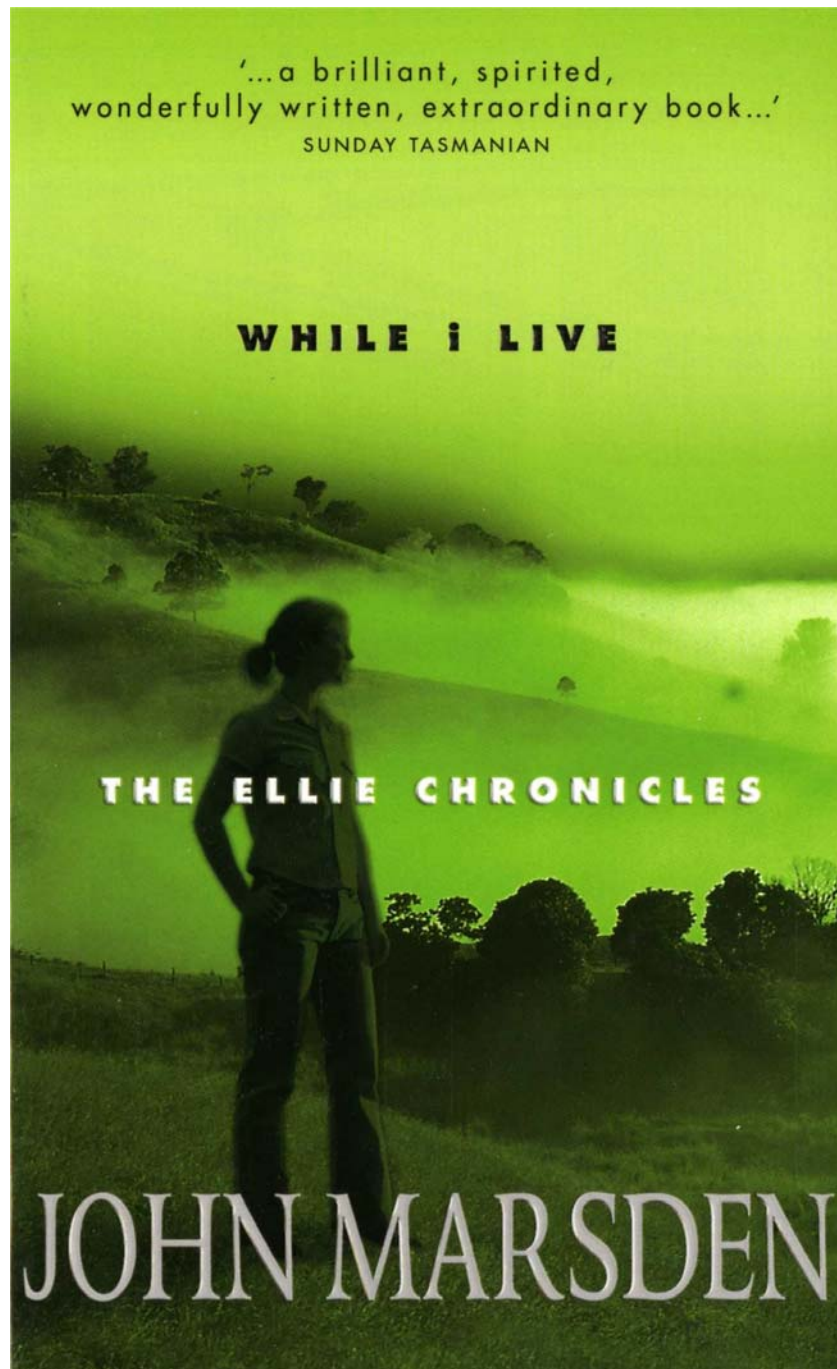




WHILE I LIVE

These teachers' notes have been designed around the major themes of *While I Live*. These themes lend themselves to discussion in the classroom, through analysis of the text and by allowing students to reflect on these issues within their own life. The questions arising from each theme may be used for writing tasks or as a starting point for further discussion and investigation.



