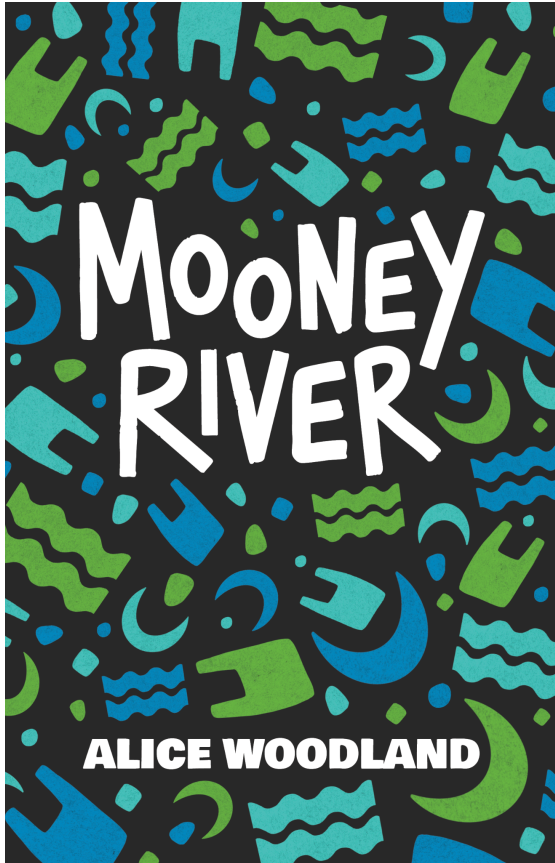


# Official Study Guide



**Published 2022**

**Recommended for ages 14+**

## **Australian Curriculum General Capabilities**

- Literacy
- Critical and Creative Thinking
- Personal and Social Capability
- Ethical / Intercultural Understanding

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## **NOTE TO TEACHERS**

I've been in your shoes. I know they are snug, scuffed and overly scrutinised. I can't provide you with the compensation and time you deserve, but I *have* put together this free resource for my Aussie YA novel *Mooney River*. I hope it eases the daily grind.

This guide has been edited in consultation with experienced teachers in WA and NSW. It is pitched at a capable year 10 class to complete over a 4-6 week period, but can be adapted to suit other classes and timeframes.

Concepts covered include:

- Context
- Character
- Voice
- Style
- Structure
- Perspective
- Themes / Ideas
- Readings
- Symbol / Motif
- Allusion
- Comparison
- + Questions & bonus thinking

Please make whatever changes / additions / subtractions you think are necessary, and encourage your students to embrace resistant or alternative readings; *their* response matters!

Last but not least: thank you.

You're doing a bloody good job.

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## SYNOPSIS

Mooney River High School is a place where everyone (from the surfer kids to the farmer kids) knows everyone — a place where it's impossible to disappear in the background. At Mooney River High, your reputation “is fixed within a few hours of enrollment, never to be forgotten.”

Rain Douglass, a year-eleven student, is one of the few kids not belonging to the pre-existing groups; as such, she has been labeled “Spooky Loser” since she joined two years ago. A highly observant and cynical outcast, Rain keeps to herself, spending most of her time between her Pop's house and her foster home, retreating into her art.

When her Literature teacher, Miss K, calls on her and another student to be the founders of the new eco-club for their school, Rain begrudgingly agrees, planning to drop out once the club fully takes off. But before that can happen, Rain has to work alongside Eleanor “Nelly,” a determined perfectionist; Erik, Nelly's twin brother and Mooney River High golden boy; and Thatcher, the twins' loud and messy best friend.

As the new members come together to get their club off the ground and protect their town from a mega-corporation threatening their local environment, Rain begins to evolve emotionally, discovering friendships — and love — in the most unexpected places.

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## A FEW PRE-READING QUESTIONS

I would recommend these questions be tackled in small groups, with notes shared with the class and expanded upon at the end of the discussion period.

1. Consider the book's title. Are there any real places you think may have inspired the

- setting? What symbolic connotations are linked to the words ‘moon/ey’ and ‘river’? How might intertextual connections (for example, the song *Moon River*) help you to make predictions about the novel?
2. What do you notice about the cover design? What are the symbols pictured, and how might they be relevant to the story?
3. Discuss the blurb. What genre would you label this book? Where will the conflict lie, and what ideas might the author explore?
4. Do you think you'll *like* the novel? Is it something you would have picked up and read outside of class? Why / why not?

