



# Black Painted Fingernails

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**Black Painted Fingernails** Steven Herrick

**A captivating story of tender new friendship and self-discovery from the author of *Kissing Annabel***

*"How about we toss a coin? Heads, it's west and a lift. Tails, it's still west, but no lift."*

James is heading into the country on his first teacher-training round when a mysterious girl asks him for a ride. Sophie has him all worked out: "You live with your parents and they bought you this car, and a very nice car it is too." At first James can't see past her wild hair and attitude, but when Sophie trusts him with a secret she's been keeping too long, she changes his direction completely. Steven Herrick masterfully reveals the essence of his characters in this tough and tender story about opening up to love and living a life that's true.

## Black Painted Fingernails Details

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## From Reader Review Black Painted Fingernails for online ebook

### Steve lovell says

Herrick just gets better. His last, 'Slice', was touchingly superb, but this offering matches it. 'Black Painted Fingernails' is a journey a young man makes over a couple of days to a vocational destination somewhere in the dusty, gritty NSW outback. Shortly after embarking Sophie inveigles a lift with him, and the world changes. As with 'Slice', this is a novel of love - between parents and an indulged son (as well as between themselves), between a daughter and her father, and between a teenage girl and her non-stereotypical 'boyfriend'. It is a book of nude swims (one accompanied by a feral goanna), parental sex and, ultimately, a boy becoming a man. It shimmies back and forth over time as we get to know and feel for the main protagonists. As a parent I can relate to the feelings of those in the tome on that score, and such is Herrick's tender touch this reader can even remember back when maybe he felt just a little like the boy James commencing one's first 'adult' relationship. Both the main youthful characters are delightful inventions. As a aged practitioner of the profession James is reluctantly travelling towards I have presented the works of Herrick to hundreds of students over the years. As my time in the classroom is winding down I'll miss doing this, but I do trust that this author has many more books like this in him that I can read on into my dotage.

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### Shirley Marr says

In this instance, my three star rating means exactly that: for me this was an average book.

And I don't mean that as a bad thing. It's not a bad book. It passes all the criteria. It's just not great either. When I say it's a boy-meets-girl road trip novel - the first things that pop into your head about what you think it is... well, it's exactly that.

Boy is trying to get away from his parents. A wild, mysterious girl shows up at the gas station and asks for a lift. Boy is attracted to girl. Girl is attracted to boy. And oooo.... is this "spend the night in a motel with two single beds" gonna stay two single beds, hmmm?

Which is a shame as I have heard so much about Steven Herrick, from the lovely Nomes, who adores his writing and also from the "Praise for Steven Herrick" page that appears at the front of this book, with grabs from the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*.

Eh? I scratch my head. Maybe I just picked up the wrong book to begin with.

The best thing about this novel is the landscape. Herrick's depiction of the hot, drought-stricken Australian farmland, one in which both animals and the people suffer - which is an analogy to the strength of what is means to be Australian - affects me. But seriously, saying that the best thing about a novel is the scenery is akin to me sending you a holiday postcard in which I tell you the only thing I like is the weather.

Sophie's backstory, where she is forced to leave home and ends up pulling beers in a pub has its gravitas, but it is only fleeting, and I wish I found out more.

What I feel doesn't work are the multiple points of view. James. Sophie. And inexplicably - James MUM and DAD. This is the first time that I have seen multiple POV provide TOO MUCH information to the point it becomes detrimental. I didn't think this was even possible. But with Jame's personal commentary on why he decided to leave home and with his parents revealing how they feel, and why they let him go and filling in

every single detail - I felt my interest being sucked dry.

Ultimately at the heart of it all - I think the "coming-of-age" lacks depth. Sophie the wild child teaching James to do "wild things" such as talk smart to small-town waitresses, go skinny dipping, throw a Bible across a room and let one's hair down and suddenly James is ready to give up his BMW M3 and buy Shannon Noll's second hand Big Black Bogan Car and emancipate himself from his parents? This perhaps maketh a "schoolies experience" but not necessary a "coming of age".