PAN MACMILLAN AUSTRALIA GIVES PERMISSION TO PHOTOCOPY
TEXT FROM THESE TEACHERS' NOTES.



JOHN MARSDEN

CHARACTERS

Ellie	Mr Yannos	Nick Greene
Homer	Mrs Yannos	Pang
Gavin	My Sayle	Shannon Young
Lee	Mrs Samuels	Sam Young
Fi	Bronte	Alastair Young
Robyn	Jess	Jerry Parsons
Ellie's mother	Jeremy Finlay	Major Gisbourne
Ellie's father	General Finlay	Mr Rodd
Mrs Mackenzie	Jamie Anlezark	The Judge
Fi's mother	Mrs Maxwell	



Draw a character map (flow chart) showing how each character relates to the others. Start with Ellie in the middle and work your way out, giving each character an individual box. Use arrows to demonstrate the relationship between the characters.

Think about:

What is their relationship to Ellie?

How important or influential are they to Ellie's life?

What role do they play in the story?



WHILE I LIVE

DEATH

Death is dealt with in many ways throughout *While I Live*. First Ellie's parents die, then she must kill others to protect and save those she cares about. This raises a number of ethical questions:

 **When is killing acceptable?**

 **Is there a difference between killing under instruction (soldiers) and killing for survival (Ellie)?**


"I didn't want the murderer's body in the same vehicle as my parents so I made the man put him in with Mrs Mackenzie, which was totally gross of me." (p. 21)


 **Why do you believe Ellie thought it was bad to feel this way?**

Ellie talks about seeing her mother's dead body:

"Everything above her legs was too terrible to see...I felt myself falling apart, coming to pieces, right there on the spot." (p. 9)

Compare Ellie's response here to her reaction to the death of soldiers. Look specifically at pages 174 and 255 - 262.

 **How does she deal with the sight of blood?**

 **What was her attitude towards the people who killed her parents?**

 **Did she believe the same thing when she killed people herself?**



JOHN MARSDEN

REVENGE

Revenge is something that motivates Ellie. She attempts to fight back to overcome the hardship she has experienced. Ellie can justify killing soldiers because she knows that they'd have killed her if they'd had the chance. She is motivated by revenge when she attacks Mr Sayle for his dishonest financial dealings.



How did the death of her parents impact on Ellie's reaction to the soldiers who imprisoned Homer and those that were in the Young's house?



Was it a matter of simple survival or did Ellie have a need to protect people she knew, because of her feelings about what happened to her parents?



How effective do you think Ellie's *J'Accuse* was in her fight with Mr Sayle?



Can you think of a time or a situation in your life where a *J'Accuse* style letter would work?



Do you think there were any ethical problems with Ellie's way of handling this situation?



WHILE I LIVE

MONEY

Ellie spends a great deal of her time worrying about money. In order to keep the farm she has to consider how much farm equipment, new livestock and the day-to-day farm expenses will set her back – not to mention necessities such as food. Instead of buying a house in Wirrawee to live comfortably she chooses to stay on the farm where everything is a constant fight.



Why do you think keeping the farm was so important to Ellie?



What role does money play in her life, both today and in the future?

“Have you gone completely mad? You’ll lose everything. I’m not even sure that it’s legal. You’re underage, remember?” (p. 67)



Did Mr Sayle raise a good point?



JOHN MARSDEN

AGE & RESPONSIBILITY

Many of Ellie's difficulties relate to her being underage. After her parents' death Ellie requires a legal guardian and she is required to attend school. She would like Homer's parents or Fi's mother to be her guardian, yet the court rules in favour of Mr Sayle as he has financial expertise. However, Ellie has taken on a great deal more responsibility than most people her age – both in terms of the farm, and her actions in rescuing Homer and the Young family.

"At your age you don't require the amount of parenting a young child would need. The main function of a guardian for you is to look after your financial interests." (p. 226)



What do you think Ellie really needed as a guardian?



Was it the financial security that Mr Sayle said he could provide, or was it the love and support that the Yannos family could offer?



