he makes visits to the house for the flimsiest reasons, but his behaviour at the party puts paid to that – possibly out of embarrassment he reverts management of the property to the real estate company. 'Poor Phil,' Jacq says of him at this news. 'We should all have better luck.' (p. 264)

## **The Title**

What on earth does *48 Shades of Brown* actually mean, and how does it apply to the story? A myriad of possibilities: the title is drawn from Dan's discovery (thanks to Neville W Cayley's *What Bird is That?*) that there are in fact 48 different shades of brown in the bird world, and he endeavours to learn all of them to try and impress Naomi. A strong thematic reflection of the title is that it suggests complexity – nothing is ever cut and dried, nothing is ever easy, there is certainly no such thing as an 'absolute' when it comes to adolescence, falling in love, or indeed, trying to make someone notice you. Brown is traditionally seen as something of a dreary colour; and Dan refers to his family home, with its camel-coloured lounge suite, as 'BeigeWorld'. So the title could also reflect the transition Dan makes from adolescence to adulthood – out of BeigeWorld into the real world, where some things are never easy... and if they were, they wouldn't be nearly as funny.

## Activities

### *Pre-Reading*

Consider the cover of the book. Look at the use of colours and symbols and what each of them might tell us. Keep the responses you make and refer to them again when you finish reading the book. The copyline at the bottom of the front cover and the blurb on the back might give you some hints.

### *During or after reading*

As Dan, write a postcard to your mother in Geneva after your first night in the house.

After reading to page 31, write an explanation of the relationship that Dan has with Jacq, and that Jacq has with Dan's mother.

How does Dan react to the noises that emanate from Naomi's room during her boyfriend's visit? What does this reveal about his character?

Imagine that Naomi keeps a diary. Write an entry for the first time she meets Dan, recording her opinion of him and what she thinks he is like, using the conversation they have at the blue table as an indicator.

What are some of the ways in which Dan and Chris are similar? How are they different?

How would you describe the style of *48 Shades of Brown*? Why do you think it is written in the first person?

How would the book be different if it were written in the past tense?

How effective is the title? What does it refer to? Why do you think Nick Earls has chosen this title for the book?

Comment on how the book ends. Is it an effective ending? Why/why not? What possibilities, if any, do you think it creates? How would you describe the ending?

The book ends in March, and only recounts the first few weeks of Dan's life in the house with Jacq and Naomi. Write a postcard or letter from Dan to his mother dated November or December, relating what has happened since the conclusion of the book.

### *Sample Essay Questions*

Nick Earls has commented that humour is partly a survival tactic for Dan. Explain how Dan uses humour to cope with the situations he finds himself in, and how effective you think this use of humour is.

Explain why Nick Earls chose Dan as the narrator for the novel. What does the use of a first-person narrator add to the novel?

'The present tense implies that everything is up for grabs.' (Nick Earls.) Comment on this statement in relation to the style and tone of *48 Shades of Brown*.

Examine and explain the parallels between Dan's essay on the fish-tank scene in Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet* and his experiences in the sharehouse.

Discuss the friendship between Dan and Chris Burns. What does each gain from the relationship?

Use specific examples from the novel to support your answer.

Explain how Dan's experiences in the house differ from his previous domestic situation. What are the most important contrasts?

Discuss the significance of Imogen's character in the novel.

Analyse the ending of the novel. Explain the extent to which you think the ending is effective, and why.

#### *Possible Extension Activities*

Viewing Baz Luhrmann's film *Romeo and Juliet*

Reading *He Died with a Felafel in his Hand* or *The Tasmanian Babes Fiasco*, both by John Birmingham. These books comically present a rather different view of sharehouse living and are aimed overtly at an adult audience.

Reading other novels by Nick Earls such as *After January*, *Bachelor Kisses*, *Perfect Skin*, *Zigzag Street*, *World of Chickens*.

### **And Finally...**

*The feedback I get from teenage readers has been the kind of feedback I'd hoped for – there's a response to the comic side of the novel, but there are also people writing and saying things like 'I've never read a character like me before'. That's really rewarding. But even for people who aren't like Dan, hopefully he's believable and what's going on is interesting enough to be worth reading. I think the novel works in different ways for different readers, but I hope it's got the capacity to entertain and also the prospect of doing more if people look a little deeper. But I'm happy either way.*

*Nick Earls*

For more information about Nick Earls, go to the website **[www.nickearls.com](http://www.nickearls.com)**