

THE STELLA PRIZE
SCHOOLS PROGRAM
EDUCATION
RESOURCE KIT

2015



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Introduction

The Stella Prize is a major literary award celebrating Australian women's writing, and promoting diversity and cultural change. The Stella Prize was founded due to an awareness that women writers were underrepresented in three key areas:

- ◆ as winners of literary prizes
- ◆ as authors of the books reviewed
- ◆ as the authors of the books on the school curriculum

On the current curriculum text lists set for Australian secondary students:

- ◆ In NSW, nearly 70% of HSC texts (2015–20) are written by male authors, and fewer than 14% of texts are written by Australian women.
- ◆ In Victoria (2015), male writers make up 68% of the VCE English text list and 59% of the VCE English Literature text list.

There is a feedback loop here: if women miss out on the major literary prizes and receive less media attention and fewer reviews, they are much less likely to be chosen for school reading lists, as curriculum developers tend to look at prize lists and at which books are receiving most attention when selecting new books for the syllabus. This matters, because it sends messages to girls and boys about whose voices and experiences are most important.

We at the Stella Prize believe it is important for girls and boys to be exposed to a wide range of stories; to see themselves reflected in the books they read and study, but also to be exposed to the lives and experiences of others. Gender stereotypes limit us all, male and female. Once early gendered reading habits are established, they can become entrenched for life and feed into unconscious bias.

The Stella Prize Schools Program seeks to inspire change, and to empower students – girls and boys alike – by encouraging them to critically engage with their own reading habits and imagine a future not limited by their gender.

The Stella Prize Schools Program (SPSP) aims to:

- ◆ produce educational resources for teachers and educators
- ◆ lobby curriculum developers to move towards more balanced gender representation
- ◆ promote children's and young adult books by Australian women
- ◆ establish an ongoing dialogue with schools, parents and young readers about ways to tackle gender disparity
- ◆ conduct ongoing research into the literary gender bias
- ◆ increase reader engagement and encourage critical thinking around literature
- ◆ provide role models for girls and opportunities for emerging female writers

- ◆ offer opportunities for schools to develop the skills of their staff and students through writing workshops, professional development sessions, and school visits by notable Australian writers.

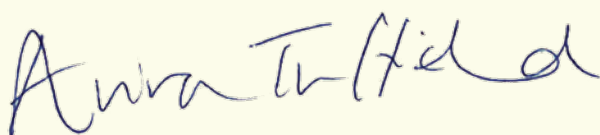
This Stella Prize Schools Program Education Kit offers teaching notes on all the wonderful books by Australian women that were shortlisted for the 2015 Stella Prize. There are also notes on each of the 2015 Stella Prize longlisted book, and for Years 7 to 10, we have included an extensive suggested reading list. You can view a full list of speakers and authors available to give schools talks at our website: thestellaprizet.com.au/spsp-speakers.

To enquire about booking a Stella Prize Schools Program speaker, please contact the Stella Prize at info@thestellaprizet.com.au or Booked Out speakers agency: bookings@bookedout.com.au / (03) 9824 0177.

The ongoing work of the Schools Program is made possible by the generous support of the Andyinc Foundation, the Nelson Meers Foundation, the Hart Line Fund and the Australia Council for the Arts. If you'd like to consider making a donation to the Stella Prize, please visit <http://thestellaprizet.com.au/support-stella/donate>.

We hope that this kit brings lively discussion, fresh ideas and a great deal of reading pleasure to your classroom. Let your students be inspired by Australian women's writing, and help them – girls and boys alike – to build their own brilliant careers.

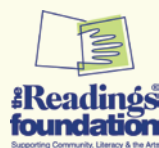
Best wishes,



Aviva Tuffield

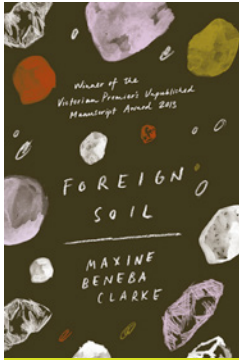
Executive Director and Co-founder

The Stella Prize



Foreign Soil by Maxine Beneba Clarke

HACHETTE



'Wondrous as she seemed, Shu Yi wasn't a problem I wanted to take on. Besides, with her arrival my own life had become easier: Melinda and the others hadn't come looking for me in months. At home, my thankful mother had finally taken the plastic undersheet off my bed.'

Maxine Beneba Clarke, *Foreign Soil*

INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXT

This collection of short stories won the Victorian Premier's Award for an Unpublished Manuscript in 2013, and was subsequently published by Hachette Australia. It went on to be critically recognised and appear on the shortlists for numerous awards.

Like all of Maxine Beneba Clarke's work, this collection reflects an awareness of voices that are often pushed to the fringes of society, and frequently speaks to the experiences of immigrants, refugees and single mothers, in addition to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people. In *Foreign Soil*, Clarke captures the anger, hope, despair, desperation, strength and desire felt by members of these groups, and many others. This extraordinary collection experiments with language, dialect and structure to capture the perfect form for each of the narrative voices it contains. *Foreign Soil* is in many ways challenging reading material, but it is an important work in that it forces us to confront our prejudices and assumptions in regards to what we believe books, and people, can be and do.

This book can and should be enjoyed as a whole, with each of the stories adding something new to the collection's chorus. However, for schools wishing to look at specific issues, or to avoid particular themes, the stories can easily be studied in isolation or selected groups. There is much scope to compare and contrast these pieces with current affairs, and to link them to issues raised in the Australian Curriculum.

These notes are divided into individual stories to allow teachers to select those they feel are most

suitable for study. A short synopsis and series of reading questions are allocated for each story, along with any themes that are not included in the general list of the book's themes below. Following this breakdown are activities that can be applied to the book more broadly.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MAXINE BENEBA CLARKE is an Australian writer and slam poetry champion of Afro-Caribbean descent. She is the author of the poetry collections *Gil Scott Heron is on Parole* (Picaro Press, 2009) and *Nothing Here Needs Fixing* (Picaro Press, 2013), the title poem of which won the 2013 Ada Cambridge Poetry Prize. Her debut short story collection, *Foreign Soil*, won the 2013 Victorian Premier's Award for an Unpublished Manuscript, the ABIA Literary Fiction Book of the Year, and the Indie Award for Debut Fiction; was shortlisted for the 2015 Stella Prize, the Glenda Adams Award for New Writing at the NSW Premier's Awards, and the Matt Richell Award; and longlisted for the Dobbie Award. Maxine was named one of 2015's Best Young Australian Novelists by the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

As a spoken-word performer, Maxine has delivered her work on stages and airwaves, and at festivals across the country, including the Melbourne Writers Festival, Melbourne International Arts Festival and the Melbourne Jazz Fringe Festival, as well as at the Arts Centre.

Maxine's short fiction, essays and poetry have been published in numerous publications, including *Overland*, *The Age*, *Big Issue*, *Cordite Poetry Review*, *Harvest*, *Voiceworks*, *Going Down Swinging*, *Mascara*, *Meanjin*, *Unusual Work* and *Peril*.

She has been poetry editor of the academic journal *Social Alternatives*, and spoken-word editor for *Overland* literary journal.

Maxine has conducted poetry classes and workshops for many organisations, including RMIT, the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English (VATE), Writers Victoria, Kensington Neighbourhood House and the Society of Women Writers (Vic).

Taken from the author's website
www.slamup.blogspot.com.au

THEMES

Family
 Class
 Race
 Prejudice
 Identity
 Gender
 Stereotype
 Language
 Motherhood
 Privilege
 Human behaviour

David

A young mother is wheeling her new bike home when she is stopped by an older woman. Both women are Sudanese, but have very different life experiences; they are from different generations and come from different parts of Sudan. They are united not by their skin colour, but by their shared need to escape, and the bike is a symbol of freedom for both. The younger fights the expectations of her elders, and the restrictions of her circumstance as a young Sudanese woman in Australia and a single mother. The older, Asha, struggles to reconcile her new life with memories of her old, and in particular of her son, David. This devastating story within a story intersperses Asha's final memory of David with the meeting between the two women. It is a story of

strength, survival and hope, resting on a shiny red bicycle.

- ◆ When and where is the story set?
- ◆ What is the story within the story?
- ◆ What is the significance of the red bicycle to each of the women?
- ◆ How does Asha's final memory of David change when she rides the bicycle?
- ◆ What connects the two women? In what ways are they different? Do they understand each other?
- ◆ How do the two communicate with each other?

Harlem Jones

Harlem Jones is angry – filled with the kind of anger that builds up with nowhere to go but outwards. He's the sort of kid who is known to police. Harlem is looking for trouble, and he finds it with his friend Toby. With the volatile setting of the 2011 Tottenham Riots, this is a story that addresses those who are failed (or perhaps deliberately ignored) by the system. The author references the riots and Mark Duggan as the catalyst for Harlem's rage. Harlem's helpless, desperate anger may be familiar to many readers, but in him these feelings are amplified, and become explosive.

In this *Overland* magazine podcast, Maxine discusses and reads aloud from 'Harlem Jones'. <https://overland.org.au/2013/10/the-overland-podcast-maxine-beneba-clarke/>

- ◆ What are the riots about?
- ◆ How has Harlem been failed by the system?
- ◆ How is Harlem an outsider? How does this inform his actions?
- ◆ What does Harlem want?
- ◆ How does the author maintain the story's pace through its language?
- ◆ What forms do power and helplessness take in this story?
- ◆ How do the different attitudes adults have toward Harlem shape and affect his behaviour?

Hope

Millie has grown up in Cidar Valley, a small town in Jamaica. She is nicknamed ‘Banana Girl’ by her younger brothers and sisters after the plot of sugar bananas her father has planted in their backyard in the hope of funding a brighter future for his eldest daughter. For Millie, opportunity comes in the form of an apprentice position in Willemina’s sewing shop in the city of Kingston.