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## POST-READING: INITIAL BRAINSTORM

The first reading of a text doesn't have to be analytical or critical. Instead, the reader will probably engage with it on a personal level, constructing an individual — even emotional — response that reflects their own likes, dislikes and experiences. Following their first reading of *Mooney River*, students should write written responses to the questions below — silently and independently. This could be completed as a journal task at home.

1. What did you like / dislike about *Mooney River*?
2. Do any of the characters seem familiar? Who and why?
3. What did you think about the way the story was told?
4. Did certain settings feel realistic to you?
5. Would you ‘fit in’ at Mooney River High? Why / why not?
6. Did the book surprise you in any way? Explore how your initial assumptions may have been right or wrong, and what this could suggest about your personal biases.
7. What comparisons did you make with other texts (books, movies, music, art, etc.)
8. Consider nomenclature in the novel. How might characters' names hint at their nature or experiences?

# THREE TYPES OF CONTEXT

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## CONTEXT REPRESENTED

The author has stated that *Mooney River* takes place in a 'simplified, mythologised version of Margaret River' — a town in Australia's South West.

Task: Research Margaret River and document your findings in a mindmap. Sections should include information on: geography / climate, population, events, unique cultural features, housing prices, occupation of residents, environmental concerns and an 'other' section.

After constructing maps, consider the following:

1. What similarities and differences can you find between the text and the town itself?
2. Why might the author have chosen to make the town much smaller and 'simpler'?
3. The Margaret River region contains significant class disparity, despite its reputation as a wealthy area. This disparity is marked by a sizable gap between those who can afford to live there and those who struggle to make ends meet (exemplifying a broader trend in coastal communities nationwide). Is the problem of class disparity reflected in the text? Which characters / relationships would most exemplify this?
4. How might the environmental concerns in *Mooney River* have been influenced by real issues facing the town?
5. The climate anxiety felt by characters in the novel (particularly Rain and Nelly) reflects a greater psychological burden placed on young people in contemporary society. How might this burden be more tangible for teens living in regional / rural communities?

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## CONTEXT OF PRODUCTION

Task: Consider the following quotes from Alice Woodland (author summary at the end of this document). How might these insights be linked to events, characters and ideas in the novel?

— "The best decision I ever made was to teach in public school. People who haven't been in these environments... I don't think they understand the grit, intelligence and humour these kids have at their disposal. Or the diversity that can be found. Public schools are our greatest resource."

— "To me, Mooney River feels nostalgic and contemporary at the same time. At first I was worried about this... that you couldn't pin down a sense of time. But now I love it. It's like a parallel universe."

— "I don't start with ideas. I start with voice and setting. I like to put a distinctive character in a really liminal space and see where they go. Sometimes it's somewhere, sometimes it's not."

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## READER CONTEXT

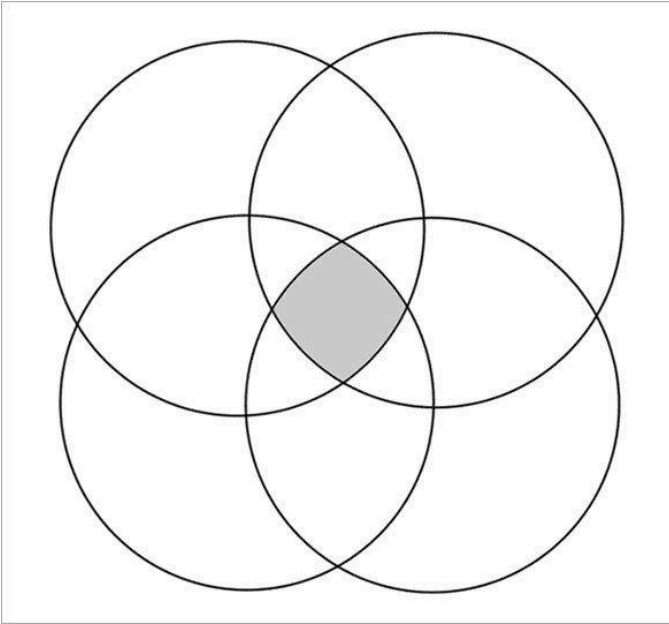
Initial brainstorming covered many elements of personal context. Now it's time to expand student thinking to include values, attitudes and culture with the following questions (in discussion or journal).

