



***Beyond Evie* by Rebecca Burton**

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Synopsis

Charlotte and her friends Juliet, Izzy and Kim are in Year Eleven. Charlotte works part-time at the Esplanade Bakery, where she meets Evie. Immediately, we are aware that a relationship has developed between Charlotte and Evie, but we sense that all has not gone well.

As the story develops we learn more about Charlotte and her family. Her father suffered from depression for some time before his death and Charlotte now lives with her mother, and older sister Amy. Her sister's boyfriend, Noah, visits often, as does her mother's friend, Brian. It is an apparently content household, but one overshadowed by Charlotte's father's death. Charlotte and her mother are not close: Charlotte considers that she and her mother disappoint each other. Over the course of the novel, Charlotte reveals to us, frankly, her first falling in love, and the emotional journey she takes as a result.

Structure

The story is divided into three sections:

- Before
- After
- Beyond

Readers can decide what, in particular, before after and beyond refer to.

Narrative Style

The style of telling of this story is distinctive and unusual - the events are told in the first person, by Charlotte talking to Evie. This is interior narrative, and means that all events are filtered through Charlotte's perceptions and emotions. It is worth discussing with students the following:

- Why the author might have chosen this very limited, but also directly conversational style. How does it make you as a reader feel?
- Do we like Charlotte?
- Do we trust her version of events/comments about other characters in the novel?
- How can we get a more objective view? Consider both point of view and person.

Characters

Discuss the extent to which this is a character-driven rather than a plot-driven book.

The following points about the major characters are taken from the book, and are intended as a starting place for discussion. Readers should consider there may be other aspects to these characters not listed.

Charlotte

- Blonde, tall and athletic, Charlotte plays basketball and softball and prefers maths and science to reading.
- She likes subjects that are useful (p47) - ones with formulas and definitions and labels. What does this desire for labels suggest about her? Do you think it might limit her view of events and behaviour?
- She loves nature too (P48). She enjoys country/bluegrass music, especially Hank Williams, and likes watching Wimbledon.
- She tells us she is restless, unable to sit still — very like her father, her mother reminds her.
- Unlike her mother who loves words, Charlotte thinks in pictures (on p14 she describes some of them).
- Students could draw, sketch, make a collage, or use photos to express their images of those pictures and hence their image of Evie and her character and personality.
- Charlotte presents a certain self to us, but to get a rounded picture of her we need to look at (give examples of):
 - what others say about her.
 - how they behave towards her.
 - other interpretations of events and people.

For instance, on page 181 Evie says about her: 'You think too much ... that's what your problem is. You should stop thinking for once, and just be'. Is this accurate? Fair? What reason/s might Evie have to say something like this about Charlotte?

Evie

- Evie takes photos, and views the world from behind a lens according to Charlotte. Do you think Evie would accept this view of herself?
- Our impression of Evie is mainly through Charlotte's eyes. E.g. p 39 there is a description of Evie wearing mismatched op-shop clothes.
- However, we get an impression of her through her actions, such as liking to break rules at the Bakery.
- We also get a sense of her through what she says, such as in chapter nine. Is this impression to be trusted?
- P167: Charlotte says that Evie liked to be different — strove to stand out in the crowd. She is then surprised by her 'conventional friends'. Were you surprised by Evie's friends, or do you have a different picture of Evie?
- P178: Evie charms Amy and Noah. Charlotte says 'you drew people in, enchanted them, flirted with them.'
- P180: Evie tells Charlotte it was just a bit of fun — 'experimenting', 'something new to try'. Does your assessment of her change here? Is she being honest? Do you think she was aware of the depth of Charlotte's feelings? Is she cruel?
- Construct a profile of Evie from Charlotte's point of view, and another from what you think from what she says and does. Are they similar? Each student could contribute this on a class wiki with different interpretations being discussed and compared.

Mother

- Charlotte says of her mother that she is not a natural nurturer — 'she needs too much space'.
- She is happy to be on her own with her books. A school librarian. Charlotte thinks she reads too much fiction and is 'not comfortable with real life; she prefers to pretend it doesn't exist'. (p20). Is this fair?
- Do you think, had she been more 'hands on' with her daughter, more connected to Charlotte, that Charlotte could have been supported by confiding in her? Or was that space between them helpful to Charlotte in acquiring her own sense of self/independence?

Father

- Charlotte's father died when she was five. He is an influence in the novel, nevertheless — explain why you think this is so.
- He was a policeman, suffering from depression and his death appears to be suicide.
- P128: Charlotte recalls her mother's story about how they met and wonders at her love for him.
- Find examples of Charlotte's early memories of him, such as his reading the newspaper over breakfast.

