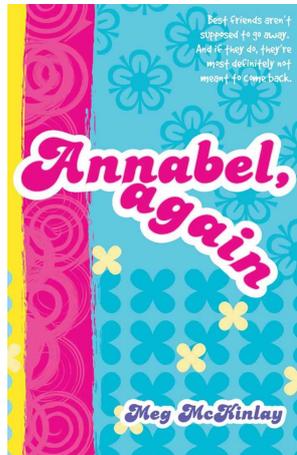


# *Annabel, Again*

by Meg McKinlay



Genre: Humorous social realism (contemporary)

Ages: 9-13-ish

## **Synopsis**

Olivia and Annabel have been best friends forever. Together, they've survived kamikaze magpies, mildly deranged mothers, and an archenemy named Summer; together, they've carried their netball team all the way to the finals.

When Annabel moves away, Olivia is crushed; without Annabel, she's doomed to spend lunchtimes staring into the sun, and afternoons spinning hula hoops alone in her driveway. So when Annabel walks casually back into class a year later, Olivia can't believe it; now everything is going to be just like it used to be. Except that it isn't. When Annabel takes a seat next to Summer and invites her to join the netball team, Olivia knows that things have changed. And that somehow, she has to find a way to get their old friendship back, preferably one that doesn't involve demented parental advice or books such as *Journey to Your Inner You-ness*.

*Annabel, Again* is a story about pistachio nuts and psychotic chickens; about maniacs and the secret life of turtles. It's about losing friendship, and fighting to hold on to what you had, then finally getting it back again, in a new and surprising shape.

## Background to the Novel

The idea for *Annabel, Again* came to me while walking my dog in the park near our home. It was the middle of summer, and the lake was completely dry. Maybe it's because I like to run, or perhaps there's something about that vast, open space that appealed to me, but I suddenly imagined a young girl running madly across that dry lake-bed. I didn't know who she was, or whether she was running from, or towards something, but the image stayed with me and formed the basis for the novel. In the book, this scene occurs towards the end, but I didn't really know that until I got there.

At the time that I started writing the book, my daughter had a friend who lived across the park from us, and I guess that formed part of the story. I thought about two best friends who lived on opposite sides of the park and why one of them might be running, and gradually spun everything out from there, like a big, messy spider-web.

As the story evolved, I realized that I was writing about female friendship, and that this is something that I'm very interested in. I think all of us who have been girls have had to negotiate the often difficult and always-shifting terrain of early female friendships. I see these kinds of negotiations beginning for my own daughter, who was eight when I started writing the book, and I remember finding it tough to steer a path through all that myself. So I guess on some level I'm trying to portray a relationship that is pushed to breaking point, by circumstance on the one hand, but also by the stubbornness of the characters themselves, and suggest that there are ways through, that friendship can be a tricky thing to manage, but is worth the effort in the end.

Although there's nothing autobiographical about the book in terms of plot – I never had a friend who moved away and then came back – I guess you could say that parts of it are emotionally autobiographical. I'm sure that I tapped into some of my own experiences in writing the interactions between the girls, and what I'm trying to do, in part, is to suggest why the characters might act the way they do. When we see girls interact with each other, all that's visible is the surface behaviour, but that emerges, of course, from a complex network of underlying fears, insecurities, anxieties, and so on. By adopting a first-person perspective, and constructing a character who (I'd like to think) is generally engaging and likeable, but who makes some rather foolish and self-defeating choices, part of what I'm doing is trying to lay some of that bare.

## Themes Explored

- \* Friendship
- \* Change
- \* Conflict Resolution/Compromise
- \* Communication
- \* Perspectives: Seeing People and Events from Different Viewpoints
- \* Coping with Adversity

## Discussion Questions

1. The original working title for the novel was *When Annabel Adams Came Back*. Which title do you prefer, and why? How do these titles differ in their effect on the reader?
  