1. To what extent does the place you grow up shape your personality? Did you grow up in Australia? In the city or country? How might this impact your response to the novel?
2. From a socio-economic perspective, which character did you find most relatable? In your experience, does economic background impact social standing?
3. What does each character value most, and whose values align closest with your own?
4. What makes someone "grown up"?

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## CHARACTER, VOICE & STYLE

On a large piece of blank paper, have students draw a Venn diagram like this one. Alternatively, these may be printed ahead of time. A total of two will be needed.



### Task:

Label each section with the name of a main character: **Rain, Nelly, Erik and Thatch.**

Now consider the following adjectives and allocate each to the character/s you think they best describe. After working through the list, include at least three additional describing words of your own.

**Character adjectives:** Romantic / Amiable / Cynical / Hard-working / Calm / Dreamy / Ambitious / Arrogant / Funny / Prejudiced / Courageous / Uncertain / Compassionate / Genuine / Creative / Lazy / Selfish / Impulsive / Irritable, +, +, +

After completing the diagram, discuss your choices as a small group. Are there any points you disagree on? Passionate (but respectful) debate is encouraged!

Now it's time to consider the *how*.

The novel is written in first person point-of-view, meaning that the characters themselves 'tell the story'.

And they tell it in very different ways.

Construct a second Venn diagram using the same four character names as headings. Consulting and annotating the novel as you go (particularly the first few pages of each part), decide which character/s use which of the following devices. Record examples.

### **Stylistic features:**

- Powerful diction
- Metaphor
- Simile
- Personification
- Synaesthesia
- Zoomorphism
- Hyperbole
- Idiom
- Jargon
- Adjectives / adverbs
- Abbreviation
- Understatement
- Swearing
- Inner monologue
- Syntax / punctuation: Simple sentences, complex sentences, sentence fragments, run-on sentences, questions, semi-colons, ellipsis
- + additional techniques / common phrases

You may have noticed that some characters use a lot of poetic devices, whereas others rely on rhetoric. What does this say about their personalities? Do these language choices align with the way you described their personality in the previous activity? How do these voices combine to create an overall sense of style in the novel?

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## STRUCTURE & PERSPECTIVE

The novel has a slightly unconventional structure. It is written in nine parts, covering four very different perspectives:

Part 1: Rain

Part 2: Nelly

Part 3: Erik

Part 4: Thatch

Part 5: Rain

Part 6: Thatch

Part 7: Erik

Part 8: Nelly

Part 9: Rain

Discuss this structure as a class. How did students respond to the split-perspective format? The following questions can then be tackled independently or in pairs:

1. How does the structure of *Mooney River* work to challenge assumptions initially made by each character? Do certain plot events 'make more sense' as the story progresses? Provide specific examples.
2. Why might the author choose to withhold information about each character?
3. Do characters seem to withhold information about themselves? How does this lack of reliability contribute to ideas about social concealment and self discovery?
4. The novel could be considered circular, as it begins and ends with Rain. Comparing each of Rain's sections, describe the growth we see in her character from start to finish.

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## SETTING, MOOD & ATMOSPHERE

In groups of 2-4 (depending on class size), have students create a poster focused on one of the following settings.

The River

Mooney River High

Rain's House/s

Everson's House

The Oval

The Ocean

Thatch's House

Posters should include:

- A description of the allocated setting
- At least four quotes, including as much sensory detail as possible
- Analysis of stylistic features within these quotes & the feelings they provoke
- Character/s who are connected to the space. Why is it important to them?
- A comment regarding the symbolic significance of the setting. What ideas about broader society might be represented?
- If desired, students can create a description of each setting, enter into Chat GPT, and produce a visual image of the setting.

Groups should present posters to their classmates, who can be provided with a digital copy or take notes. Question-time essential.