Millie is resilient, but a dreamer. She falls in love and becomes pregnant to a man, Winston, who is about to leave the city for work. He promises to come back to her but, as time passes, and Millie doesn’t hear from him, she grows heartbroken, and increasingly sure that she won’t see him again. ‘Hope’ describes the tug of war between several characters, each of whom rests their own hopes on Millie as she tries desperately to live up to their expectations.

- ◆ What are the banana plants a testament to?
- ◆ What do each of the characters in this piece hope for?
- ◆ Why doesn’t Willemina tell Millie that Winston has written to her?
- ◆ Does the story end with hope for Millie?
- ◆ How is Millie’s life in Kingston different from her life in Cidar Valley?

Foreign Soil

In the story that gives its name to this collection, Ange is a hairdresser who is convinced that there is something more to her life. When Mukasa walks into the salon and flirts with her over his haircut, she’s sure that he’s it. But their relationship in Australia is inverted when Ange travels with Mukasa to his home country of Uganda. Once there, Mukasa is no longer the doting man he was in Australia. He becomes violent and aggressive, and Ange feels increasingly cut off from the world, both literally and metaphorically.

This brutal and subtle story explores the horrors faced by victims of family violence who have no safe place to turn to. By setting the story in Uganda, rather than Australia, Beneba Clarke forces readers to go on the journey with Ange. There is no space for questions

such as ‘Why not just leave?’, and the story addresses the claustrophobic horrors of abuse without respite.

- ◆ How might this story be read differently if it was set in Australia?
- ◆ How does Mukasa’s behaviour change when he and Ange get to Uganda?
- ◆ How is Ange alienated? How might this apply to women in Australia?
- ◆ Why does Ange conceal her pregnancy?
- ◆ What image does the author finish the story with?
- ◆ What emotions does this last paragraph convey?

Shu Yi

Ava lives in the suburban town of Kellyville in Australia, which she describes as ‘the typical everyone-knows-everyone-else’s-business-and-can-I-borrow-a-cup-of-milk-for-the-kids’-breakfast-please suburban blond-brick Australia’. Ava is used to being the odd one out, used to dealing with the casual and the not-so-casual racism of her peers. When Shu Yi arrives at her school, Ava thinks she is captivating and beautiful. But although she knows what it’s like to be bullied and ostracised, Ava is reluctant to make herself even more of a target by aligning herself with the new girl. She ignores Shu Yi, grateful for her own reprieve from the attention of schoolyard bullies, and hopes the attacks on the new girl will pass. When Ava’s mother and teachers suggest to Ava that she watch out for Shu Yi, she has the chance to make a difference, but is too afraid of the consequences for herself.

This is an astute narrative about fear and bullying. Both Ava and Shu Yi are sympathetic characters, targeted by their peers because their nationality marks them as ‘other’. The author has perfectly captured the nuances of how and why people act in these situations and, in doing so, forces the reader to question the hows and whys of their own behaviour.

- ◆ What image is evoked by Ava’s description of her Australian town? What does that tell you about the types of people who might live there?
- ◆ How does Melissa use her parents to justify her behaviour?

- ◆ What is wrong with the attitudes of Mr James and the principal in this story? How might they have acted differently?
- ◆ What is significant about Shu Yi's line at the end of the story?
- ◆ Why does Ava reject Shu Yi?

Railton Road

Railton Road is set in a rebel squat in England in the 1960s. Solomon is in line for a promotion from his current position running the Black History Classes at the squat, to Minister for Culture with the London Panthers. He can taste the rebellion in the air, and detects its imminent arrival with De Frankie, one of the leaders of the Black Panthers. De Frankie is aggressive and unforgiving, initiating action against women he believes have betrayed their race. The story ends with a woman in shackles, a painful and humiliating symbol of the revolution to come.

- ◆ What is the tension at the heart of this story?
- ◆ What does Solomon feel about the coming revolution?
- ◆ How are De Frankie's and Solomon's attitudes different?
- ◆ How is the woman at the end of the story not what Solomon expected? How does this make him feel about what the London Panthers are doing?
- ◆ What does the treatment of the woman represent?

Gaps in the Hickory

The longest story in the collection, 'Gaps in the Hickory', is about Delores, an old woman who moved to New Orleans from America's Deep South, and is mourning the death of her good friend Izzy. Delores' kindness is shown in her treatment of her young neighbour, Ella, while she secretly worries for the safety of Izzy's grandson, Carter. Mississippi isn't a good place for a boy like Carter, who feels more comfortable in his sister's dresses and beads, particularly without Izzy around to keep him safe.

- ◆ What is it about Carter's behaviour that makes Delores worry for him? How does she know his secret?

- ◆ Why does Delores feel that she might be responsible for Carter's sexuality? What did she keep a secret from Izzy?
- ◆ Do you think Carter's dad is acting solely out of prejudice? What other emotions might he be feeling?
- ◆ Why did Izzy leave her house to Delores?
- ◆ How does Carter feel when he puts on Lucy's clothes?
- ◆ At what point in the story do you realise the truth about Delores' past identity? What does holding this information back at first mean for your reading of the character? How might your interpretation of the story have changed if you knew this from the very beginning? How might the author be playing on traditional prejudices and stereotypes to encourage readers to consider their own attitudes beyond the book?

Big Islan

In 'Big Islan' Nathaniel's wife teaches him the alphabet, letter by letter. 'A is fe ackee.' Nathaniel is happy with his life, happy with what he knows. He doesn't want to labour over these meaningless letters. But one morning, looking at the newspaper and seeing the reception of the West Indies cricketers in Australia, the letters take on new meaning. 'A is fe Owstrayleah.' 'E is fe envy.' 'R is fe restlessness.'

This is a small story that addresses big ideas about education, place and happiness. Written entirely in Nathaniel's dialect, the story is in some ways challenging to read, but readers are rewarded with the experience of really being inside a character's head, if only for a moment.

- ◆ Why does Nathaniel's wife want him to learn the alphabet?
- ◆ How does the way Nathaniel views his life change from the beginning of the piece to the end?
- ◆ How do the descriptions of place in the story reflect Nathaniel's emotional state?
- ◆ How is the alphabet used to demonstrate Nathaniel's inner thoughts?

- ◆ Is Nathaniel better off with an education?

The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa

'The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa' is the story of a young refugee boy trapped in Sydney's Villawood detention centre and an Australian woman struggling to make anyone care about him.

The bulk of this story belongs to Asanka, a young boy seeking refuge from the horrors of his homeland. These horrors are sharply drawn alongside those he experiences upon his arrival in Australia. No more than a teenager, Asanka has already endured torture at the hands of the Tamil, and been dragged, half dead, through the salty ocean towards a dream of a safe place, only to be locked up indefinitely before even reaching Australian shores. His only friend was Chaminda, an older man who saved him more than once on the long ocean voyage. After Chaminda's death, Asanka paces the corridors, restless, helpless and alone.

Loretta has left her job at the Asylum Seekers' Support Centre because of pressure from her husband. In this story, she is the outsider, the helpless 'other' who lacks the language to explain who she is or what she can possibly offer. Chaminda was certain Loretta could help Asanka, but as she sits in front of him, sizing up a boy who has lost all hope, she knows that she cannot. Asanka can see it in her. He knows there is no hope, and so all he asks of her is a gift, of some toiletries. What harm could there be? What harm, until a hairpin becomes a needle and dental floss, a thread.

This piece ruthlessly drags the reader's attention towards issues that are often suppressed and ignored in Australian society. Based on conversations the author had with refugees, Asanka is faithfully created and authentic. His journey is not idealised or diluted and, like the other stories in this collection, 'The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa' asks readers to question their own attitudes and responses.

- ◆ Why does Asanka count?
- ◆ How does the author demonstrate Asanka's feelings of helplessness and disconnection from the world? Why does he feel this way?

- ◆ How do Chaminda and Asanka become friends? What unites them?
- ◆ What does Asanka hope for? Is this likely to happen?
- ◆ Why might this story be difficult to read? What ideas does it challenge?
- ◆ For Asanka, what is real?
- ◆ Why is Loretta unable to help?
- ◆ Why is she frustrated with her family and friends' lack of understanding? How could she explain it so they would understand, and would they listen?

The Sukiyaki Book Club

The final story in *Foreign Soil* brings the collection full circle, and, like 'David', is a story within a story. In this heavily autobiographical piece, a young black single mother sits at her desk writing. She is stuck on a scene where her character, Avery, is hanging from the monkey bars, alone, with no way down. The young mother asks herself: is there any way to bring the child down safely?

She wonders if there is hope for her, her children, or Avery. The rejection letters pile up on the desk next to her. Her writing is good, they say, but not hopeful enough, not light enough. The young mother is desperate for a happy ending, but she can't find her way to one.

Her despair grows. Her children are bored. Hungry. Avery doesn't have the strength to hold on. She lets go. Drops.

And in the middle of the air, Avery's body takes over. She flips. Lands safely. And in the young mother's dilapidated apartment, her children dance together, carefree and happy.

- ◆ What control does the protagonist of this piece have over the other characters? What happens when she gives it up?
- ◆ Why does her work keep getting rejected? How important is hope in writing? Can a piece be sad and hopeful at the same time?
- ◆ How does the author show these characters to be more than just 'poor'? What else are they?

- ◆ How does this story reflect the author's life? Why do you think the author has chosen to finish with another story within a story?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Discuss in class the following words in relation to *Foreign Soil*:

- Power
- Hope
- Refuge
- Racism
- Privilege

Find examples of how each is used in the text, who is affected by them and in what way, and consider how the story might change if it had been used differently. How is it used for and against the character/s in your example?

2. What do we mean by the word 'stereotype'? Choose one of the characters in *Foreign Soil* and discuss how the word stereotype could be applied to them.

- Do they conform to a particular stereotype?
- If someone were to meet this character, how might stereotyping influence that person's thoughts or behaviour toward the character?
- How is the character stereotyped by others in the story?
- How does the character resist or break away from their traditional stereotype? How has the author achieved this?
- What is the connection between prejudice and stereotype? How can this be applied to your character?
- Describe a character as if you're meeting them for the first time.
- Now imagine you're the character and write a paragraph describing yourself.
- How do these two paragraphs differ, and what does that say about the way we stereotype people?

