

LONGACRE PRESS RESOURCE KIT

Longacre Press Young Adult Fiction

OUT on the EDGE

Anna Mackenzie

"What do you do when you can't
keep going?
You stop."

Alison's life is totally together. There's not much that can faze her. Not until a guy she barely knows turns up in her backyard — his face looking like someone has been using it as a football.

What can she do but help?

As Garry struggles, not only with the consequences of his actions but with his darker side, Alison is sure she's done the right thing. Until the authorities get involved, that is. And suddenly she discovers that her own complacent existence is not as rock solid as she'd thought.

A frank, clear-eyed story about making your own decisions, and learning the full dimensions of your heart.

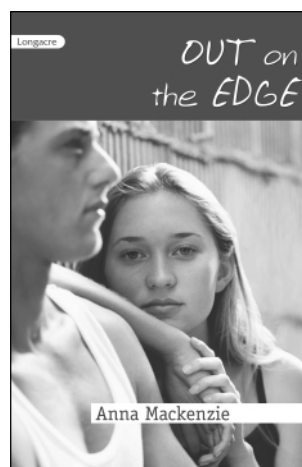
THE AUTHOR:

Anna Mackenzie lives in Hawkes Bay and is involved with the rural community. Her first novel, *High Tide*, featured in the Children's Literature Foundation List of Notable Books of 2003.

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- Editorial comment
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- Study notes:

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SYNOPSIS:

TOLD from the alternating points of view of its two main characters, *Out on the Edge* is the story of Garry and Alison, classmates who have had relatively little to do with each other, until one day Garry experiences a violent assault from his father. Garry escapes to take refuge in Alison's back yard, and she offers him a place to stay at the family bach, to give him some time out to recover. The two young people, drawn together by crisis, become increasingly attracted to each other, but then are pulled apart when the authorities get involved in Garry's family life. Garry's

efforts to defend himself and his mother mean he has to face the police, family courts, counselors, and go into temporary care. Determined not to get Alison further embroiled in his personal tragedy, he tries to cut contact with her.

The novel follows Alison's battle to show Garry there is potential for them to stay together, despite their youth, his circumstances, and her own family's anxiety about her love for the troubled young man.

EDITORIAL COMMENT:

ANNA MACKENZIE handles a challenging, serious social issue with a gentle grace. With a refreshingly relaxed, colloquial touch, her work shows a clear mindedness that expresses a deep concern for her characters, and for any member of a young generation brutally forced to take on an adult maturity and fend for themselves – and defend each other.

Her characters express an empathy for one another which is redemptive. It illustrates how far they are able to rise above the loss and emotional deprivation dealt to them (Alison's father died when she was five; Garry comes from a severely abusive background). In the right places, her novel also deals in a frank, documentary style with the practicalities surrounding an experience like Garry's: courts, police, counsellors, hospitals, care

units. The research behind her work helps to demystify some of these areas for young adults. The novel also shows the difficulties young people often have in expressing themselves in the face of these authorities. Anna Mackenzie's writing also draws in moments of a tranquil kind of poetry that in themselves show her characters are still capable of perceiving the good in their worlds. The novel is sensitive yet robust; its tone reflects exactly the sensibility its young characters need to witness in the adults they deal with – and it offers hope for both Alison and Garry as they gain the perspective and inner strength to cope with crisis.

AUTHOR INSPIRATION:

What motivated you?

Garry and Alison's story is one that I felt needed to be told. Life is seldom simple and tidy, and chance experiences can change your perspective, even your life – as happens to both Alison and Garry in *Out on the Edge*.

The origin of the story links to a supporting character in a previous book (Martin in *High Tide*). While Martin and Garry are very different people, they share the experience of having a violent parent – though the level of violence is considerably worse for Garry.

The idea of telling the story of a teen from a violent background started to grow in my mind soon after I finished writing *High Tide*. In that book Martin's background is only briefly touched upon. As I thought through ways of exploring the issue further, Garry's story began to develop.

