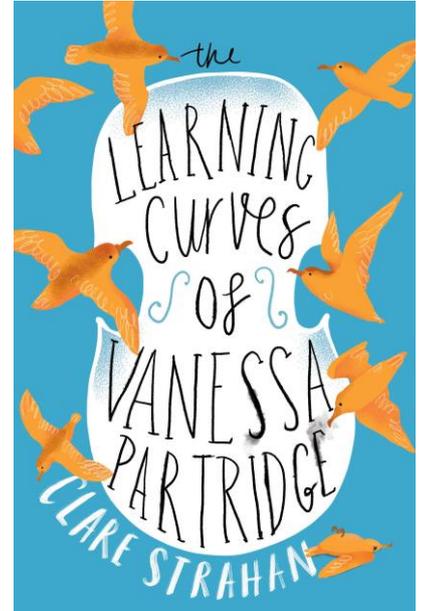


# The Learning Curves of Vanessa Partridge

by Clare Strahan

May 2018 ISBN 9781760296797 paperback  
Recommended for readers aged 15+ years



## Summary

Vanessa Partridge is curious about the idea of having sex. But she can't tell anyone. And no one would believe her anyway – because everyone knows she's a goody-two-shoes. But over the summer holidays, Van rebels and everything changes.

At first it feels like delicious freedom as she explores her independence, practising her favourite cello pieces, reconnecting with her long-time summer friend Kelsey and exploring her attraction to environmental activist Bodhi.

But when her sense of self is shaken, Van wrestles with issues of desire and consent, and the questions that have been plaguing her all along... Can someone with sensible plaits and an interest in philosophy really be a raving sex-o-maniac? And if they are, is there anything wrong with that

*The Learning Curves of Vanessa Partridge* is a funny and warm coming-of-age novel about love, sex, friendship, family, and finding your voice.



Clare Strahan's first-person text jumps and darts around, cleverly capturing the staccato, channel-surfing rhythms of the teenage brain. This is further enhanced by the use of present tense throughout the narrative to create immediacy and energy, plus a certain anxiousness about what is coming up next. The present tense voice also functions to make the tone of the novel highly conversational, as if the protagonist were relaying her story in real time to you, the reader-listener.

In keeping with the tone of an anxious, liminal teenage narration, the voice skips between the high and low, the mundane and profound, the crude and the poetic. Strahan maintains this balancing act well, creating a convincing journey into the psyche of a young girl who is sure she is the only one experiencing what she is experiencing.

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## Themes

- relationships
- consent
- growing up
- family
- humour
- environmental activism

## Author's inspiration

In the author's own words:

'The short film *Abbreviation*, [part of the 2013 anthology film *The Turning*, based on short stories by Tim Winton] struck a chord with me and got me thinking – about sexual consent, about the disconnect between burgeoning sexual desire and the developing teenage body, and the vulnerable, often powerless, inner world of young people still trailing the innocence and naivety of childhood. About the idea of the 'sexual' girl as some kind of predator and how that is reflected in middle-age, too – the whole insult of the 'cougar'. It got me thinking about my own teenage years – my curiosity and interest in sexual experience, the fantasy of it all – and the shame and confusion that often accompanied the reality. I so often felt like the whole thing was out of my control.

'I asked myself the questions, what is consent? How do you consent to something you've never experienced?

'There was a meme going around comparing consent to having a cup of tea – and it was clever and valid, but ultimately I found it reductionist: sex and relationships are sticky and messy.'

— Clare Strahan

## Use in the curriculum

*The Learning Curves of Vanessa Partridge* is a fantastic discussion-starter in the wake of the #MeToo movement, exploring the difficult boundaries between consent and responsibility that older teenagers must negotiate. As one reviewer noted: 'It is a story that prioritises self-care and assertiveness over politeness and likeability...[and] tackles questions of desire, consent, autonomy and authority head-on via [a] cast of intensely relatable characters.... It is a book that says to young women (and men), that respect is not based on how you dress, consent is not a one-way street, and that women's voices are important – and we should take care to listen.'

— Bec Kavanagh in *Books & Publishing*, 12 April 2018.

Senior classes able to navigate the one or two explicit sex scenes will be gripped by a novel that reflects their concerns so accurately and sympathetically. They can analyse the language to discover why the teenage 'voice' is so compelling and real. They will relate to the themes of self-identity/self-realisation, relations with family and friends, and environmental activism. *The Learning Curves of Vanessa Partridge* challenges students to speak out loud and debate the thoughts and experiences teenagers live through and are confused by but so often keep to themselves. It has the potential to change lives.