3. Coming from a slam poetry background, it is perhaps unsurprising that Maxine has a great love and respect for the way the sound of words can influence how they are read. In this *Guardian* piece ([http://](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/17/stella-prize-2015-six-australian-authors-on-the-stories-behind-their-books)

www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/17/stella-prize-2015-six-australian-authors-on-the-stories-behind-their-books), Maxine says the following in reference to the book:

'Stylistically, I was very concerned about voice while writing this book. Spoken word has always been my first love – I've performed on stages and airwaves across Australia and internationally for almost a decade now. When I was writing the stories in *Foreign Soil*, I set out to replicate what I would do at the microphone – to transcribe the sounds, accents, rhythms of speech on to the page.

'The story 'Gaps in the Hickory', set in Mississippi and New Orleans, is written in a distinct southern vernacular so that the reader cannot elect to escape the accent and its histories. The story 'Big Islan' is written in a distinct Jamaican-accented English. Part of the story 'David' is written in English as a second language. The way we speak, our choice of words, our rhythms, our pauses, tell so much about who we are, where we've been, and sometimes even where we're heading.'

- What do you think Maxine means when she says 'the reader cannot elect to escape the accent and its histories'? How does this relate to your emotional responses to the stories written in dialect?
- How does the way we speak express who we are? What does the way you speak say about you? What kind of language do you use (e.g. formal, informal, slang, swearing, dialect)? Do you speak fast or slow? Is your voice monotone or singsong in tone? Do you use particular words often? Answer these questions about yourself, and also ask someone else to answer them on your behalf. How do their answers compare to yours?
- How does the author capture all of these things in her writing, and what insights does this offer into the characters?
- Using your description of the way you speak, and other points you've discussed during this activity, try to write a short piece (creative or straightforward), that focuses on capturing the way you talk.

FURTHER READING

On Maxine Beneba Clarke and *Foreign Soil*

Digital Writers' Festival 2015: Presenting the Stella Prize Longlist (Maxine reading from *Foreign Soil* 'Big Islan') 16:47–21:38

<http://digitalwritersfestival.com/2015/event/stella-longlist/>

'At first her work was rejected, but then she won an award': *Sydney Morning Herald*

<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/maxine-beneba-clarke-20140501-37iro.html>

'Listen': Review by Fiona Wright: *Sydney Review of Books*

<http://www.sydneyreviewofbooks.com/foreign-soil-maxine-beneba-clarke/>

(and response to this review by Maxine Beneba Clarke

<http://www.sydneyreviewofbooks.com/listen-correspondence/>)

'Maxine Beneba Clarke delves into foreign soil': *The Herald Sun*

<http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/maxine-beneba-clarke-delves-into-foreign-soil/story-fni0fiyv-1227040359468>

Review by Lou Heinrich: *Newtown Review of Books*

<http://newtownreviewofbooks.com.au/2014/07/22/maxine-beneba-clarke-foreign-soil-reviewed-lou-heinrich/>

Review by Martin Shaw

<http://www.emergingwritersfestival.org.au/tag/maxine-beneba-clarke/>

The Stella Interview: Maxine Beneba Clarke

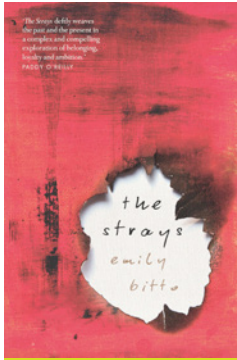
<http://thestellaprize.com.au/2015/03/the-stella-interview-maxine-beneba-clarke/>

'Stella Prize 2015: the shortlisted authors on the stories behind their books': *The Guardian*

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/17/stella-prize-2015-six-australian-authors-on-the-stories-behind-their-books>

The Strays by Emily Bitto

AFFIRM PRESS



'I once read that the heart's magnetic field radiates up to five metres from the body, so that whenever we are within this range of another person our hearts are interacting. The body's silent communications with other bodies are unmapped and mysterious, a linguistics of scent, colour, flushes of heat, the dilating of a pupil. Who knows, what we call instant attraction may be as random as the momentary synchrony of two hearts' magnetic pulses.'

Emily Bitto, *The Strays*

INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXT

Emily Bitto has described herself as fascinated by 'a group of unconventional individuals coming together with the idea of separating themselves to some extent from mainstream society'¹. Bitto's debut novel, *The Strays*, revolves around this idea, and draws inspiration from the lives of the Heide Circle of artists in the 1930s. In *The Strays*, Helena and Evan Trentham are a fictional artist couple at the heart of the modernist movement in Melbourne, who form an artist collective at their home – the fictionalised grounds of Melbourne's Heide Museum of Modern Art.

The narrator Lily, like Bitto herself, is an only child. She is middle-aged as she begins her story, reflecting on her years spent living with the Trenthams, and in particular her friendship with their daughter Eva. Lily is a child used to isolation, and when she starts at a new school, she expects to be an outsider. But immediately she is taken in by Eva, who attends the school with her older sister, Bea, and their younger sister, Heloise. Lily's friendship with Eva is immediate and intense. They form the kind of bond experienced in many female friendships, based on secrets and promises and heightened by the emotions of adolescence, a time when physical and emotional boundaries are yet to be established.

Lily is in awe of Eva and her family from the outset. They are extroverted and gregarious, nothing at all like Lily's own conservative parents. She witnesses

the freedom they give their daughters, and the open arms with which they welcome 'strays' into their home and, to Lily, it seems like a sort of paradise. Lily spends more and more time at the Trenthams' house, as she and Eva become inseparable. When her father is injured, and is unable to work, Lily's family are forced to move out of their home, and she moves in with the Trenthams for an indefinite period.

It is around this time that Evan, growing increasingly frustrated with the conservative ideals of the Australian art scene, invites a group of like-minded artists to come and live on the Trenthams' property as well. The idea is that these modernists will find inspiration in each other and, with the patronage of Evan and Helena, will have the financial independence and space to create work that pushes the boundaries of art. Jerome is one of the artists in the Trenthams' circle. Well-educated and talented, he is admired by Helena and envied by Evan. But it is Eva and Heloise that interest him most, and it is his relationship with these two girls that eventually fractures the circle and the Trentham family.

Eva is wild and energetic. Her creativity and charm, like her father's, pull Lily to her. As the girls become closer, Lily is witness to Eva's melancholy, and her anger towards her parents at being treated as a side note to their artistic lifestyle. Eva is a fascinating character, not only within the text, but to readers as well. She is the more daring of the two girls, and has the kind of character that tends towards chaos and self-destruction. She has periods of effervescence juxtaposed with periods of withdrawal. As time passes, she pulls away even from Lily, keeping her

¹ <http://www.fancygoods.com.au/booksandpublishing/2014/05/14/artistic-licence-emily-bitto-on-the-strays/>

relationship with Jerome a secret, and only sharing her plan to run away with him at the last minute. Ultimately, Eva is a survivor, and at the end of the novel she emerges scarred but proud.

The character who slips through the cracks, the one who skims just beneath the notice both of the reader and of her family, is Heloise. Heloise is the youngest Trentham. She is neglected not only by her parents, but also by her sisters, who are dealing with their own adolescence and don't have the patience to explain themselves to her. Heloise's quiet character is punctuated with unexplained outbursts of extreme anger and aggression. In hindsight, these become precursors to her obsession with Jerome and even to her death, but at the time she is not only ignored by her family, but also goes under the radar of us as readers too.

The Strays is a complex novel with a very fitting title. Each character is a stray of sorts, collected together in the Trenthams' household, where creative and adolescent chaos plague them all. It is classically tragic and rich in historical inspiration, but speaks with a contemporary voice. The liberated attitudes with which the Trenthams and their circle approach their lives, in particular their sexual attitudes, will deter some from selecting it for study. However there is much to be gained through the study of this novel, in particular looking at the friendships between girls and women, and the historical role of women in the modernist movement.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



EMILY BITTO has a Masters in literary studies and a PhD in creative writing from the University of Melbourne. Her debut novel, *The Strays*, was shortlisted for the 2015 Indie Prize, the UTS Glenda Adams Award for New Writing in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards and shortlisted for the Dobbie Award. *The Strays* won the 2015 Stella Prize.

Taken from the author's publisher
www.affirmpress.com.au

THEMES

Female friendship
 Female artists
 Modernism
 Victorian history
 Art history
 Coming of age
 Family

READING QUESTIONS

- ◆ Where is *The Strays* set? How does the setting reflect the personalities of the characters?
- ◆ How do the characters make use of the gardens at the Trenthams' house? What does the space mean to each of the people living there?
- ◆ In one interview, Bitto says that she didn't want the novel to read as 'heavily researched historical fiction'. What do you think she means by this? How do you think she achieves a contemporary voice despite the novel's historical setting?
- ◆ How is Eva first introduced into the narrative?
- ◆ Which of the Trenthams is introduced in the novel first? What does this tell you about what will happen later?
- ◆ In the prologue, Lily is a middle-aged woman. How does starting the story in the future shape your perspective as you start to read the rest of the story? What do you know? What questions are you already asking? What are your predictions for how the book might end?
- ◆ According to Evan, what is the role of art? How is it currently failing to achieve this?
- ◆ What do Helena and Evan hope to achieve by inviting other artists to live with them?
- ◆ Where is Evan situated in the Melbourne art scene?
- ◆ What is Jerome's relationship with Evan? What does Jerome take from him?
- ◆ How are Lily's and Eva's mothers different?
- ◆ How would you describe Helena? How does Lily describe her in the book? How do her daughters feel about her?