I think some people will love this book. I am not saying all those things above are negative. Some people will love these things because in a way they are simple, sweet and uncomplicated. In fact there are some wonderful, positive reviews. In the current Aussie YA environment though, where the ante is currently being upped with established writers producing excellent, consistent novels and new voices breaking ground - my expectations may have been too high. Or I was expecting something that this book just isn't.

If you are throwing dagger eyes at me, I say:

Shush! Be patient, BB! I want to give Steven Herrick a chance to prove himself.

I think I should read *Slice: Juicy Moments from My Impossible Life* next, what do you think?

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## **ALPHAreader says**

With the toss of a coin James finds himself with company on his way to the country. Sophie with her black fingernails and slipping black dress is going as far as James can take her.

While James is leaving home for the first time, Sophie is returning after a long absence.

Along the way they'll share laughs, burgers and secrets.

'Painted Black Fingernails' is the new young adult novel from Australian author Steven Herrick.

James and Sophie's story is based on the assumption that you can always open up to a stranger because you've got nothing to lose by telling them your secrets. On the dusty highways and backwoods roads leading into the country Sophie and James trade banter and stories that slowly open them up to hard truths and old scars.

James and Sophie couldn't be more different. James grew up in privilege, firmly attached to his mother's apron-strings and benefitting from his father's job as a surgeon. He studied hard in school and had few friends, and as he heads into the country for his first teaching job in a primary school, James reflects on all that pushed him out of home. He seems at once elated and terrified to be leaving the nest, while at the same time we begin to understand that the path he's currently on is not necessarily of his own choosing.

James was a lovely and sweet character, if a little dull. He's very sheltered and almost fragile – and despite being a bit of a drip, there's a lot of him that's relatable. He's just beginning his adult life, and thrilled to be leaving his over-protective mother behind . . . but still terrified of the big, bad world and unsure of his place in it. Sophie is the perfect antidote to James's fragility. By contrast she's brash and funny, alluring and evasive. She has more secrets than James to share, and more to lose by going home.

*Sophie looks at me for a long time before speaking. "Do you ever feel like screaming in public, but stop yourself, because of what people . . ." She looks in the direction of the kitchen. "Because of what people you*

*don't know and don't care about might think?"*  
*"I'm scared of what everybody thinks," I answer.*

The story is told from alternating chapters between James and Sophie, and James's mother and father whom he has left back home. I'm still not sure if the mother/father perspectives were necessary. Beyond better understanding James's claustrophobic home life, I think these narratives were more intended to let young readers know how hard parents have it when they find themselves with an empty nest. Perhaps this is Herrick asking his home-leaving readers to take a care for those they're leaving behind?

Two strangers in a car, one leaving home while the other is returning. A boy who is finally admitting what he wants out of life and a girl who needs to face the family she left behind. 'Black Painted Nails' is a wonderful little character road trip with an unfurling narrative and two compelling protagonist's riding shot-gun.

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## Isamlq says

Black Fainted Fingernails would have been ordinary save for two moments that I found positively honest. The story itself swings from James, on his way to becoming a teacher, to Sophie, on her way home, to Michael, who wants nothing more than to have his son break out, just be, and finally, to Angela, who's having the hardest of times in letting her son go.

Road Trip. As usual there's the meeting of new AND a slow progression towards getting to know who you're with. Here, *every single one* of them discovers a little of what's in them and of what's in the people with them. And this is where those "two moments" come in: that James is so unsure about what he wants but dead certain about what he DOES NOT want, is so me. Seriously, truly... that's me in a handful of words.