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## SYMBOLISM & MOTIF

As an ongoing task, in a shared digital space, students should comment on the following symbols and motifs:

Water / The moon / Rubbish / Birds (native wildlife) / Music / Alcohol & drugs / Lights & torches / Phones / + / +

Each student should contribute at least five comments — use the best for class discussion!

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## THEMES & IDEAS

Have students explore two of the following themes in depth:

- The complexity of love and relationships
- The pressure of family expectations
- The power of community
- Finding beauty in an imperfect world
- Identity and self-discovery
- Humanity's connection with nature
- + +

Notes should include the following points of analysis, which may be ordered using a table like the one below:

Theme:			
Character and/or setting connected	Key quotes (5+)	Explanation of quote / devices	Comparison and / or allusion

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## ALLUSION

By this point, students have likely noticed references to many other texts in *Mooney River* — from music to literature to mythology.

For the purpose of this activity, you will be focusing on the latter, examining allusions to a number of prominent myths from Ancient Greece. Relevant characters from these myths are listed below.

- Artemis and Apollo
- Psyche
- Apollo and Daphne
- Zeus and Hera

For each character / myth, students should:

1. Research. Write down key words describing the character/s, their traits, symbolic associations, and details of popular stories in which they feature. You may wish to structure notes as a mindmap.
2. Write a concise, one paragraph summary for each.
3. Describe the connections made between the original myth and character/s in *Mooney River*. How might these connections expand upon ideas within the novel? Provide quotes from the novel to justify thinking.

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## BONUS RESEARCH - PSYCH TERMS

In literature, psychological terms can be used to analyse characters' minds, motivations, and behaviours. Relevant concepts are listed below.

- Ego, Super-ego, Id
- Defense Mechanisms
- Imposter Syndrome
- Inner Critic
- Oedipus Complex
- Madonna / Whore Dichotomy

For each, complete the following tasks:

1. Research the concept. Explore its origins, as well as more modern applications. Great resources are available online, including short videos which may be viewed in class.
2. Write a concise, one paragraph summary for each.
3. Response (two paragraphs +): How might each concept be applied to *Mooney River*? Which characters may fit / be impacted by this term? Provide quotes from the novel to justify your thinking.

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## PART QUESTIONS

The following questions (which may be set as an ongoing journal task over the period of study) mostly require students to respond and react to plot events and ideas. You may wish to add additional close-analysis, possibly linked to students' findings on language and style.

### Part One: Rain

1. Using the first two-three pages of the text, how would you describe the character Rain?
2. With evidence from pages six and seven, describe the town of Mooney River.
3. What does the author mean by the metaphor, 'the social currency here is salt'?
4. Discuss how Rain's descriptions\* of the three remaining narrators (Nelly, Erik and Thatch) helped you to form an initial opinion about each.

\*The following extracts may be provided:

"Despite looking like the priss who dies fifteen minutes into every horror movie, Eleanor is cutthroat. Everything she does is calculated, from her control of essay structure to her stiff blonde fringe. I've imagined her cutting it with a steel ruler while reciting totalitarian mantras to her reflection."

"The parody of a surfer, is Mooney River's Golden Boy: Erik Everson. He's sort of gangly. Always jumping up to slap the rafters so you have to stop in the middle of the corridor and wait for him everywhere you go. And always pushing back his pretentious hair, which is shorter and stringier and whiter than his sister's."

"'Thatch', as the cool kids call him, looks like an adult Lost Boy. He's this big,

barrel-chested numbskull, with messy hair and messy clothes and a messy attitude."

5. In her conversation with Miss K, Rain explains her feelings of futility in the face of the climate emergency with the following analogy: "It'd be like holding an ice-cube over a bonfire. The ice-cube will just drip away, and whoever's holding it will get burned." Explore your thoughts and feelings around this statement.
6. Upon finishing part one, discuss how your understanding of Rain as a character has changed / evolved.
7. What predictions do you have about the rest of the novel?

### Part Two: Nelly

1. A significant aspect of Nelly's voice is her inner dialogue. How does she speak to herself? What reaction does this provoke in Nelly, and the reader? Provide examples from the first few pages of part two.
2. Now that you have an insight into Nelly's life, compare the 'real' Nelly with Rain's descriptions. How might she be misunderstood by Rain and other people in her life? (A possible quote to consider: "There is substantial effort involved! In everything I do!")
3. How does Nelly's descriptions of the scene at the oval (beginning page 76) contribute to character development? Consider both Nelly and other characters / dynamics.
4. Explain Nelly's relationship with her family. How might comparison play a role in her desire to succeed and / or 'prove herself'? Does she feel close to Erik and her parents, or isolated by them? (The 'empty hall' on page 91 could be explored as a symbolic / liminal setting here).

