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opening extract from

Dreaming of Amelia

written by

Jaclyn Moriarty

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Dreaming of Amelia

Jaclyn Moriarty

Note

Most of the following story takes place in an HSC English exam on the topic of gothic fiction.

The HSC (or Higher School Certificate) is a series of exams taken by students in New South Wales at the end of their final year of school. During that final year, students also complete ‘projects’ and ‘assessment tasks’, the results of which are combined with the HSC exam results to determine which university course the student can take.

Gothic fiction includes novels like *Wuthering Heights* and *Frankenstein*. In a gothic novel, you will often find: mad people locked in attics, secret passageways, monsters, murderers, ghosts, and family curses. A beautiful young woman is likely to ride in a carriage through a bleak landscape, hear the toll of a distant bell, see a black crow, hear a rumble of ominous thunder, see drops of blood, hear haunting music, see a figure shrouded in mist, hear a blood-curdling scream – and it will all make her prone to fainting several times a day.

Part One

1.

Board of Studies
New South Wales

HIGHER SCHOOL CERTIFICATE EXAMINATION

English Extension 2

General Instructions

- **Reading Time – 5 minutes**
- **Writing Time – 4 hours**
- **Write using black or blue pen**

Elective – *Gothic Fiction*

<u>Question 1</u>

Write a personal memoir which explores the dynamics of first impressions. In your response, draw on your knowledge of Gothic fiction.

Riley T. Smith
Student No. *8233569*

My first look at her was her name.

It was inky dark blue. On a note they'd left stuck to my backpack.

'KNOCK ON THE SECOND RED DOOR,' said the note. 'ASK FOR AMELIA.'

'Amelia, eh?' said I.

There's a lot you can do with a name like Amelia.

You can play with it, sure, is what you think I'm going to say. Make it cute (Amy), or cuter (Millie), complaining (Meelie), or French, I guess, like the movie (Amelie).

You can step right into that name, is what I mean, and walk around. Swim with it or spill it on your shirt. Whisper it over like a sad, soft ache, or bark it out aloud like a mad, manic message: cam*ell*ia, come heee-re, a-million, ah murder you, ye-eah.

You can peel it off your backpack, fold it up safe, walk right past that second red door, or you can not.

This was a few years back. I was 14 then.

I was still looking down at the name on the note while I headed to the second red door and I stopped with a fist in the air.

And there she was.

You think you know what I'm about to say, don't you?

You think I'm going to say: *Amelia was just like her name.*

No. Amelia was a girl in a cute T-shirt nightie with a retro Ms Pacman on the front, and the sexiest thigh-high boots I ever saw. If Jesus were a bootmaker. And she looks at me with her eyes open wide and a face that says: oh my god, I'm muckin' around in my sexy Jesus-boots, in my crazy dreamworld, and I've opened the door and let you in on my crazy dreamworld and that's so embarrassing but, actually, who cares? because it's funny.

And then we're both laughing. There's this rope-length of laughter between us.

Funny thing is, even while I’m laughing, and falling in her eyes, a part of me knew she was a ghost.

The first time I saw her I knew that my Amelia was a ghost.

Emily Melissa-Anne Thompson
Student No. *8233521*

Lightning struck! There was a howling of wind, as if wolves roamed about, howlingly. Thunder crashed! Lightning struck again!

It was the first day of Year Twelve.

I had set out that morning with trepidation. I did not, in all honesty, see a crow, a raven or any other black bird on the way to school that day.

And yet! I was trepidatious.

In part, of course, it was the Higher School Certificate looming like a monstrous entity at the end of the year. Not to forget the likewise looming of my future career in the law. (Or, anyway, the *degree* in law that awaited me at the wrought-iron gates of my future. A degree that could be locked in an attic like a crazed ex-wife if I did not do well in my HSC exams!!! But, by and by.)

But no, it was more than that! Something about the impending day struck me as ill. Perhaps it was the gathering dark clouds? (In all honesty, I don't think I actually noticed them because my dad's car has tinted windows and I always think there's a cloudy sky but it turns out to be the tint. So I've stopped bothering to look.)

But maybe my subconscious noticed!

At any rate, now it was recess – and the storm had come!

And there I was on the green velveteen couch in the Year Twelve common room at Ashbury High, which is in Castle Hill, 40 minutes drive north-west of Sydney if you take the M2, while the thunder howled! And the lightning struck! And generally the weather rattled around, as if it had to carry gothic chains behind it!

I chatted with my friends, Lydia and Cassie.

'There is a deep foreboding within me,' I said (or words like that, not exactly that), 'that my new shampoo doesn't actually bring out the honey highlights in my hair like it says it does!'

Lydia shook her head at me, slowly, cryptically.

It could be that she meant: 'No, Em, don't worry. I see plenty of honey highlights.'

But I doubt it.

Cass reassured me that the shampoo worked. *But she wasn't really looking at my hair!!* She changed the subject, saying that there'd been a snake in the doorway of the music rooms that morning. (A snake! Gothic.)

Lyd said she'd heard Ms Wexford killed the snake with a saxophone.

'Seriously?' I cried.

Lyd gazed at me. 'No,' she said.

'It was already dead,' Cass explained. 'A kookaburra probably dropped it there.'

Then Lyd spoke over my mild hysteria to say this: 'Hey, did you hear there's two new people this year? A girl and a guy?'

TWO NEW PEOPLE THIS YEAR??!!

Strange time to be changing schools!! The final year? Why now?!

In all honesty I think my skin crawled a little. But it might have been the scratchiness of the velveteen couch.

'Seriously?' Cassie said. 'Where from?'

'They're in my home room,' Lyd commented (ignoring Cassie's question – why? *Why?!* Perhaps she did not know.) 'They're together.'

'Together, you mean, like, together?'

'Yeah. Since they were 14 or something.'

Strange! Most highly strange.

Lydia told us several facts about the couple. She must have chatted with them at roll call! Unlike her! She is not shy, but she is suspicious and therefore a bit of a reservoir with strangers.

And yet, something was missing. What was it?

Of course.

'What's their names?' I said.

'Amelia and Riley,' was my friend's reply.

(Did she tremble a little as she said that? I know not. Probably not.)

'Riley and Amelia.' I swapped their names around. It seemed wrong, the order Lyd had chosen. There is always a correct order when you say a couple's names.

And yet – was *my* order right?

I think it was.

Riley and Amelia.

The names quivered before us.

At that moment, three things happened:

There was a roaring sound. (The rain was suddenly heavier, as if someone had held the volume down on the remote so that the room was now aghast with sound.)

There was a clanging of bells. (Our school bell ringing for the end of recess.)

There was the creeeeeeaaaaking of a door. (The door to the common room opening.)

We turned as one, the three us.

And I think that we felt chilled to the bones. (In all honesty, I myself did because the open door was letting in a draught.)

For there, in the doorway, they stood:

Riley and Amelia.

I knew, at once, that it was they.