- ◆ What is expected of mothers? How does Helena not fit this image? Is she a bad mother?
- ◆ What impact does their parents' lifestyle have on each of the Trentham girls? Are they neglected or liberated?
- ◆ Does Lily make the right choice to publish her book at the end? Who is she responsible to? Should she consider the feelings of others?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. *The Strays* explores the impact childhood friendships can have throughout our lives. Think back to a friend you had when you were very young.
 - Are you still friends with that person?
 - Has the friendship changed? How?
 - How has your life changed because of them?
 - Think about the friendship you've chosen. How is the friendship between Eva and Lily similar to your friendship, and how is it different?
 - How does the friendship between Lily and Eva change each of them?
 - Is it a good friendship? Is it equal?
 - What are the differences between their friendship as adolescents and their relationship as adults?
 - What external influences shape their friendship? Think of an instance that you feel defines your friendship. Write this scene – either as a prose story, a script, or a letter. Try to capture the dynamic of your relationship.
 - Who is making the decisions?
 - What is the emotion in the scene?
 - How does the nature of the friendship affect the outcome of the interaction?
 - Where does the power lie? Imagine switching the power dynamic of the scene and then rewrite it. Does this change the outcome? Choose a scene in the book between Eva and Lily and switch their power dynamic, then rewrite it. How might things change?

- Look at the other friendships in the book and answer the following:
- Who are they between?
 - Who controls the friendship?
 - How do the characters behave in this friendship? Does it differ from the way they behave in other relationships we see them in? How?
 - How does the friendship between these characters affect the narrative of the book?

2. Modernism challenges the notion that art must realistically portray the world. As a historical research project, look up the history of modern art in Australia, and write a short biography of an Australian modernist artist. Include who they were, what they were famous for (style and technique as well as specific paintings), when they were famous, who their contemporaries were, and what they were considered to have added to the modernist movement. You may consider choosing one of those artists or poets associated with the early modernist movement, or perhaps even someone from the Heide Circle of artists. Following your biography, write a summary of their artistic ideals.

Write a similar biography for one of the characters from *The Strays*. Consider the same questions as above, but use references from the text as your background information. Discuss the differences between the ideals of the two artists and use this to comment on how Bitto has managed to capture the ideals of modern art in her fictional setting.

- How does writing about these historical moments from a fictional perspective add interest, or capture modern readers?
- Is the history less authentic if the book is fictional? Where does the author draw the line between fiction and history, and how does this impact the reader's interpretation of events represented in the book?

3. An interesting exercise for schools based in Melbourne* would be to visit the Heide gardens, and ask students to imagine parts of the novel in

* in other states this could be done in other outdoor settings, leading to a more general discussion about the way setting can influence a story.

the actual setting. Ask them to consider their own emotional responses to the setting and how this enhances their reading of the text.

FURTHER READING

On Emily Bitto and *The Strays*

Digital Writers' Festival 2015: Presenting the Stella Prize Longlist (Emily Bitto reading from *The Strays*)
22:32-26:08
<http://digitalwritersfestival.com/2015/event/stella-longlist/>

Emily Bitto's Stella Prize acceptance speech
<http://thestellaprize.com.au/2015/04/emily-bittos-stella-prize-acceptance-speech/>

The Stella Interview: Emily Bitto
<http://thestellaprize.com.au/2015/03/the-stella-interview-emily-bitto/>

Emily Bitto wins 2015 Stella Prize for her debut novel, *The Strays*: *The Guardian*
<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/21/emily-bitto-wins-2015-stella-prize-the-strays>

Emily Bitto Wins Stella Prize, Promises Part of Winnings to Wilderness Society: *New Matilda*
<https://newmatilda.com/2015/04/21/emily-bitto-wins-stella-prize-promises-part-winnings-wilderness-society>

Emily Bitto's debut novel wins the Stella Prize: Books and Arts Daily: Radio National
<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/booksandarts/emily-bitto27s-debut-novel-wins-the-stella-prize/6411110>

Interview: Artistic licence: Emily Bitto on *The Strays*: Fancy Goods
<http://www.fancygoods.com.au/booksandpublishing/2014/05/14/artistic-licence-emily-bitto-on-the-strays/>

Emily Bitto's debut effort proves a Stella performance: *The Australian*
<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/books/emily-bittos-debut-effort-proves-a-stella-performance/story-e6frg8nf-1227314242363>

Review by Madhvi Pankhania: *The Strays* by Emily Bitto - the fizz and the fall of bohemian living: *The Guardian*
<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/21/the-strays-by-emily-bitto-review-the-fizz-and-the-fall-of-bohemian-living>

Review by Donna Lu: Newtown Review of Books
<http://newtownreviewofbooks.com.au/2015/04/16/emily-bitto-the-strays-reviewed-by-donna-lu/>

Stella Prize 2015: the shortlisted authors on the stories behind their books: *The Guardian*
<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/17/stella-prize-2015-six-australian-authors-on-the-stories-behind-their-books>

On the Heide Story

BOOKS

Janine Burke, *The Heart Garden*, 2005, Random House Australia

Janine Burke, *Dear Sun: The Letters of Joy Hester and Sunday Reed*, 2001, Random House Australia

Janine Burke, *Australian Gothic: The Life of Albert Tucker*, 2003, Random House Australia

Lesley Harding & Kendrah Morgan, *Sunday's Garden: Growing Heide*, 2013, Melbourne University Press

Patrick McCaughey, *Bert & Ned: The Correspondence of Albert Tucker and Sidney Nolan*, 2006, Melbourne University Press

WEBSITES

Heide Making History
<http://www.heide.com.au/assets/files/Education/HeideEdResourceMakingHistory12.pdf>

The Heide Story
<http://www.heide.com.au/about/the-heide-story/>

Image of an artist as a doomed man: *The Age*
<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/03/18/1015909923274.html>

On Modernism

What is Modern Art? MoMA Learning
https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/themes/what-is-modern-art

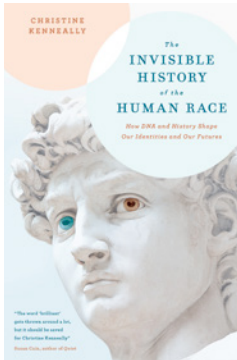
Modernism in Australia
<http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/modernism>

Sidney Nolan
<http://nga.gov.au/COLLECTIONS/AUSTRALIA/GALLERY.cfm?DisplayGal=13>

The Invisible History of the Human Race: How DNA and History Shape Our Identities and Our Futures

by Christine Kenneally

BLACK INC.



'... the way we see the world and act in it – whether the end result is gender inequality or trusting strangers – is significantly shaped by internal beliefs and norms that have been passed down in families and small communities. It seems that these norms are even taken with an individual when he moves to another country. But how might history have such a powerful impact on families, even when they have moved away from the place where that history, whatever it was, took place?'

Christine Kenneally, *The Invisible History of the Human Race*

INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXT

This complex and fascinating book attempts to make sense of human history and the way it shapes our individual thoughts, attitudes and behaviours.

Christine Kenneally is the author of two books, and has won awards for her journalism in Australia and internationally. *The Invisible History of the Human Race* reaches from the present back into deep history, charting traits inherited via community, family and genetics.

The book is divided into three parts – 'Ideas about What Is Passed Down Are Passed Down', 'What Is Passed Down' and 'How What Is Passed Down Shapes Bodies and Minds'. The author has covered a lot of ground (literally), travelling between countries to track down experts and follow ideas through to their conclusion. She faithfully recounts personal stories, examines scientific theories, and charts the various attempts that have been made to discover and record our genetic lineage. She speaks with great authority, and creates the impression that not a single stone has been left unturned in her research for the book.

In her introduction, Kenneally discusses the questions that often drive people towards researching their personal history. *Where do I come from? Where do I go from here? What is my legacy?* These same questions resonate throughout the book, as readers are asked

to trace their own unique combinations of character traits and DNA back through time to their origins.

The Invisible History of the Human Race covers many topics, each pushing the boundaries of where and how we define ourselves. Kenneally constantly reinforces the legitimacy of personal stories, giving examples of the ways that each individual story can be used to shape, highlight and reflect on the bigger picture of human history. This book explores not only the ways our inherited identity can empower individuals, but also the ways it has been used against them. Kenneally covers some of the most significant events in history – the Roman Invasion of Britain, the Mongol Empire, slavery in the United States, the Holocaust – and sharpens our view of them by showing how they constitute part of our genetic makeup.

Each of the topics covered in the book would be fascinating enough in isolation, but the connections Kenneally draws between them make them even more so. She discusses the ways we record and engage with our history, and the rise of popular online tools such as Ancestry.com. These are then considered in relation to written histories, oral histories and now genetic histories. These strands of our past are blended together seamlessly.

Personal history, world history, science and technology walk hand in hand through this book. Because of the broad scope of the content, there are

innumerable ways to engage with the text. From a school perspective, the text could be studied as a whole, or as distinct chapters. It could be studied for subjects including history, gender studies, English, social studies and geography. A number of possible discussions could stem from each of the topics covered, and there are countless links to contemporary issues and material that could enhance these discussions. These notes therefore are predominantly open-ended reading questions, designed to prompt classroom study, essays or personal research projects. There are several activities at the end, however teachers are encouraged to use this book and these notes to supplement a variety of classroom topics.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



CHRISTINE KENNEALLY is an award-winning journalist and author who has written for *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *Slate*, *Time*, *New Scientist*, *The Monthly*, and other publications. She is the author of *The Invisible History of the Human Race: How DNA and History Shape Our Identities and Our Futures* and *The First Word: The Search for the Origins of Language*.

Before becoming a reporter, she received a PhD in linguistics from Cambridge University and a BA (Hons) in English and Linguistics from Melbourne University. She was born and raised in Melbourne, Australia, and has lived in England, Iowa and Brooklyn. She is currently a contributing editor for BuzzFeed News.