The Passenger. How Sophie inserts herself in to his life was too ~~strange too creepy~~ easy, but it was James' failure to act that had me questioning him: too kind, too helpful... No way, me thought, but her being with him, rubbed off in way because eventually he did show he could be snarky and quick too. But what he said later on, that she was being provocative for the sake of it, was another moment where he showed himself capable of being insightful. It was a moment of him calling it like it was: pure honesty.

Family This was where things turned ordinary and predictable for me. *His is one with a mother was hoping for one thing, and a father imagining others.* But there's a re-discovery here too. Again, that re-discovery seemed a bit "too happily ever after" for me, but it was sweet nonetheless/ *Hers is a source of heartache.* I have come to expect a measure of sad in books from Aussie YA, and this does not fail to deliver. The why of her leaving and the why of her coming home unfold slowly... and got me paying attention, and shocked. Her eventual reaction, had me slightly surprised my head: Her decision was not an easy one to make.

There's a moment or two in this that hit it for me...

3/5

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## Jess - The Tales Compendium says

This is a story about a boy searching for freedom, and a girl returning from hers. I love Aussie fiction, road-

trips, new friendships, awkward male leads and confident females, so this was already a book for me before I even opened the first page.

It is a story that heavily highlights the pressure parents can put on their children rather than letting them choose the path they would like to take themselves which I think is a common issue for teenagers, and parents, alike. There were times I couldn't wipe the smile off my face, at Sophie's self confidence, spunk and boldness and at James's embarrassment at being in an unfamiliar situation. I was also brought to tears at one point when Sophie returns home. It's times like these that I wish I was more eloquent so I could really describe what I want to; I'm just really in love with this book!

James is one of those awkward teens who doesn't have any luck with girls and plays life very safe. Whether this is due to his mother's over-protectiveness, his lack of confidence or both, it means that when Sophie appears in his life, she is sure to turn things upside down. Sophie is a free spirit who left home to get away from the pain of loving people who leave, and the mindset of the small town she lived in. She is the total opposite of James, and just what he needs to help him discover what he wants in life. And James might just be the kind of person Sophie needs to face her family again.

Black Painted Fingernails is told in alternating chapters. James's chapters tell the story as it is happening in present time, with an occasional look back at the past. Sophie's chapters look at her life and how she ended up sitting in the car next to James, heading home for the first time in three years. I believe it is done this way because the problems that James faces are current whereas Sophie's issues all stem from her childhood. Both James and Sophie are attempting to face their problems but without their chance meeting, it may not have gone so smoothly. There are also chapters by James's dad and his mother. They each have a couple of chapters set in present time which help the reader to understand the environment that James has come from but also shows teens the difficulty some parents have when their 'nest' is suddenly empty.

Black Painted Fingernails reminds me of *Swerve* by Philip Gwynne and *Wavelength* by AJ Betts. All three books look at males in their late teens struggling with where to go in their lives and what will come next. In each case, a girl helps show them the way.

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## **Braiden says**

Black Painted Fingernails by Australian author Steven Herrick was a quick one to two day read, encompassing one's struggle to be who we want to be and do what we want to do despite the pressures inflicted from others. If you're having trouble finding your purpose in life, then this is a story for you. Many teens can relate easily to the characters that are introduced in this novel.

James and Sophie are well developed characters coming from two very different lives and families. James' mother is very over-protective and can't go very long without thinking or wondering about her son's wellbeing. The signs of an over-protective mother with her only child. James' father, a surgeon, is the opposite to his wife. He is laid-back and decides that it is James' right to do what he wants with his life, persuading his wife to have this same outlook. Whereas with Sophie, her parents divorced and never knowing her mother, has grown up with a father and brothers. She escapes under ideal circumstances, crossing path with James on his trip to the country for his teacher-training.

In this novel we are seeing alternating chapters between characters and point-of-views. James is seen through first person and his travel to teacher-training, and then with Sophie. There are chapters in third person of Sophie's past for why she escaped from her small town and family. And then we have present third person chapters of James' mother and father and how they're coping with having their only son away. At first it was

confusing, but then later on I thought that it slightly worked having given Steven Herrick some degree of freedom to work with this story and give more detail, character-work and backstory to Sophie's and James' lives and how they contrast one another.