Brian

- Brian is Charlotte's mother's current partner who does not live with the family.
- According to Charlotte he adores her mother, but she is unsure that the feeling is reciprocated.
- He is an environmentalist and keen gardener — a gentle person whom Charlotte loves. Discuss his place in the story as a role model/father figure.

Amy

- Amy is Charlotte's older sister — by five years.
- She is pregnant at the end of the novel and she and boyfriend Noah will marry.
- Consider how their relationship provides a counterpoint to Charlotte and Evie's.

Juliet

- Juliet is a strong character, who seems very accepting of the emotions Charlotte is experiencing. She is also a cynic where love and relationships are concerned. What does her warning about 'falling too far' say about her own views on Charlotte's relationship with Evie? Is Juliet herself afraid of love? Could there be other motivations behind her comments? Is she honest? Is she jealous?

Other friends

- Apart from Juliet, Charlotte's closest friends are Kim (who was her best friend) and Izzy.
- Charlotte does like labels and tends to label her friends. For instance, she says (p70) that Kim is an 'incorrigible romantic', and that Noah is a good person even when she kisses him (48-49). Do you think this need to label limits Charlotte's understanding of her friends?
- Using examples from the book, especially dialogue, give your own character sketch of Juliet, Izzy and Kim. Then compare these with Charlotte's 'labels'.

Plot

- We are aware from the first chapter that this story is told in retrospect and that all is not going to end happily: 'I know now, of course, that this connection was as thin and fragile as a spider's web' (p4). How does this affect your approach/desire to continue reading the book?
- The plot centres around encounters between the two girls as their relationship develops. Charlotte gives us her interpretation of events. Are there other possible versions? Write a few of the scenes below between the two girls as if you were Evie, or as an onlooker (e.g. a fellow worker in the bakery or one of Evie's or Charlotte's friends). How does this change your view of the relationship being played out between Charlotte and Evie?
 - P69: Evie leaves the job at the Bakery.
 - P123: Evie gives Charlotte a present — a gold necklace - but reveals she stole it.
 - 132: Evie invites Charlotte to 'hang out' with her every day in the school holidays. Charlotte decides to ignore her friends for Evie.
 - P136: Evie researches Charlotte's taste in music and buys a range of CDs. How do you interpret this — the act of a friend or a manipulator?
 - Evie tells Charlotte she wants to get to know her; p137.
 - Charlotte tells Evie she confuses her — and she wonders all the time if she is being mocked. What do you think?
 - P138: Charlotte reflects that there have been a few moments which she thinks were true and this was one of them. Agree? The chapter ends with 'I guess I'll never know how it seems to you.' Share reactions to Evie's behaviour here.
 - P161: Charlotte tells Juliet about Evie.
 - P163: Juliet warns Charlotte not to fall 'too far'. Why does she say this? What does it suggest she knows about Charlotte? About Evie?
 - The novel is building to a pivotal event in their relationship. What are the predictions? What are the possibilities from the circumstances, thus far?
 - At the end of the story Amy is pregnant — a new life is ahead of her, and she is happy. What do you think is Amy's view about Charlotte and her relationship with Evie?
 - Finally, what consoles Charlotte and allows her to put the last year in some sort of perspective?

Ideas/Themes

There are many parts of the novel worth pausing for and sharing responses, not only in terms of the novel but for life generally. Students will want to identify their own, but here are some to begin with.