Taken from the author's website
www.christinekenneally.com

THEMES

Genealogy
Personal history
World history
DNA
Ethics
Identity
Human behaviour
Family

READING QUESTIONS

- ◆ What is the appeal of genealogy?
- ◆ 'If there are no records, there is no power.' (Chapter 2) What do you think the author means by this? How are records used to wield power, or to take it away? How might a loss of records mean a loss of power?
- ◆ What did Ralph Waldo Emerson mean when he said 'Our age is retrospective'? (Chapter 2) Is this a negative thing?
- ◆ Why do you think so many people are fascinated by their family histories?
- ◆ What evidence is needed to prove family connections? How has evidence of family history been used against people?
- ◆ How is genealogy used against people with lower class status? How does this relate back to the earlier question about power?
- ◆ Where did people get the idea that some groups of people were inherently superior to others? How did this form the basis for the Nazi party?
- ◆ What are the three ideas (Chapter 3) that radically changed the way people thought about generations and genealogy?
- ◆ Who was the first person to study heredity in twins?
- ◆ Who coined the phrase 'nature and nurture'?
- ◆ What is eugenics? What are the ethical issues surrounding eugenics and sterilisation?
- ◆ How were Grant's (Chapter 3) ideas interpreted by Hitler? How did he manipulate existing social attitudes against the Jews?
- ◆ When has forced sterilisation occurred in Australia? What are the human rights issues associated with this?
- ◆ How does Ottokar Lorenz (Chapter 4) describe the functions of genealogy?
- ◆ What is antigenealogy? How are genealogy and antigenealogy used to persecute people?
- ◆ How is genealogy significant for people who have been adopted? What rights do they have to access

- birth records, and how do these differ from the rights of people who are raised by their biological parents?
- ◆ What is your ‘web of information’ (Chapter 5)? How does this web influence your identity? How would you feel if it was taken from you?
 - ◆ Who has the rights to your history? To your DNA?
 - ◆ ‘Totalitarian power thrives when it alienates people from basic information about themselves.’ (Chapter 5) What do you think this statement means? Is it accurate? Who might be affected by this?
 - ◆ How does information go missing?
 - ◆ Who might have ‘a vested interest in forgetting’? (Chapter 5)
 - ◆ Is tracking our personal history disrespectful to the secrets of our ancestors?
 - ◆ How has the internet changed the way we engage with the past? What are the possible implications of this in the future?
 - ◆ What does Marshall Duke (Chapter 6) call the ‘intergenerational self’? What is it associated with and why?
 - ◆ How can we preserve data? What happens if we lose it?
 - ◆ What is the information that gives context for data? How do we preserve that?
 - ◆ What are the ethical issues associated with a resource like Ancestry.com?
 - ◆ What are the different ways that we pass down our histories?
 - ◆ What does genealogy tell us about our past? What could it tell us about our future?
 - ◆ How is our personal identity shaped by what we know about our family history?
 - ◆ What ‘ideas and feelings’ are communicated down to us through our family? How does this shape our attitudes?
 - ◆ In Chapter 7, how do Nunn and Wantchekon define culture?
 - ◆ What are the genealogical effects of the slave trade on later generations?
 - ◆ What factors can influence the likelihood of an idea or feeling being passed down through generations?
 - ◆ What do the terms ‘horizontal transmission’ and ‘vertical transmission’ mean?
 - ◆ What are the problems with candidate gene study?
 - ◆ What can the living body tell us about deep history?
 - ◆ What significant historical discoveries were made through the study of human genomes in Britain?
 - ◆ How can genealogy help explain social history?
 - ◆ What influence did the Mongol Empire have on DNA?
 - ◆ Apart from fame, what might be noteworthy about being descended from someone historically significant?
 - ◆ In Chapter 10 what does Greenspan say is the difference between telling stories and telling the truth?
 - ◆ What are the differences between a genetic family tree and a genealogical family tree?
 - ◆ In what way did Woodward and Sorensen hope that their DNA project would change the way people treat each other?
 - ◆ According to Michele Cooley-Quille (Chapter 11), why is having a strong sense of family so important? Do you agree with this? Why/why not?
 - ◆ What can happen to our sense of self when DNA is used to disprove something we consider part of our familial and personal identity? Support your answer with examples from the book.
 - ◆ What are the risks of delving into your personal history?
 - ◆ What impact does DNA have on our ideas of race? What are the positive and negative implications of this?

- ◆ How have Robert Lewontin's (Chapter 11) findings on DNA and race informed contemporary ideas about the existence of race?
- ◆ How do different family members react to personal history? What conflicts can arise by tracing your past?
- ◆ How has genetics changed the way we look at our health? Is it always a positive thing, or could it be used in a negative way?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. In this article (<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/17/stella-prize-2015-six-australian-authors-on-the-stories-behind-their-books>) in the *Guardian*, Christine Kenneally talks about her approach to writing a book like this:

‘The writer had to embed themselves in other worlds and systems of knowledge, they had to labour to collect a mound of facts, and then they had to select and structure them, all so the reader would feel that they – the writer – had simply got out of the way of the story.’

The kind of writing used in this book is called ‘creative nonfiction’, which refers to writing that uses techniques normally found in fiction (plot, pace, character) to tell a story that is true. Watch the following YouTube video, outlining the structure of a creative nonfiction piece:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wlguuzwdq_Y

- How does Kenneally ‘frame’ her writing?
 - What other elements from Gutkind’s talk can you see in her piece?
 - Choose a moment from the book that resonates with you, and use it to inspire your own piece of creative nonfiction. You could choose an element that requires further research, or use the material in the book as a way into telling the story of one of your own experiences.
2. Ancestry.com has a free 14-day trial period. Use this (or use pen and paper if you’d prefer) to draw up your own family tree. Put as much information in as you can, and try to find records where possible. Interview your parents and grandparents and try to go back as far as you can.

- Where do you get stuck? Why?
- What have you found that is interesting or surprising about your family?
- Have you been able to see aspects of yourself in any of the family members you discovered in your research?

FURTHER READING

On Christine Kenneally and *The Invisible History of the Human Race*

Digital Writers’ Festival 2015: Presenting the Stella Prize Longlist (Christine reading from *The Invisible History of the Human Race*) 10:40-16:03

<http://digitalwritersfestival.com/2015/event/stella-longlist/>

Christine Kenneally’s *The Invisible History of the Human Race*: Review by David Dobbs: *The New York Times*

http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/19/books/review/christine-kenneallys-invisible-history-of-the-human-race.html?_r=0

Christine Kenneally talks about *The Invisible History of the Human Race*: Black Inc. (VIDEO)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDCGobfFlqQ>

The Invisible History of the Human Race: Christine Kenneally: *Huffington Post*

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/christine-kenneally/genealogy-eugenics_b_6367344.html

The Invisible History of the Human Race: Review by Simon Caterson: *The Monthly*

<http://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2014/december/1417352400/simon-caterson/invisible-history-human-race-christine-kenneally>

The Stella Interview: Christine Kenneally

<http://thestellaprize.com.au/2015/03/the-stella-interview-christine-kenneally/>

Stella Prize 2015: the shortlisted authors on the stories behind their books: *The Guardian*

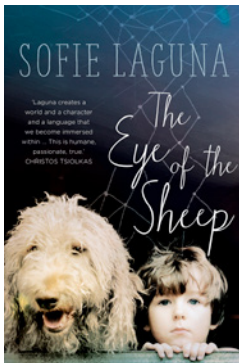
<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/17/stella-prize-2015-six-australian-authors-on-the-stories-behind-their-books>

On creative nonfiction

<https://www.creativenonfiction.org>

The Eye of the Sheep by Sofie Laguna

ALLEN & UNWIN



'I closed my eyes and saw my dad tearing through the surf towards me, getting to me as fast as he could. Mum wasn't there, only Dad. There was room for him. In Nineteen Emu Mum took up all the room. Her streams of love flooded the house; that's why Dad spent so much time in the shed. It was dry land in there.'

Sofie Laguna *The Eye of the Sheep*

INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXT

The Eye of the Sheep is Sofie Laguna's second book for adults. Her first, *One Foot Wrong*, was longlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary Award and shortlisted for the Prime Minister's Literary Award for fiction in 2009.

Jimmy Flick is unusual. Described as both 'too fast' and 'too slow', he sees the world differently. *The Eye of the Sheep* is narrated entirely in Jimmy's voice, immersing the reader completely in his thoughts and allowing us to see the world as he does. The book follows Jimmy as he ages from six to eleven, and is an intimate portrait of a family pushed to their absolute limits.

In this book, Laguna delicately explores the tensions that make this family of four vulnerable: family violence, poverty and Jimmy's intellectual disability all play a part. Family violence is a major theme, but there is nothing clichéd or typical in the nuanced way Laguna writes about this fraught topic. Jimmy's mother, Paula, is both physically and metaphorically large. She is a victim, but also a woman who is passionate about her husband and family. She is reckless with her own health, but dotes on her sons, particularly Jimmy. She stands between her husband, Gavin, and Jimmy, both as a protector and as a barrier in their relationship. Gavin too is more than just an abusive husband. Laguna wants us to love him – and, despite ourselves, we do. She paints him as a man desperate for redemption, for whom violence is the language of men. Gavin is blocked by his own failures and frustrations and, at times, by Paula. In the moments where he is alone with Jimmy he becomes

a different man, one who has the capacity to be a good father. It can be difficult to read about these characters, because from the outset it is clear there is no easy way for them all to have a happy ending.

Jimmy is the reader's conduit into the Flick family's story, and it is he that the reader becomes most invested in. He is a boy with surprising insight, who we might suspect lies somewhere on the autism spectrum, although this is never specified. Jimmy finds comfort in reading his 'manuals' – the instructions for pieces of equipment throughout the house: the washing machine, the television and so on. Perhaps this is because he hopes to make sense of the things he doesn't understand by likening them to things that he does. As a narrator, Jimmy makes perfect sense, describing the world around him with dizzying clarity. As a child, though, Jimmy lacks the ability to articulate himself to those who share his fictional narrative. In the second part of the book, when Paula dies and Gavin is absent, Jimmy becomes almost mute, leaving him even more vulnerable in a world of adults who lack the patience or capacity to understand him.

Sofie Laguna is an extraordinary storyteller, as she demonstrates in both of her novels. Her unique strength lies in creating characters with voices that sing from the page. She is an author who refuses to shy away from (and is perhaps drawn to) the darkness in people, but this is tempered by her ability to articulate other, lighter parts of their characters as well. Although the themes in this book (particularly family violence) might be considered challenging by some school groups, there is great potential for

students to use this text as a way into discussions about issues with real-world relevance in the safe space of the classroom. The activities below include a significant section on understanding characters, as these are key to engaging with this extraordinary text.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



SOFIE LAGUNA originally studied to be a lawyer at the University of New South Wales, but after deciding law was not for her, she moved to Melbourne to train as an actor. Sofie worked for a number of years as an actor at the same time as completing a Diploma in Professional Writing and Editing at RMIT. Sofie is now an author and playwright writing for both adults and children.