I do believe Steven Herrick did a great job at adapting this concept of struggling teens in a setting that's close to home, with circumstances that are relatable to both teen and parental readers, but not to the point that it was executed extremely well. I enjoyed the story but it doesn't stick out to me as a read that was memorable. At times I was interested and then other times I was just flicking pages. At times I was engaged and then other times I was not. Maybe I lost a touch lately for contemporary because I need something hard-core and twisted to keep me engaged.

First paragraph:

'I'm stuck in cross-city traffic, smelling petrol fumes and watching the man in the car beside me sing along with his iPod. He closes his eyes opera-style and lets rip. His double chin wobbles as he strains for the high note.'

Favourite quotes/lines:

"Maybe what stays alive...is what we carry inside us."

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## **Marianne says**

Black Painted Fingernails is the 6th book by Australian writer Steven Herrick. The story starts with James Spalding, a student teacher, setting out west to the town of Hillston for his first teacher-training round. He's setting out with a cut lunch from his mother, Angela, a gleaming new red BMW M3 from Michael, his dad (a well-off surgeon) and also with a definite lack of enthusiasm. Sophie, owner of the Black Painted Fingernails, is twenty-one, looks gorgeous, wild and unconventional and is hitching a ride back home. She approaches him at a petrol station for a ride. James, young, inexperienced and (by his own admission) a bit geeky, is overwhelmed by her cockiness, and finds himself with a passenger.

The story is told in several voices: James is detailing what happens to him and to Sophie on the trip west; Sophie details what has happened in her life to bring her to this point; Angela and Michael separately detail their anxieties about James on this, his first time away from home. At Sophie's suggestion, they enter the "Truth Factory", and learn a great deal about each other. James admits that he doesn't know what he does want, but he is quite certain he doesn't want "my mother to tidy my room or buy my underwear or find me a suitable girlfriend. I don't want to be a teacher".

Herrick sets a great scene: the reader feels present in the story from page 1. The dialogue is authentic, the characters quickly become people you care about and the plot is realistic. This novel has some lessons to teach: decide what is really important in your life; think carefully about burning all your bridges, as you may want to use them to go back home; stay connected with the people you care about and tell them you love them, they could be gone tomorrow. This is a heart-warming tale and an easy read. I did wonder if the author used "chaise lounge" (three times!) intentionally, tongue-in-cheek, or if both authors and proof-readers can't spell these days. Am I showing my age? This novel is described as Young Adult Fiction. I am not a Young Adult, but I very much enjoyed it, none-the-less.

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## **Someone says**

Everything about the book screamed, "generic 90s family read". (I don't know why 90s but the girl just reminded me of someone like Monica from friends) I mean, I finished the book, which is unusual for me, so I'm guessing it was an alright read. Throughout the whole read I was constantly looking for a 'plot'. There wasn't one. Unless you call, "boy and a girl goes on a road trip and fall in love, whilst the boy finds himself (?)" a story. It was a long read of 'introduction of various characters with lots of gaps for most of them'. They randomly put James parents as a sub-main character which was weird, but it was alright. Didn't really like the ending either. I lost interest enough to skim read everything at the end and never found out how the dad died and what happened to the station wagon that Sophie bought. I don't know. The book was just a fragment of various details to develop a character and the timeline did get annoying because the author kept jumping back and forth in weird order. One random thing I found funny was the fact that the author was mocking a generic writer in the book named Ethan yet I wonder if he realised his book was mediocre at best to be on a clearance sale for \$1 at a bookstore only within 4 years of release.

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## Rebecca says

When I read the blurb I was like 'Awesome! I've heard great things about this author and I love road trip books! What could be better!' While I did enjoy it, I didn't love it as much as I thought I would.

