

Amy Doak: What Have They Done to Liza McLean?

Join bestselling author Amy Doak as she explores the craft of writing mystery and offers a behind the scenes look at her latest novel, *What Have They Done to Liza McLean?*

Amy will show students how she builds high stakes, creates authentic characters and shapes suspense that keeps readers turning the pages. She will also share her writing journey, along with the lessons she wishes she had known at the start.

This focused session on craft will leave students inspired to take creative risks and develop their own storytelling skills, guided by one of Australia's standout voices in contemporary young adult fiction.

BUILDING SUSPENSE AND TENSION

Mysteries live or die on suspense, timing and carefully released information. What makes readers keep turning the page? How does the writer control what the reader knows (and when)?

Students choose a tense moment from the novel (or a teacher-provided passage) and identify:

- one red herring;
- one genuine clue;
- and one unanswered question.

Then they write 3–4 new sentences intensifying suspense without revealing the solution.

CHARACTER AND MOTIVE

Great mysteries depend on believable motives, not just plot twists. What kinds of motives commonly appear in mysteries (revenge, fear, jealousy, protection, desperation)? Which characters in the novel feel morally grey? Does a character need to be likeable or relatable to be interesting?

Students should complete a Motive Map for one character from *What Have They Done to Liza McLean?*:

- What do they want most?
- What are they afraid of?
- What would they never do?
- What might they do under pressure?

Conclude by finishing this sentence: "This character becomes more/less suspicious when..."

WHICH CHARACTER ARE YOU?

Use [the official Penguin quiz](#) for *What Have They Done to Liza McLean?* Students complete the quiz to discover which character they are.

Students should then write a short paragraph responding to:

- Do you agree with this result? Why/why not?
- What strengths or flaws do you share with this character?
- What would you have done differently in their situation?

If there's time, they could also write a brief diary entry in that character's voice.

ETHICS OF SECRETS AND TRUTH

Mysteries hinge on secrets, lies and hidden histories. When, if ever, is it okay to keep a secret? Are there "good" lies and "bad" lies? Who decides? What are the consequences when truth is revealed too late? How does *What Have They Done to Liza McLean?* suggest truth can be both healing and harmful?

During the discussion, teachers should chart students' responses under:

- Protecting someone
- Protecting yourself
- Causing harm
- Doing good

Encourage nuance rather than right/wrong answers.

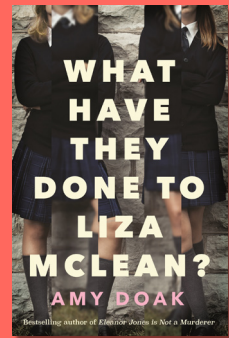
WRITING A MINI-MYSTERY HOOK

Amy Doak is an expert at hooks, stakes and risk in storytelling. What does it mean to say the stakes are high? How does raising personal stakes change a story?

Students draft the opening paragraph of a mini-mystery including a central character, a problem or disappearance, a hinted secret and rising stakes. Then swap with a partner and answer, what questions do you now want answered? This reinforces the idea that mystery equals questions and consequences.



Amy Doak



What Have They Done to Liza McLean? is available at Readings.

KEY CURRICULUM AREAS (YEAR 7-10)

Learning areas: English,
Capabilities: Critical and Creative Thinking, Personal and Social Capability, Ethical Capability
Foundational Skills: Literacy