Her many books for young people have been named Honour Books and Notable Books in the Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year Awards and have been shortlisted in the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards. She has been published in the US and the UK, and in translation throughout Europe and Asia.

Her picture book, *On Our Way to the Beach*, was included in the White Raven 2005 annual selection of outstanding international children's books by the International Youth Library (Associated Project of UNESCO).

In 2008 Sofie released her first novel for adults, *One Foot Wrong*, to international acclaim. It was shortlisted for the Prime Minister's Literary Awards and longlisted for the Miles Franklin Award. Screen rights for the book have been optioned, and Sofie has recently completed the screenplay.

In 2011, Sofie moved back to writing for children with the highly popular and best-selling *Our Australian Girl: Meet Grace* series, published by Penguin Books. She has recently written the equivalent for boys, *Do You Dare: Fighting Bones*.

In 2014, Sofie published her second novel for adults, *The Eye of the Sheep*, which was shortlisted for the

Stella Prize and was the winner of the Miles Franklin Literary Award.

Sofie continues to write for a wide readership, from picture books for very young children, to series for older readers, to novels for adults. She lives in Melbourne with her partner and their two young sons.

Taken from the author's website
<http://sofielaguna.com>

THEMES

Family
Family violence
Privilege
Class
Redemption
Identity

READING QUESTIONS

- ◆ What are your first indications as a reader that Jimmy is different?
- ◆ What is Jimmy's relationship with Robby?
- ◆ Why doesn't Jimmy want to go to school?
- ◆ How does the author show that there is violence in Jimmy's family without him saying it explicitly?
- ◆ Why doesn't Paula leave Gav?
- ◆ Are Jimmy and Robby in danger?
- ◆ Who is Merle? What is the relevance of Merle and the Cutty Sark?
- ◆ What is different when Gavin and Jimmy go away together? How does this shift your perspective about the characters?
- ◆ How does Jimmy feel about Ned? How does this help him?
- ◆ How is Gavin's own history reflected in his actions towards his family?
- ◆ What relationships are possible between the men in this story? What prevents them from achieving this?
- ◆ How do each of the characters find redemption?

- ◆ How are adults shown as the outsiders in the book?
- ◆ How do the characters fail themselves and each other?
- ◆ Who is responsible for Paula's death?
- ◆ What is the impact of Paula's death on Jimmy?
- ◆ How does Gavin view his position in the family?
- ◆ Who fails Jimmy, and how do they fail him? Consider both specific characters in the book, as well as institutions, or people you might expect to help him in reality.
- ◆ Besides Jimmy, who are the victims in this novel? Why? Do they overcome their situations, and if so how?
- ◆ Why does Jimmy end up with a foster family?
- ◆ Who becomes Jimmy's unlikely ally once he is living with this family?
- ◆ Why does his foster mother give up?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. *The Eye of the Sheep* is driven by its characters. As you read, keep a character journal for the following characters: Gavin, Robby, Jimmy and Paula. In it, write at least three examples from the text that answer the following:

- ◆ How is the character described by others?
- ◆ How does the character describe themselves?
- ◆ How do they describe their relationships with each of the other characters?
- ◆ What factors influence their decisions or actions?
- ◆ Who else is involved in the outcome of their story?
- ◆ Who are they responsible to and why?
- ◆ How is the character disadvantaged?

Based on your observations, write detailed responses to the following. Back each of your answers up with examples from the text.

- ◆ Is Gavin capable of being a good father?

- ◆ How does the author use descriptions of each character's physicality to mirror their emotional state?
- ◆ How does the way each character views his or herself differ from the way others view them? Give examples.
- ◆ What does Jimmy want for each of his parents? What does he want for himself?
- ◆ What does Robby's absence do to each of the characters?
- ◆ How are Gavin and Jimmy different when they are with Paula, when they are alone, and when they are with each other?
- ◆ In what ways do Jimmy and Robby fulfil Paula's needs?

Drawing both on your character journals, and your responses above, choose one of Jimmy, Gavin or Paula and write a letter from them to someone else. It can be to any other character mentioned in the book, no matter how minor, but you need to consider why they would write a letter to this person, what it would be about, how their voice would change, and the things they would discuss.

2. In her article 'Mayhem and Mercy on the Margins' (see FURTHER READING) Louise Swinn praises Laguna for 'the way her characters are the sum of all of the parts that make them – not just the one or two elements that are most notable: the alcoholic, the browbeaten wife, the wacky kid. These characters are multidimensional. It is much easier to dismiss an alcoholic than it is to understand why they act the way they do, or to notice the other things about them, the good that they do. It is quite a feat to write characters with such nuance.'

- ◆ How does Laguna make each of her characters multidimensional?
- ◆ What are the most notable or unusual elements of each character?

3. Watch Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED Talk 'The Danger of a Single Story' (http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en)

- ◆ What does Adichie mean by a ‘single story’?
 - ◆ How is the single story relevant to the way we might view Gavin, Paula or Jimmy?
 - ◆ What might their single stories be? How would this affect the way we see them?
 - ◆ What techniques does the author use to show us that these characters are more than their single story?
 - ◆ In what way does creating multidimensional characters open up more options for them? Choose one of the characters (Gavin, Paula or Jimmy) and decide on a ‘single story’ narrative for them. What would this mean for their outcome? Imagine what might happen if they were limited in this way and write an ending for your character. Compare this to Laguna’s outcome for each of the characters. How is it different? Is it more hopeful? Less? What does it give the character that your single story ending does not?
4. In her review (see FURTHER READING), Anna Spargo-Ryan describes *The Eye of the Sheep* as ‘part graceful and considered storytelling, but also brutal social realness’ and says that, for Jimmy, Laguna has almost created a brand new language. In the Radio National interview (see FURTHER READING), the interviewer quotes David Malouf as saying that writing from the voice of a child is a great gift for a writer because you’re ‘perched between innocence and experience’. Sofie herself says that Jimmy’s voice give her an opportunity to be completely honest about how he’s feeling.
- ◆ How does Jimmy use language differently?
 - ◆ How does this shape the way he views the world and articulates his experiences?
 - ◆ Do you agree that Jimmy’s voice gives a more honest portrait of his feelings than if the book was narrated by someone else? Why? How would it change if the story was told by, say, Gavin or Paula?
 - ◆ In what way does Sofie Laguna use language differently from other authors you’ve read? How does this allow her to get closer to her characters?

- ◆ What problems do you think writing in the voice of Jimmy might have presented? In what ways would it have been liberating for the author?
- ◆ Write a short piece (either fictional or based on a memory) in the voice of a child narrator. In class, reflect on the process of writing your piece, and discuss the challenges and freedoms of writing in the voice of a younger person.

FURTHER READING

On Sofie Laguna and *The Eye of the Sheep*

Sofie Laguna’s *The Eye of the Sheep*: Books and Arts Daily: Radio National

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/booksandarts/sofie-laguna/5755318>

Digital Writers’ Festival 2015: Presenting the Stella Prize Longlist (Sofie reading from *The Eye of the Sheep*) 3:28–10:05

<http://digitalwritersfestival.com/2015/event/stella-longlist/>

‘Mayhem and Mercy on the Margins’ by Louise Swinn: *The Australian*

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/mayhem-and-mercy-on-the-margins/story-fn9n8gph-1226998768197>

Review by Anna Spargo-Ryan

<http://blog.annaspargoryan.com/2014/08/book-review-the-eye-of-the-sheep/>

Review by Ruth Starke: *Transnational Literature*

http://dspace.flinders.edu.au/jspui/bitstream/2328/35085/1/Starke_Eye.pdf

The Stella Interview: Sofie Laguna

<http://thestellaprize.com.au/2015/04/the-stella-interview-sofie-laguna/>

‘Stella Prize 2015: the shortlisted authors on the stories behind their books’: *The Guardian*

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/17/stella-prize-2015-six-australian-authors-on-the-stories-behind-their-books>

On Family Violence in Australia

<http://au.reachout.com/what-is-domestic-violence>

<http://dvcs.org.au>

On family violence and dealing with challenging themes in YA literature

'Developing a love of reading: why young adult literature is important'

<http://archive.alia.org.au/publishing/orana/39.1/owen.html>

'Family Violence: A Recurring Theme in YA'

<http://www.yalsa.ala.org/thehub/2012/07/17/family-violence-a-recurring-theme-in-ya/>

The Golden Age by Joan London

RANDOM HOUSE



'Small things give you happiness. He'd learnt that, above all else. In the labour camp, a smoke, a starry night, a thicker piece of bread could make them briefly happy as children. Was all happiness just a memory of childhood?'

Joan London, *The Golden Age*

INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXT

The Golden Age is a book about war, about loss, about letting go, about illness, about poetry. It is a book about love. These themes circle the book's two young protagonists, Elsa and Frank, who meet in the polio ward of the Golden Age juvenile convalescent hospital (an historically accurate setting) and, to put it simply, fall in love.

Frank is the son of Hungarian refugees, Meyer and Ida. The family emigrated from Hungary to Australia out of desperation, rather than by choice. They have left behind their ruined country, but Ida has not left her suffering there. A talented pianist, she refuses to play the instrument that once brought her joy, her silence a penance. When life deals Ida another cruel blow, and Frank contracts polio, she is almost unsurprised. She holds her melancholy close, and it keeps her separate from her husband and son.

Meyer is deeply intuitive. He has adapted more gracefully to their new life in Perth, though he still recognises that he is an outsider and, at times, longs for the comforts of his home country. Meyer is a man who believes in love. He has had mistresses, and there is a spark between him and Nurse Olive from the *Golden Age*, but he also has a deep, unwavering love for his wife. Meyer's life is characterised by the continuity of hope, and by small gleaming moments of joy.