The book is mainly told in James's and Sophie's POV, however is sometimes told through the parents eyes. My favourite aspect about this book was how, the author, Steven Herrick, described the scenes, characters and surroundings.

A snippet from the book:

\*She enjoys driving; the creases around her mouth are deeper, more pronounced. Her hair falls in tangled dreads across her shoulders and down her back. Her skin is smooth and pale. pg. 68

I liked Sophie and James, the main characters, especially Sophie. There was something about her and her black painted fingernails that attracted me. I found her to be an interesting character and I wanted to know more about her.

I enjoyed this book and will be sure to check out some of his other titles.

## Aussie YA Book Challenge 2011

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## Dorien says

James is net onderweg naar zijn stageplek als leraar, als hij bij zijn eerste tankstop Sophie oppikt. Samen vervolgen ze hun weg, James naar het begin van zijn toekomst, Sophie naar de afwikkeling van haar verleden.

Waar James wat verlegen en terughoudend is, is Sophie een brutaal kruidje-roer-me-niet, met het hart op de tong. Ze daagt hem uit niets dan de waarheid te spreken, en dat is niet gemakkelijk voor een bescheiden

jongen als James. Hij is als enig kind - moederskind - gewend de lieve vrede te bewaren en soms zijn mening voor zich te houden. Hij is zeer beschermd opgevoed en heeft weinig tegenslag gekend in zijn leven tot dan toe.

Maar ook voor Sophie, die een groot geheim met zich meedraagt, is het niet altijd voor de hand liggend om eerlijk te zijn. Ze heeft na een vervelend voorval een aantal jaren geleden alle contacten met haar familie verbroken. In de tijd dat ze voor zichzelf moest zorgen heeft ze het nodige meegemaakt.

In een hoog tempo ontwikkelt zich een wederzijds respect en vriendschap tussen de twee. James besluit van zijn voorgenomen route af te wijken, en zo niet op tijd op zijn stageplek te verschijnen, om Sophie helemaal naar huis te brengen. Daar aangekomen maakt hij kennis met haar familie en begrijpt hij pas echt goed wat er aan de hand is met haar.

Steven Herrick beschrijft mooi het Australische landschap en de dorpen waar James en Sophie doorheen komen. Zijn sfeertekening is even eenvoudig als fraai: *We rijden langs een grauwe boerderij aan de rand van Sophies dorp, waar kippen in de modder scharrelen en een hond rondzwerft tot het eind van zijn lijn. Een welkomstbord op de kruising zit vol kogelgaten. [...] 'Het komt goed, Sophie. Je vader is vast blij je te zien.'* Mijn opmerking valt in de ruimte tussen onze stoelen.

Herrick is vooral bekend om zijn 'free verse novels' voor kinderen en jongeren. *Zwartgelakte nagels* is zijn eerste gewone Young Adult-roman. Een goedgeschreven, makkelijk leesbare mozaïekver telling, waarin beurtelings James, Sophie en James' ouders aan het woord komen of de hoofdrol spelen. Over een roadtrip, met als belangrijkste kenmerken vrijheid en vriendschap.

En een zoetsappig, bijna overdreven happy end. Alles komt goed...

Vertaald door Tjalling Bos.

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## Preet says

This book was not for me, though I don't think it was a bad book. The characters were relatable with James, a man finally leaving the nest and Sophie, a somewhat wild and rebellious girl who lives her life on her own terms. However, I can't say I ever really liked either of them. They were just there. That's how the whole book was for me. I never felt like I was enjoying or hating it, it was just something to pass the time with.

Having the author also write with more of an Australian culture made the story as a whole a little less grasping for me. There were a few terms here and there that I wouldn't understand and it would have me pull away from the story. Though the alternating chapters were nice, I didn't feel as though I had a good bearing on who James was as a character since he was always shown in the present. Also, I felt the handful of chapters in his parents perspective were unnecessary and took away from the flow of the book. Sophie, though confident and probably the most well-developed character in the story, had a lot of back stories where I kept feeling unsure about why Herrick bothered to even mention it.