Living with violence is all too common. But how does someone with no experience of violence cope when they are unexpectedly confronted with a reality quite different to their own? How would Alison react? Can she really come to understand what Garry has been through? These questions also demanded answers – and the answers are Alison's story.

Background information and research:

In writing *Out on the Edge*, my experience as a counsellor working with families in which abuse occurs was invaluable. I also asked a lot of questions. Police liaison and PR people proved extremely helpful, providing information and opinion about various scenarios. They answered queries about all sorts of minor detail – how quickly the police would talk to Garry's classmates, what type of information they would give to the media, at what stage and in what circumstances charges would be laid.

To ensure the story was as credible as possible, I talked to doctors, read up on head injuries, made



David Evans

notes on the length of time bruises last and the different range of colours they move through (never before had the occasional bruise seemed advantageous to my writing!).

The family group conference and CYFS scenes I was able to clarify through talking to a young friend who has been through the system, as well as talking to some of the professionals involved.

I also researched Alison's cycling – in fact, the first few chapters were 'written' in my head while I was training for a bike race. While the setting of the book is based only loosely on real places, the 70km training circuit Alison refers to is one I've done often.

Writing:

When I began writing *Out on the Edge*, I started by telling the story from Alison's perspective, but I soon started to feel that I wasn't getting the full picture. I decided to rewrite the early chapters in Garry's voice, initially to ensure that I was capturing Garry's character to my satisfaction – at that stage I had no intention of including him as a narrator. As soon as Garry's unique, poetic and insightful voice developed, I knew that it was as fully his story as Alison's, and that he had to be a part of telling it.

Blending and merging their voices without repetition and with varying timescales proved far more demanding than writing in a single narrative voice – but I believe the story is the richer for it, and I hope that readers will gain insights as well as enjoyment from the dual perspectives.

WRITING STYLE:

From

Part I: Alison Chapter One

The gravel crunched under the wheel as I turned into our driveway. I was breathing hard – the climb up the hill is always tough but at the end of winter, when I haven't been on the road for a few months, it's murder.

Five-thirty: the ride had taken longer than I'd expected but Mum wouldn't be home till after 11 so there was only homework waiting. After my warm down. I was into my first stretch when I caught a flicker of movement in the shadows woven through the trees at the side of the garden. I reached for the bike, holding it like a shield against the dark.

'Who's there?' My voice sounded wussy, even to my ears.

No answer. I hadn't really expected one. Maybe it was a cat. Maybe I'd imagined it. I took a step towards the shed and straight away there was a noise, half word, half groan.

'Who is it?' I was angry: I didn't like being crept up on and if someone was there they should have answered the first time. Besides, being angry is easier than being scared.

A pair of trainers shuffled forward, the body wearing them still lost in shadow, but I could see it wasn't an adult and I relaxed a bit.

'Come out!' My voice was harsher than I'd intended. 'Come on. You've got no right, hiding in there.'

The boy was my age and scruffy looking. Old jeans, torn T-shirt with dark stains on it, brown hair flopping over his face. He came forward a few steps then stopped, but he couldn't stand still. Even with his head hanging I could see he was all smashed up, but he was still easy to recognise.

'Garry! What're you doing here?'

• • •

From

Part II: Garry Chapter 4

I told her what happened. I think I told her all of it: the words felt like battery acid, eating me up from inside. Lying here in the dark I try to work out why she's helping me, after what I told her.

There's a streak of moonlight like a three-fingered hand reaching across the ceiling, but there's not enough light to see the room. I don't remember much about getting here, just the Vespa and following the white line. I must have stopped somewhere, because I remember feeling cold and putting my hands in my pockets, then finding a note with directions. That got me going again.

I do know why I went to Alison.

I wouldn't have gone there if I'd been thinking straight. It's not like I ever had a chance with her, but even if I had, this'd be sure to blow it.