- P54: Photographs: 'Photos don't lie ... They tell the truth ... You can see things about people behind the lens that you can't see face to face.' Do you think photos can capture the essential nature of the person? In a group, select a photo that each group member thinks captures their real selves. Share with others in the group. Is there agreement, or are there widely different opinions? Discuss reasons.
- Charlotte thinks that her father didn't understand the pattern of life, its peaks and troughs, the rough with the smooth. What do you think?
- P63: Charlotte sees depression as 'a surfeit of sadness' and P64: she is again critical of her mother who failed to see her father's depression as a 'disease of terrible, grinding pessimism or of desolation, or of despair', but as a weakness, 'a terminal lack of will'. What is your view?
- P74: 'It was like life, Charlotte. Life doesn't have neat endings. It's messy, you know? It's all over the place.' This is in reference to the film but is it also foreshadowing?
- Charlotte thinks: 'But that's why people go to the movies — to get away from the mess of life.' Earlier she has accused her mother of such escape through her reading of fiction, and says of herself: 'I'm not into make believe.' Is she being inconsistent here? Does this inconsistency actually make her a more realistic character? We are all contradictory, aren't we?
- Map the class's attitudes to movies — realists versus romantics, fantasists versus action etc.
- Favourites: On pages 142-3, Charlotte and Evie list their favourite colour, food, drink, music, book, TV show and time of day. What do their choices tell us about them?
- On a class wiki, have the class do the same anonymously. Can class members be matched with their favourites?
- P145: 'Things do go wrong, all the same, though don't they ... that's life.' Is this a realistic view? Fatalistic? Too passive?
- P163: 'If you go in too deep it hurts'. As it turns out, was Juliet right? So is it better not to fall in love too hard? Should we always be protecting ourselves?
- P187: '...how different is grief from depression, anyway, do you think? And does a wound like that [death of a husband and father] ever really heal?'
- P187: '...sadness is all around us ... some people just seem to draw it in more deeply than others.' Consider your behavior when sad. Is it the same as others in your family or circle of friends?
- P195: Charlotte understands that domestic ritual, like the ironing she mocked her mother for in the opening of the novel, can be restful and soothing. Invite class members to share their soothing domestic rituals.

Music

- Hank Williams is Charlotte's favourite (she is a 'sad song junkie') and on page 17 she gives some of the songs he sang. Find and listen to them and choose the one you think suits the mood of the novel the best.
- There is more music that acts as a soundtrack behind the book, such as the songs Amy sings — *Manic Monday, What about Me? Whispering Jack, Thriller* (p18). Does the choice of music reflect each character?
- Invite students to select songs that characterise Evie, Brian, Charlotte's mother and play to the class. Students then have to work out which character is being represented, and why.

Symbolism

- Trace references to birds throughout the book. Charlotte notices them in the background. Discuss the ways in which they may be being used symbolically by the author, e.g: as sort of wordless Greek Chorus, commenting on events, such as the kookaburra laughing when Evie left (p182), p159: the thrush.
- The image of a spider is used a couple of times, once when Charlotte describes her connection with Evie ('this connection was as thin and fragile as a spider's web' p4) and once when she and Noah are watching a daddy-long-legs slowly kill a white-tail spider by suffocation. In the book, who do you think is being suffocated, and by whom? Is it possible that Charlotte has some power over Evie, just as the daddy-long-legs has power over the white-tail, despite her apparent harmlessness?

Language

- The novel is rich in vivid description, which is important in such an 'internal' book. Invite students to find passages and images that resonate — and use these as models for writing, too. Below are some examples of the tangible background and physical context and setting being evoked.
- Descriptions of the natural world, such as the world after rain on P38.
- P43: Charlotte recalls her Dad — one clear memory.
- P58: Detailed information about the house and Evie's bedroom which reveals much about her. Invite students to create their actual or ideal bedroom/house and reflect on what it says about who they are.
- Page 124: A car drives past 'headlights sweeping over us, so that your face lit up under its twin beams: pale, ghostlike'.
- P125 — the supermarket: '... I could hear the hiss of the automatic doors sliding open; the tinkle of piped music spilling out into the night air; cheerful voices, calling, laughing.'
- P139 — walking home along the beach: 'the wind on the beach was cooling and gusty, and the sand was strewn with seaweed — high, damp hillocks of the stuff, that clumped right up around my knees.'

The relationship between Charlotte and Evie

- Identify the significant moments/stages in Charlotte and Evie's relationship, such as on page 55 — is Charlotte misinterpreting things? Below are some to consider:
 - P73: Charlotte lets Evie choose the film as she doesn't want to look 'unsophisticated' in front of her — why is that important? How equal is the relationship? What is Evie thinking here?
 - P75: Evie refuses to share her secret after she promised, and looks at Charlotte as though she is 'admonishing a willful child'. Is she just manipulative?
 - P141: Charlotte says she knows Evie through and through — is that true or is she creating an Evie she wants to believe in?
 - P159: Juliet comes back into Charlotte's life — she has turned off her phone for a week to be solely in Evie's world.
 - P164: Is Charlotte reading too much into Evie's words and actions?
 - P169: Charlotte feels afraid — why?

Secrets

- Invite students to decide what they think is the most important secret in this book — and explain why.
- P56 Charlotte describes her family as stoics — never letting on their sense of fear/inadequacy etc. Is that admirable? Or is it a weakness?

Related Reading

Double Exposure by Brian Caswell

Just in Case by Meg Rosoff

The Winds of Heaven by Judith Clarke

Paper Towns by John Green