Overall, I never felt the characters really grow through the book, they more just changed suddenly, like magic. This book was a slow read for me and just left me frustrated that it wasn't ending so I could move on to something more interesting.

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## Holly says

I wanted to like this so much. It started off promising, and the writing was readable enough. But it lacked the essence to make me go "wowsers" and the ending felt unresolved and messy.

When Sophie first comes on the scene, I immediately think MPDG. You know, *that* kind of female character. Think Alaska Young, think Zooey Deschanel, think the bodacious wild girl who cannot be tamed. I fell into the familiarity of her character, pleasantly surprised with the soft, caring element of her personality.

(view spoiler)

James was a likable guy. His development is typical for a "coming-of-age story" but with fresh tones of sincerity which really resonated with me.

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## Lauren K says

James is off on his first road trip into the country to take up a six week training placement. He leaves behind his anxious mother and drives off in the BMW gifted to him by his father. James has gone through life doing the right thing, pleasing his parents, going to University and living a relatively predictable life. When James picks up Sophie, a young mysterious hitchhiker his life begins to take a different route. Sophie is a troubled young woman who has been running from her past and has taken the long way back to her family roots. Sophie and James's contrasting personalities play out nicely as they begin to trust each other.

This is a quick read with a slow but steady plot. The characters are well developed, Sophie and James reveal themselves little by little during their car trip and the author also shows glimpses of their past with flashbacks. These two young adults develop a strong friendship in the couple of days they are driving across country. They realise they can learn a lot from each other and heal each other's past hurts. Sophie and James have realistic inner conflicts and desires and the growth they undertake during their short journey is enthralling and leads to a lovely ending.

An enjoyable YA road trip novel by Australian author, Steven Herrick.

3.5/5

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## Kate O'Donnell says

in steven herrick's newest book, published a couple of months ago now, student teacher james is heading to a country town for his very first teaching experience. ostensibly, james is ready - he's got the job, somewhere to stay (and all paid up), he's got the keys to a bmw and a healthy cut lunch for the drive.

luckily for the reader, who might be despairing at this point for james' lack of imagination and sense of adventure, he stops to fill up with petrol and is somehow conned into giving sophie a lift on his way.

sophie is older. she's hair, legs and black painted fingernails. and she's got james pegged immediately and she goes out of her way to encourage, entice and embarrass him out of his shell.

she brings out a tube of lipstick and elaborately applies it to her full lips, then kisses the hankie, leaving a big red pout above my name. she hands it back to me. 'don't wash it. leave it for your mum.'

it soon becomes clear that james is far from ready, and far from willing to enter into the teaching life. and sophie - so cocky and apparently self-assured - is hiding, or has masked, some painful secrets and sadness. the characters are all big-hearted, very real people. they talk, they're awkward.

sophie's third-person narrated chapters deal almost exclusively with her back story and the reader learns how she developed her tough exterior. the scenes with cardigan madrigal, the gentle hippie boy - the only boy in town who didn't like football - of sophie's teen years in her rough country hometown are such a highlight.

and in an unusual move, a number of the chapters are narrated from james' parents point of view. ok, so you don't really want to read about (spoiler) parents having sex, but at the same time it's kind of special to be privvy to angela and michael's experience of being left behind by their only son - coping with his absence and torn between trying to protect him from the world while also wanting him to discover it. complete pic of family and when the time comes, at the end of the novel, we are able to understand the parents' motivations and responses.

on one hand you think you have this story figured out: road trip, coming of age, boy meets a quirky girl and is bewitched. on the other hand...this is steven herrick and it's beautifully written and a truly lovely story.

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## **Elvina says**

Its ok, this book is quite nice. I can't think of anything to say

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