### Part 3: Erik

1. What language patterns do you notice in the first few pages of Erik's part? (Consider: simile, descriptions of nature, sentence fragments, low-modality).
2. How is the conflict between Erik and his dad foreshadowed in his early pages? Explore Erik's descriptions of and reactions to Andy Everson (e.g. "He's standing, arms stretched out, waving me in. He's just a black shape in the red granite glow, but I know it's him. He's been standing on that rock my whole life.")
3. Erik's friendship with Thatch is one of the closest relationships depicted in the novel. What aspects of their friendship seem authentic to you? Do you find the depictions of male bonding relatable / recognisable?
4. During the eco-club meeting (page 149) the club members discuss the pros and cons of a new burger franchise coming to town. What reasons are presented for and against the establishment? How might a multinational company like this disrupt the intimate microcosm of Mooney River?
5. The beach clean-up signals a shift in Erik and Rain's relationship, and sparks of romance begin to fly. Why has the chemistry between them suddenly increased? What do you predict will happen between them in the remainder of the novel?

### Part 4: Thatch

1. What do the first few pages of Thatch's part reveal about his home life and history? How does his day-to-day experience differ from his best friends? Consider the impact of his dad's job (FIFO) and apparent alcoholism.
2. Page 190 reads: "I tell Erik I dunno what that meant. Uncivilised. He says if you're civilised, it just means you do things properly. According to the bullshit rules of wherever you live. 'So it always changes,' I

say. 'You can never get it right.'" Do you think being 'civilised' is an objective or subjective state? Discuss using real-world examples.

3. In their pursuit of alcohol, Thatch, Erik and Nelly find themselves in the dingy home of a frightening older man / suspected drug dealer (page 219-). Explore your feelings during this scene. How might this man's home represent the darker underbelly of small Aussie towns?
4. Compare your response to Thatch at the conclusion of part four to your response during part one. What words might you use to describe his character, and how do they differ from initial assumptions? Use examples to support your thinking.

### Part 5: Rain

1. How has Rain's perception of Oscar changed since part one?
2. How have language features and syntax been used in this section to create a sense of nervousness / suspense? What comment might this be making about adolescent relationships?

### Part 6: Thatch

1. This section explores the complexities of Thatch's relationship with Abigail. Do we see a different side of the two characters when they're together? Does Abigail seem like a villain or victim at this stage of the story? Why?
2. Explore Thatch's response to Erik and Rain's budding relationship. How does experiencing their first kiss from an outsider's point-of-view impact the reader's experience?
3. Thatch seems to manipulate the police officers quite effectively. Why do you think

this is? Would you consider his aptitude for lying a positive or negative trait? Do you think he is dishonest in all realms of life, or just with authority figures?

### Part 7: Erik

1. Erik reaches a 'breaking point' at the beginning of part seven, finally divulging his knowledge of Andy's affair and lashing out physically at his dad. What, specifically, do you think provoked this loss of control?
2. Examine the following quote: "With all due respect, Sir... no one knows anything about anyone's life." (p. 305) How does this sentiment reflect not just Erik's feelings in the scene, but greater themes within the novel?
3. Do you think Erik's suspension from school is fair? Could he have handled the situation with Brian Decker differently?
4. Erik, though understandably shaken by the conflict in his family, is reluctant to show his emotions, his harsh inner critic imploring him to: "*Grow up... Stop being a fucking pussy.*" Do you think the pressure Erik feels to remain unfeeling and 'masculine' reflects a broader trend in our society?

### Part 8: Nelly

1. Explore Nelly's feelings towards her Dad. Although she seems unwilling to forgive him, she also reflects on positive childhood memories of him arriving home from trips abroad. How does this reflect the common coming-of-age theme of loss of innocence?
2. Much like her brother, Nelly seems uncomfortable with emotional vulnerability ("*Do not cry, Everson*"). What do you think this reveals about the values of the Everson family?