2. What sort of person is Livvy (Olivia)? List some words that you think describe her personality. How would you describe her behaviour towards the other girls – sensible, selfish, fair, mean, a combination of these? Does she seem like someone you would like to know? Why or why not?
  
3. Why do you think that Livvy's mother said she needed to move on and forget Annabel? Does this seem reasonable to you?
  
4. What do you think makes a friend? Do you think Livvy and Summer could ever be friends? Livvy and Kate? Why or why not? Remember that what brought Livvy and Annabel together in the first place was a shared sense of difference. This sense of being different from the others led them to become 'exclusive' friends, and they then effectively stopped seeing the other girls as potential friends.
  
5. What is it that brings Annabel and Livvy back together again towards the end of the book? In what ways is their relationship likely to be different in the future?

6. Make a list of things that have changed over the course of the narrative. What do you think the novel might be saying about change and how we respond to it?

## Language and Style

### 1. Point of View

*Annabel, Again* is written in the first person, so that we see events from Livvy's perspective. How do you think this affects the way the reader sees things in the novel (think particularly here about the ways you described Livvy in response to the first discussion question above)? Think about aspects of the novel and try and separate *fact* from *perspective*. How do you think the book would be different if it were written in the third person? Or if it was narrated by Annabel, instead of Livvy?

### 2. Tense

The novel is written in the present tense. What effect does this have on you as a reader? How do you think the book would have been different if it were written in the past tense? (Students might like to consider here the sense that a book narrated in the past has already happened, that events are set in stone, whereas a present-tense narrative perhaps generates the illusion that the ending is unwritten, that events are related as they take place, and that the reader experiences them at the same time as the characters do).

### 3. The Magic of Metaphor: 'Show, Don't Tell'

An instruction you'll often hear in writing classes is 'Show, Don't Tell'. By this, we mean simply that it's often more effective to *suggest* something to the reader than it is to *explain* it. In *Annabel, Again*, I often use a form of metaphor to do this work for me, so that the words suggest more than their literal meaning. Consider the following examples:

\* When Livvy's mother tells her who Cazaly is, Livvy says: 'How can someone be totally famous one minute and the next it's like they never existed at all?' (p. 105)

Is it really Cazaly that Livvy is concerned about here? What more general anxiety is being expressed about her own situation?

\* When Livvy does her 'dud throw' of the stick, she says: 'I want to go and get it again, do a re-throw, get it right this time, but it seems like too much effort.'

And like admitting I stuffed up. If I stand here and don't look at it, I can pretend I threw it hard and fast, clear across the lake.' (p. 97)

Livvy doesn't want to admit that she's done something badly; she would rather ignore the facts and believe a made-up version of events. On the surface, she's talking about throwing a stick, but what else do you think she might be referring to here?

See if you can come up with some other examples of how the novel uses this sort of device. You might think about Livvy's insistence on retaining the same netball positions, her love of playing 'centre', and her argument that people should focus on one main activity.

### **Class Activities**

1. Draw a map – where do the key scenes in the novel take place? Map the action but also the 'emotional action' – are these necessarily the same thing? Think about how the park features in the novel – a lot of action takes place there, but it's also a kind of neutral space. It's what separates the girls' houses, it's a symbol of relative freedom for Livvy (when she's allowed to cross it on her own), and it's the site of much of the action as well as some key emotional shifts in the novel.
2. As a class, write the key plot-points of the novel on the board. Mark each 'crisis point' of Livvy's relationship with Annabel. Think about what Livvy could have done differently at each point (e.g. rejected her mother's crazy fast-track plan for forgetting, been honest with Annabel about why she didn't go to her house with Summer, rather than making up a story about magpies, and so on.)
3. Try telling the story from the point of view of Annabel. Re-write or re-imagine a single scene from the point-of-view of Annabel or Summer.
4. Write chapter headings for selected sections of the novel. In your headings, try and suggest what happens – either emotionally or in terms of action. See if you can limit yourself to 4-6 words per heading!