The Golden Age is an ensemble piece, enacted with cinematic grace. Although Frank and Elsa are at the core of the narrative, this story is just as much about the other characters inhabiting the space. Whole

chapters are devoted to secondary characters such as Nurse Olive; Elsa's mother, Margaret; and other children at the Golden Age, including Albert Sutton. This gives depth to their appearances in Frank's and Elsa's lives, but perhaps more importantly it also gives depth to their own. None of London's characters exist merely to serve the plot. They are each fully developed, with hopes and dreams and failings. A good example of this are Elsa's and Frank's parents: Margaret and Jack, and Meyer and Ida. Their desires and relationships are explored far beyond their roles as parents, and they are more than merely representations of stereotypes.

Frank and Elsa are often oblivious to the changing tensions of the relationships outside their shared world. This is as it should be, as children's awareness of adults tends to be filtered solely through their own perspectives. Frank, Ida and Meyer were separated during the war, and Frank's memories of this time enhance his feelings of isolation and otherness. During the course of the book, he meets only two people whom he feels truly understand him: Sullivan, a once-promising rower who Frank stumbles across in his early explorations of the adult wing of the polio hospital; and Elsa, who he meets at the Golden Age and falls instantly in love with.

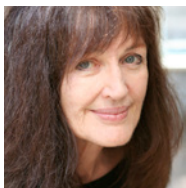
Frank is intrigued by Sullivan. Although there are only a few years between them, Sullivan comes across as far wiser and worldlier, and acts as a mentor of sorts. Frank visits Sullivan every day, and as the older boy lies inert inside an Iron Lung, his body crippled by polio, Sullivan teaches Frank about poetry. It is here that Frank discovers his vocation as a poet.

Sullivan teaches him about the meanings behind poems, explains that they need not necessarily rhyme, and on his deathbed charges Frank with the task of completing Sullivan's final, unfinished poem, 'On My Last Day on Earth'.

Sullivan's premature death makes an everlasting mark on his young friend, but it is Elsa who finally gives Frank something to write about. He feels an affinity with her from the moment he sees her. Elsa is beautiful, possesses a silent wisdom, and is the same age as Frank. Their relationship is subtle but intense, as they find inspiration in each other and become increasingly intertwined. Their relationship signifies their transition from child to adult, and when they are found in bed together, it is seen as a sign that the Golden Age is no longer the appropriate place for them. When they are separated, Frank and Elsa wilt, each lacking the energy to live without the other.

The Golden Age spans many years and lives. It is a testament to the author's skill that she has achieved so much, while maintaining such a light touch. Students will find this book easy to engage with. The narrative around the nature of love is universal, and there is historical relevance to students interested in Australia's recent history. There are a number of approaches that could be taken to studying this text based on the themes discussed above, and these are covered further in the notes below.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



JOAN LONDON is the author of two prize-winning collections of stories, *Sister Ships*, which won the Age Book of the Year in 1986, and *Letter to Constantine*, which won the Steele Rudd Award in 1994 and the West Australian Premier's Award for Fiction. These stories have been published in one volume as *The New Dark Age*. Her first novel, *Gilgamesh*, was published in 2001, won the Age Book of the Year for Fiction in 2002 and was longlisted for the Orange Prize and the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. Her second novel, *The Good Parents*, was published in 2008 and won the 2009 Christina Stead Prize for Fiction at the NSW Premier's Literary Awards. Joan's books have all been published internationally to critical acclaim.

The Golden Age is her third novel. It was shortlisted for the 2015 Stella Prize and the 2015 Miles Franklin Literary Award.

THEMES

Family
War
Polio
Love
Parenting
Isolation
Poetry

READING QUESTIONS

- ◆ In an interview, Joan London mentions being inspired by *The Diary of Anne Frank*, because it was an 'awakening' for her to read about the tragic experience of a '13-year-old, an amazing writer, and a brilliant girl'. In some ways, London's own character Frank is similar to Anne Frank – he too is a child beset by the horrors of his time, drawn to writing, whose brilliance is infectious.
 - What changes for the reader when historical horrors are explored through the perspective of children, rather than adults?
 - Can you identify with Frank because of his age? How does this help you understand the parts of his story that are unfamiliar?
- ◆ What draws Frank to Sullivan?
- ◆ What does Sullivan teach Frank about poetry?
- ◆ What does Frank mean when he says that he's found his vocation?
- ◆ What is the difference between a vocation and a career?
- ◆ What are Sullivan's poems about?
- ◆ How does Sullivan's approach to poetry differ from that of Frank's parents and teachers?
- ◆ Shortly after he meets Frank, Sullivan says, 'Once you get used to your condition [...] your imagination becomes free again.' What does he mean by this?

- ◆ Considering the quote above, in what ways are each of the characters in the book both liberated, and trapped, by their conditions?
- ◆ How does Frank describe Elsa when he first sees her? Is this description accurate? How does she change over the course of the book?
- ◆ In what ways does polio shape the children at the Golden Age? How does it set them apart from the other people in their lives? How does it change the way they are treated?
- ◆ How does Ida feel about music? Why does she stop playing? Why is she nervous when she plays at the concert at the Golden Age?
- ◆ What does Sister Penny feel is lacking in her relationship with her own daughter?
- ◆ How is motherhood portrayed in the book? Think about characters who are biological mothers, as well as those who take on maternal roles. How do these depictions conform to or differ from common conceptions of mothers in the 1950s? How do their fears and dreams differ from those of their children? How are their lives shaped by their children in both positive and negative ways? How and why does the author show this?
- ◆ When was the polio vaccine introduced? When is the book set in relation to this?
- ◆ What happened in Hungary that forced Ida, Meyer and Frank to emigrate?
- ◆ How is their life in Australia different from their life in Hungary?
- ◆ How are attitudes to Meyer and Ida similar to attitudes towards current refugees or immigrants in Australia?
- ◆ Do Frank and Elsa find happiness at the end of the book?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Read 'On Keeping a Notebook' by Joan Didion:
<https://penusa.org/sites/default/files/didion.pdf>

In *The Golden Age*, Frank is given his first writer's notebook by Sullivan – a prescription pad that he writes his poetry in.

- ◆ What is the significance of this?
- ◆ What does Frank write in his notebook?

Carry your own notebook for a week. Use it to write down anything of interest to you. Don't worry about being clever, just write whatever catches your eye – the beauty of this kind of observation is that it will help you discover your unique voice. What do *you* notice that no one else does, what are *you* drawn to, what interests *you*?

You might not feel comfortable sharing your notebooks in class so, instead, at the end of the week, write a paragraph or so describing the experience. Has carrying a notebook changed the way you see or think about things? Do you feel inspired to write, or to create something from the notes you've written? Will you continue to use your notebook?

2. The book opens with Frank finding his vocation as a poet, and closes with him talking about this same topic. It is an important theme in the book, as Frank's discovery that poetry doesn't have to be bound by rhyme reflects the liberation he feels in being able to express his identity through language. Dorothy Porter is one of Australia's most famous poets, and her work speaks to the ideas that Sullivan shares with Frank – the idea that poetry doesn't have to rhyme, that it can focus on mundane topics and yet is still able to reveal a universal truth about the human experience. Using the following website, choose at least two of Dorothy Porter's poems to study.
<http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/porter-dorothy>

- ◆ What are the themes of the poems?
- ◆ How are they structured?
- ◆ Do they speak to your experiences? Do you understand them?
- ◆ What objects or references does Porter use to ground the poems in reality?
- ◆ How does Porter use language to show emotion?

Using your analysis of Porter's poems, and drawing inspiration from Frank's and Sullivan's ideas about poetry, write your own poem in a contemporary style. Write about things that matter to you, using language that is meaningful to you. The poem should have structure, and use evocative language, but you should be at the heart of it. If your school has a blog, this would be a good place to display students' poems, or they could be turned into a zine and distributed throughout the school.

3. *The Golden Age* is very much a book about desire – about what each of the characters wants the most. Make a list of characters in the book.

- ◆ What do they want?
- ◆ Do they manage to achieve this?
- ◆ Does the object of their desire change from the beginning of the book to the end?
- ◆ Will getting what they want make each of them happy? Why? Why not?
- ◆ What is preventing them from getting what they want?
- ◆ What is it that makes them want this thing more than anything else?
- ◆ Try to answer these questions in relation to yourself. Does understanding the characters in this way make you relate to them better? How can you see yourself in them? In what ways are you different?
- ◆ How has the author explored the outcome of desire and the way it influences our actions and behaviour?

FURTHER READING

On Joan London and *The Golden Age*

An Interview with Joan London: *The Sydney Morning Herald*

<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/interview-joan-london-20140804-zza13.html>

Review by Geordie Williamson: *The Australian*: 'Joan London's *The Golden Age* is written in the poetic language of love'

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/joan-londons-the-golden-age-is-written-in-the-poetic-language-of-love/story-fn9n8gph-1227023111291>

Review by Tegan Bennett Daylight: *Sydney Review of Books*: 'Fully Present, Utterly Connected'

<http://www.sydneyreviewofbooks.com/golden-age-joan-london/>

Review by Brenda Walker: *The Monthly*

<http://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2014/november/1414760400/brenda-walker/golden-age-joan-london>

Review by Jim Morgan: *The Daily Review*: *Crikey*

<http://dailyreview.crikey.com.au/the-golden-age-joan-london-book-review/12307>

Video Interview with Joan London: *The First Tuesday Book Club*

<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/firsttuesday/s4214221.htm>

The Stella Interview: Joan London

<http://thestellaprize.com.au/2015/04/the-stella-interview-joan-london/>

Stella Prize 2015: the shortlisted authors on the stories behind their books: *The Guardian*

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/17/stella-prize-2015-six-australian-authors-on-the-stories-behind-their-books>

Digital Writers' Festival 2015: Presenting the Stella Prize Longlist (Joan reading from *The Golden Age*) 26:38–31:20

<http://digitalwritersfestival.com/2015/event/stella-longlist/>

On contemporary poetry and free verse

Modern Australian Poetry

<http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/modern-austn-poetry>

Free Verse: The Hidden Rules of Free Verse Poetry

<http://writersrelief.com/blog/2009/06/free-verse-the-hidden-rules-of-free-verse-poetry/>

On the historical elements of the book

Australian Polio History

<http://www.polioaustralia.org.au/australian-polio-history/>

History of Polio

<http://www.bbc.com/news/health-17045202>

Polio Figures Show Upward Trend (historical reference to the Golden Age Convalescent Hospital)
<http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/47869359>

Hungary Declares War on Germany: On This Day in History
<http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/hungary-declares-war-on-germany>

Heat and Light by Ellen van Neerven

UQP



'Humans never see what's coming. Everything is seasonal, cyclical, dependent on environment and weather conditions. Would I love you in the winter, when my toes are frost? Would I love you in the summer, when the wind comes tumbling on me?'