### Part 9: Rain

1. What does the reader learn about Rain during the recount of her visit to a psychologist (beginning page 331)? Did any of this information come as a surprise to you? If so, how did it alter your feelings towards Rain?
2. Contrast the following descriptions of Nelly, Thatch and Erik with Rain's observations in Part 1.

"I feel... proud. Of Nelly. I feel so proud that she's my friend... she doesn't pretend to be anyone other than exactly who she is. She doesn't apologise. She doesn't resist. She goes out into the world and says what she needs to, and fights for what she wants."

"Michael Thatcher steps in front of Nelly and me, facing all four men like he's going to fight them. Like they have to get through him first. It's brawny. Primitive and overprotective. And, as he's standing there, I think he might be one of my favourite people in the world."

"I start to understand why people lose their minds for this. For people like him. Are there other people like him? Or is he the only one?" ... "I'll see you tomorrow?' he says. He whispers something else, and the gate latch sings."

3. Were you satisfied with the ending of the novel? What, if anything, would you change?
4. What predictions would you make about each character? Where do you see Rain, Nelly, Erik and Thatch 10 years into the future?

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## ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Discuss how *Mooney River* constructs different perspectives and/or voices to communicate its ideas.
2. Consider how the microcosm of *Mooney River* represents broader issues present in regional Australia.
3. Loss of innocence is a key marker of the bildungsroman (coming of age) genre. Analyse how a character's perception of the world changes after experiencing a harsh reality.
4. Explore how characters in *Mooney River* challenge or reinforce traditional ideas about masculinity and/or femininity.
5. Consider how *Mooney River* sets out to influence the way we perceive and/or empathise with those around us.
6. Liminal or "in-between" spaces are used frequently throughout *Mooney River*. Explore how these settings may be linked to the experience of adolescence.
7. Explain how an awareness of allusions to other texts has enriched your understanding of *Mooney River*.
8. Discuss the way that language used in *Mooney River* has encouraged you to

respond to the wonder and beauty of your world.

9. Explore the ways in which *Mooney River* caused you to reflect upon your own cultural assumptions, social position and/or gender.

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## COMPOSITION

1. Write a feature article from the perspective of a journalist from the Mooney River Mail, covering the events that took place at the surfing competition. Remember to use the conventions of your form (headline, byline, concise paragraphs, interviews, visuals, etc.)
2. Write a poem in any verse inspired by a line of your choice from the novel — OR — construct a found poem from one page chosen from the novel.
3. Write a journal entry from the perspective of a character of your choice. Remember to use the language patterns identified for that character in previous activities.
4. Draw a filmic storyboard, by hand or online, capturing your favourite scene from the novel. Remember to include multiple film conventions, such as scene/shot numbers, camera angles/movements (pans, zooms, tilts), shot size (close-up, wide), character actions, dialogue, sound cues, and transitions (fades, dissolves).

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



When Alice was six, she wrote a poem about having a bath in a tub of baked beans. Though hilarious, the poem received little critical acclaim. Later in life, Alice received a Bachelor of Arts and a Graduate Diploma in Education before teaching high school English for the better part of a decade. Her favourite thing about teaching is making people laugh. It's also her favourite thing about writing.

*Mooney River* is Woodland's debut novel. An early version of the text was highly commended for the Fogarty Literary Award in 2021. Since then, Alice has become a passionate self-publisher.

The second novel in the Mooney River Series – *Foxhead Bay* – was released in December 2025.

Head to [alicewoodlandauthor.com](http://alicewoodlandauthor.com) for more info, or to organise a school visit.

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## REVIEWS

'Not a book I'll forget in a hurry... the lead characters are endearing and funny. If you or your teen is looking for an entertaining small-town story filled with enthusiasm, angst, and young sweet love, *Mooney River* would be a great choice for you.' – *Independent Book Review*

'Beautifully-written, moving and authentic.'  
– *Miranda Luby, Author*

'A sweet and funny love story which highlights the need for empathy and community in our wounded, late-capitalist world.'  
– *Amazon Review*

Many more reader reviews can be found on Goodreads and Amazon.

Happy reading.

Happy thinking.

Love, Alice