## Discussion questions

### Before Reading Activity:

- a) Research the #metoo movement in terms of its origins, purpose and on-going outcomes.
- b) Watch the following film by actor David Schwimmer and discuss the impact of #metoo on our attitudes about sexual harassment in the workplace.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/01/26/upshot/sexual-harassment-script-react.html>

### Chapter 1:

- a) Vanessa's character is a mixture of strengths and flaws. Draw a column down the centre of a workbook page and put a heading of *Vanessa's Strengths* on one side, and on the other side *Vanessa's Flaws*. Are some of Vanessa's strengths also flaws, or vice versa? Give examples of things she says or does in the chapter to illustrate your judgement.
- b) Is Vanessa someone you can easily relate to? Do you believe it is important to relate to a central character in a YA novel? Explain your answer in full.

### Chapter 2:

- a) Why do you think the author alludes to 'looking back' on several occasions? (Examples being her description of the Shearwater staircase depicting the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, the name of Ash's rock band and the lyrics of his signature song.)
- b) *'What's happened to you, Vanessa ...Did somebody say you were fat?...Ignore them, she calls after me. 'You've got the body of a goddess!'* (p. 67)  
Compare Rochelle's comment with her earlier comments about body shape when shopping with Vanessa and discuss both in light of the broader societal issue of how teens are encouraged to view their bodies.

### Chapter 3:

- a) Compare and contrast Bodhi's comments about not having sex with Vanessa while she is unconscious (p. 134) and the scene that occurs in his car a few pages on (p. 144). What role does consent have in both scenes? Do you think Bodhi and Vanessa have the same view of consent and, if not, how do they differ?
- b) *What would people think if Mum ran off with him? They'd probably say he was after her money, or had mother issues, or was blind. Marlene is right: people are much meaner to women than men, overall.* (p. 177).  
Do you agree with Vanessa that our society is 'meaner' to women? Other than double standards about age differences in relationships (the acceptability of older men and younger women in a relationship versus the unacceptability of older women and younger men), what other examples within the novel can you find of double standards for males and females?

### Chapter 5:

- a) *The fact is, if you're going to dress like that and flirt like you do, you're going to have to learn to accept the consequences. You're a pretty thing.* (p. 200)  
Put into your own words what Richard Marks is saying here. Who is responsible/to blame for sexual assault in his opinion? Do you agree with his attitude?
- b) *It makes me so angry that girls won't recognise the patriarchal bullshit they're mired in even when it jumps up and bites them.* (p. 201)

Put into your own words what Marlene is saying here. Who is responsible/to blame for sexual assault, in her opinion?

- c) *...no one told me that rape – or any kind of sexual abuse – is about power and control and about violence – not sexiness, or passion, or drinking champagne with your father’s friend at a party.* (p. 237).

Put into your own words what you think Mrs Lepski is saying here. How does this view differ from Richard’s and Marlene’s above? Which of these three views do you think is most prevalent in today’s post-#metoo world?

## **Chapter 7:**

What does Vanessa mean when she says, ‘Sex is a whole soul conversation...It should be up to me how much I want to say.’ (p. 266). How does the scene between Vanessa and Darith in bed illustrate this point?

## **Chapter 8:**

*Groups of birds congregate in gaggles near the edge, looking out, like surfers discussing the weather and waves. When the time’s right, they launch themselves one by one with a comical hop into the air, trusting the thermals to carry them according to a wisdom of pattern-making scientists can only dream of comprehending, to their true home – the sea.* (p. 273–274)

What literary purpose do shearwaters have in *The Learning Curves of Vanessa Partridge*?

## **After Reading Activity:**

Discuss the novel in light of its author’s comment, ‘How does a sexually curious girl consent to an act of which she has no experience except in her imagination?’

## The author

Clare Strahan is a Melbourne writer who once rattled out a novel on a manual typewriter by candlelight. Her debut young adult novel, *Cracked*, was shortlisted for the 2015 Ethel Turner Prize for Young People’s Literature in the NSW Premier’s Literary Awards. She managed the fiction reading team at *Overland* journal for several years, was a peer selection panellist for *Varuna*, the National Writers House 2014–2016, and teaches creative writing for the PWE Associate Degree at RMIT. She is the creator of the ‘Literary Rats’ cartoon and flutters about the twittersphere as @9fragments.