How does Ellie's age influence or impede what she is able to do?



Why does Ellie think it is so important to look after and provide for Gavin when she has so much more to worry about?



WHILE I LIVE

TRUST & FAMILY


Ellie has almost a second sense as to whom she can trust. She has a fierce bond with Gavin, Homer, Fi and their parents, but she is concerned about the motives of her teachers, Mr Sayle and Jess.

 **Is her bond with her friends because of their shared war experiences, or because of her unwillingness to open herself up to new people?**

“After all, your father obviously trusted him.” (p.237)

 What was trustworthy about Mr Sayle?

“I knew gunmen might be in there. I knew it might be an ambush. But when it’s your family what else can you do?” (p. 9)

 Do you believe you have a choice when it comes to protecting your family and friends? Or, like Ellie, do you think this is something that must be done, whatever the risks?

 Why won’t Homer tell Ellie about Liberation?



JOHN MARSDEN

THE ENEMY

Details about the people on the other side of the border are deliberately unclear. Little is known of the causes or origins of the war, what the situation is now, or what the soldiers want when they attack the Linton and Young houses.



What do you know about the people on the other side of the border? Do you know which country they come from, what language they speak or what they were fighting for?



Make a list of all the things you know about 'the enemy' on the other side of the border. Compare your list with the rest of the class.



Is it important for the story that we know a lot about these people? Why or why not?



WHILE I LIVE

EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

Most students will never have been remotely close to experiencing the situations Ellie has found herself in. This raises a number of issues for discussion and reflection.



How would the average person cope if they were placed in Ellie's position?

"It seemed so obvious. But I was really startled. For so long we'd lived in a world where police did not exist." (p. 253)



If your town or city was invaded tomorrow, to whom would you turn? Who could you rely on to protect you?

Ellie talks about waiting for soldiers:

"I think only people who have been there can understand what it's like." (p. 161)



Can you imagine what it would be like to wait without moving for hours?



Can you compare it to anything else you've experienced in your life?

Ellie discusses on page 289 what she'd do in an emergency farm situation, comparing her reaction to what other people might do.



How do you think you would cope in a situation similar to Ellie's in *While I Live*? Would you fight or cower away? Do you think you'd have a choice?

John Marsden talks about what he thinks he would do in Ellie's situation:

I would like to think that I would be brave and get out there and do brave stuff. But I don't know, and cannot know until I'm put in that situation. There have been times in my life when I've been exhausted or in danger, and have had to dig deep to find a little extra, and so far, that little extra has always been there, so I'm glad of that. But to do it month after month, in a war situation... well, I don't know. My hope is that I would be brave, but my fear is that I would hide under the bed and wait for it all to go away.



JOHN MARSDEN

ELLIE

Many readers have written to John Marsden asking him why he chose to write the *Tomorrow* series and *While I Live* using the voice of a teenage girl.



How differently would this story be received and read if the protagonist was a teenaged male, or an adult?

John responds to a reader's question:

"If the central character in the *Tomorrow* series were a male, do you think the series would have been so successful?"

This question really intrigued me. I think it probably would have been, as long as the male was a sensitive intelligent person, not just some meathead who went around hacking people to bits. If he had been in that second category I guess the books would have had a lot of popularity with a certain type of reader, but the fact that they have reached such a range of people suggests that they depend on something other than pure action.

I'm liking less and less the label 'male' and 'female'. For example you could say that the books would have been equally successful if the main character had been a male with female characteristics, or that the books are successful because Ellie is a female with male characteristics, but that's a good example of just how meaningless, and even dangerous, these labels can be.

It's funny, but when I picked up the pen to start writing the books, I just immediately went into a female voice, with barely a moment's thought.



How different do you think the story of *While I Live* would be if it were written from another perspective, such as Gavin's?

Read chapter 13 again, and decide how different it would be if this chapter were written from Homer's perspective.



Rewrite this chapter using Homer as the protagonist.

Think about:

What does he see?

What does he know that Ellie doesn't know?

What does he think is happening?