She's cool, Alison. She's got green eyes and hair that runs through a dozen shades of gold and copper and brown, like sand poured through sunlight. Tidy body too, but that's not what it's about. I just like her. She sticks up for what she believes in. Most of the dipshits don't have anything they believe in. They don't think, except about themselves. Alison thinks.

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STUDY NOTES:

Discussion Questions

- Do you think Alison made the right decision in not going to the police straight away? Explain your response.
- What aspects of personality and background seem to form the attraction between Alison and Garry?
- Garry is appalled at his own actions. Is he justified in feeling ashamed?
- Do you agree that there is a genuine difference between self-defence and assault?
- What conclusions might we be able to draw about Garry's home conditions from the snide remarks Alison's classmates make on pp 27–28?
- Re-read pp 35–36. How might the simile that Garry's father uses – of the mussels pushing each other off the rocks – reveal something of their family life? Why is this simple, early childhood memory so painful for Garry?
- On page 39, Garry asks himself questions about his father's violence: "Does finding reasons why he changed make it okay? Does it make what he did not his fault?" How would you answer these questions?
- What does Alison mean when she says on page 57 "...how easy it is not to know people, and how much harder it can be if you do"?
- Do you think Garry's mother made the correct ethical decision when she confessed to injuring her husband?
- What assessments can you make about Sergeant Tairua's character, from the way he handles Garry's case, particularly at the family conference?
- What do you think of Alison's mother's parenting skills? Does she do a good job? Compare and contrast these skills to those of Garry's parents.
- Do the main characters, Alison and Garry, each have flaws? Explain your answer.
- Do you agree with Norbert's philosophy – that it's always good to remember where you come from?
- Do you think Alison has lost perspective when she decides to hitch to see Garry?
- What kind of future do you see for Alison and Garry, together and/or separately?

Literary Comprehension

- What are the main *stylistic* differences between Garry's and Alison's stories? I.e. how does the writer create a distinct sense of personality through her use of language in each separate character section?
- Choose between five and ten similes in the novel and discuss how effective they are; what images or other sense impressions they evoke, and what they reveal about the characters' state of mind.
- Find out definitions of the *epistolary novel* and the *false document* techniques in literary fiction. Does *Out on the Edge* have anything in common with either of these techniques?
- How does *Out on the Edge* conform to the conventions of literary realism?

General Knowledge

1. Find out the correct treatment for shock.
2. Find out five main facts about the condition of alcoholism.
3. Find out five main facts about concussion.
4. Find out what a family conference usually involves when someone under 18 gets involved with the courts.
5. Find out five main facts about the condition sometimes called 'battered wife syndrome'.
6. Find out five main facts each about post-traumatic stress disorder and depression.
7. Find out some of the basic differences between the types of counselling that can be called 'cognitive therapy' and 'psychoanalytic therapy'.

Creative Writing

- Tell the story of a troubled friendship using only the letters exchanged between the friends.
- Tell the same story through an exchange of emails.
- Imagine you are either Garry's caseworker or Alison's counsellor. Write a psychological profile of your client/patient.
- Write a poem from Garry's point of view about some aspect of the novel.
- Write a song lyric from Alison's perspective about some aspect of the novel.
- Choose one of the descriptive passages in the novel which you find particularly effective and use it to set the scene or the mood for your own piece of descriptive writing. Quote the passage as the epigraph for your work (i.e. clearly state the source: title, author, chapter, page number).

- Write your own versions of the letters between Alison and Garry described (but not given in full by the author) on pages 145–146.
- Write a version of the letter Garry receives from his father (also not quoted in full by the author) on page 155.

Drama

- Turn any two scenes from the novel into a play script and perform this for the class.
- Write three separate news broadcast bulletins that chart the main events in the novel. Perform and/or video/and or record (as if for radio) your reports for the class.
- Role play a scene between Garry and his father, who finally meet following all the events that happen in the novel.

Debate Subjects:

Divide into negative and affirmative teams. Debate the following topics:

"Spare the rod, spoil the child."

"Violence is a natural human behaviour."

"There are no happily ever afters."

"Love is just a chemical reaction in the brain."