Ellen van Neerven, *Heat and Light*

NOTES ON STUDYING THE TEXT

This collection of stories is best suited for study by upper secondary year levels, however 'Water', the novella found in the middle of the book, could easily be studied in isolation, and may be considered suitable for Year 10 students.

Alice Healy has written an excellent critical analysis of her challenges and successes as a non-Indigenous Australian teaching Indigenous texts. This is a valuable resource, available at the link below, for teachers studying *Heat and Light* or other Indigenous texts in the classroom.

http://www.academia.edu/1631032/Teaching_Indigenous_Literature_an_Ethics_of_Voice

Healy suggests that:

'Indigenous writing, whether creative or critical, provides an important critical point at which a shift in understanding national narratives, identity and history can be examined.'

She continues:

'Indigenous writing is necessarily political, whether the purpose is to speak back to past colonial injustices or to offer a more affirmative celebration of Indigenous people... It is political especially in its reception – in the offering of subjectivities that rupture normalised 'white' values.'

Healy also refers to an essay by Geraldine Balzer, referenced at the end of these notes, who writes on teaching Canadian Aboriginal literature and suggests that 'empowering students to make meaning using a

diversity of lenses enables them to see the text from several locations'.

It is worth reading Balzer's piece in full, as it offers valuable thoughts on teaching Indigenous authors, as well as a number of points that could be used to initiate discussions around the text in the classroom.

Indigenous author Ambelin Kwaymullina has also written an excellent piece on the need for diversity in Australian children's and young adult literature that could be used as background reading or for classroom discussion: <http://www.wheelercentre.com/notes/we-need-diverse-books-because-an-indigenous-perspective-on-diversity-in-young-adult-and-children-s-literature-in-australia>

INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXT

Heat and Light is an unusually structured collection of short stories by debut author Ellen van Neerven. One of the stories, 'S&J', was first published in Dave Eggers' prestigious literary magazine *McSweeney's Quarterly*, alongside Tara June Winch, Tony Birch and Melissa Lucashenko. After completing the full manuscript of *Heat and Light*, van Neerven entered, and won, the David Unaipon Award for an unpublished manuscript by an Indigenous author in the 2013 Queensland Literary Awards. The book was subsequently published by UQP, and was shortlisted for the 2015 Stella Prize.

The book is divided into three parts: 'Heat', 'Water' and 'Light'. It is structurally unusual in that the three parts are quite separate, and while 'Heat' and 'Light' are collections of short stories, 'Water' takes the form

of a single novella. From a publishing perspective, it is striking to see a book break the standard form in this way, but it offers wonderful opportunities to study the book in a variety of ways and at various levels of student ability.

Teachers wanting to look at the political and cultural context of Indigenous Australia might find it useful to conduct a close study of 'Water', comparing this speculative vision of Australia to current and historical events. Readers might consider the good intentions behind the creation of 'Australia 2', and discuss the resulting displacement of Indigenous Australians from their land, as well as the forced removal of the Indigenous inhabitants of Australia 2.

Others may wish to study the book at a technical level, looking at the techniques used in the short stories of the 'Heat' and 'Light' sections. The stories collected in 'Heat' revolve around the Kresinger family, and are narrated by various family members at different times in their personal history. The stories of 'Light', on the other hand, are linked thematically, looking at the desires of young people both to belong and to assert their own individuality. Ellen van Neerven has created a variety of characters with clear, individual identities and strong narrative voices. Students will learn a great deal about storytelling, narrative and the construction of character through the close study of these pieces.

There is also space to study the book as a whole, as there are recurring themes in each of the pieces. Comparing the descriptions of place in each of the pieces would be a good starting point for this. Or the book as a whole could be considered in terms of its place in the political and cultural history of Indigenous writing in Australia.

There are many good reasons to study this book, and as many different ways into the text. The following notes are broken up into four units: 'Heat', 'Water', 'Light' and Overall, to enable teachers to introduce the book into their classroom in any of the ways described above.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



ELLEN VAN NEERVEN is a Brisbane-based writer. She was the 2013 winner of the David Unaipon Award. Her first book, *Heat and Light* (UQP) was released in 2014.

Divided into three sections, it is inspired by the intersection of familial history, location and identity.

Ellen's writing has appeared widely in publications such as *McSweeney's*, *Review of Australian Fiction*, *The Lifted Brow*, *Meanjin*, *Ora Nui* and *Mascara Literary Review*.

Ellen works at the State Library of Queensland as a part of the black&write! Indigenous writing and editing project, which aims to support and promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers. Ellen is the editor of the digital collection *Writing Black: New Indigenous Writing from Australia*.

Taken from the author's website:

www.ellenvanneervencurrie.wordpress.com

OVERALL THEMES OF HEAT AND LIGHT

Prejudice
Displacement
Cultural identification
Family
Australian landscape
Sexuality
Belonging
Identity

READING QUESTIONS

- ◆ What is the significance of each of the book's subheadings: 'Heat', 'Water' and 'Light'? Consider this question both before you read the book and after. How do your responses change?
- ◆ Ellen van Neerven has said in an interview that she wants readers to have a 'fictional experience'¹. What do you think she means by this? Has she succeeded?

¹ <http://ifoa.org/2014/by-foa-authors/five-questions-ellen-van-neerven>

'HEAT'**SYNOPSIS**

The author describes this section as 'a deconstructed family tree'². The story is passed from family member to family member, a technique that includes different characters' voices across several generations. 'Heat' follows the bloodline of the Kresinger family. The oldest character in the collection, and in many ways the point from which the rest of the family spreads out, is Pearl Kresinger. She is the eponymous subject of 'Pearl', the first story in the collection. We learn about her through the descriptions others give of her to her granddaughter, Amy. Pearl is chaos, and she is described as having an affinity with the wind, giving her qualities that are mythical and destructive.

'I heard about the freak storm in the early fifties, Pearl Kresinger cheating death for the second time. The wind ripped the Kresinger tent up, into a tree. The others ran for shelter and Pearl stood there and let it lift her, she went into the electricity wires and they curled into each other like lovers as she was jolted. Her brother moved to her lifeless body and she touched him, and he took her place.'

As Amy learns about her grandmother from a local woman, she recognises in her own character the same qualities that set Pearl apart, that drew her to destruction, that kept her spinning, wild. But discovering this part of her history also cuts her off from the truth as it has been told to her so far.

In 'Pearl', Amy and Pearl reflect each other across generations. They are introduced to readers simultaneously, as young women feeling disconnected, possessed by reckless energy. As we are drawn further into the rest of the stories in 'Heat', we see them again, at different times, revealed to us as they appear to other members of their family: lover, daughter, mother, cousin. Readers are presented with characters who are multifaceted and richly flawed.

THEMES

Family
Sexuality
Power

2 <http://ifoa.org/2014/by-foa-authors/five-questions-ellen-van-neerven>

Identity
Country

READING QUESTIONS

- ◆ How are the characters of Amy and Pearl similar? How are they different?
- ◆ What kind of language does the author use to describe Pearl? What does this tell you about her character?
- ◆ What is Pearl's relationship with Marie? What is Amy's relationship with Marie?
- ◆ How is Marie described differently from Pearl?
- ◆ How is motherhood portrayed in these stories? How is it similar or different from your own thoughts and understandings about motherhood?
- ◆ Who is the narrator in each story? How does this affect our understanding of the characters?
- ◆ Where are each of the stories set in relation to the others, both in time and in space?
- ◆ How does this affect how the characters position themselves in the world?
- ◆ How is sexuality used by and against each of the characters?
- ◆ How would you describe the Kresinger family?
- ◆ In what ways do each of the Kresingers belong? In what ways are they set apart from others?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. One of the themes of 'Heat' is the way we interpret similar events differently depending on our position in our family. Think of an event that involved you and at least two other members of your family. Write down your memory of this event, including as many details as possible. When you have done this, have a conversation with the other family members who were there. Let them tell you their memories of the same event. How do they differ from yours? If you view the event from their perspective, how does it make you think differently about your own actions?
2. Another take on this is to look at the different ways people in our families view each other. Write

a short description of someone from your family. As above, choose at least two other family members and interview them. Ask them for their memories of their interactions with the family member you have chosen. Ask them to choose three words to describe this person. How are their descriptions different from yours? How does this change the way you see your family?

3. Based on one of the two above activities, and drawing inspiration from the stories in ‘Heat’, write your own short story. Think carefully about who is telling the story and who the story is about. Try to recreate your characters as fully as possible, using things you’ve noticed about them and things other people have noticed, as well as exploring their position in your family and their relationships with other family members.

4. Choose two of the main characters from ‘Heat’ and complete the following activities and questions.

- How is this character described by other members of the Kresinger family? Give two examples.
- How is this character described by someone outside of the Kresinger family? Give one example.
- How does this character view themselves? Give two examples.
- Find three separate words used to describe your chosen character.
- As you’re reading ‘Heat’, keep a character journal for each of your chosen characters. Note which stories they appear in, how old they are in each, who is telling the story, how they behave, how they have changed from other stories. When you have finished this section of the book, write a short paragraph about each of your two characters, describing their journey and how they come to be understood by others, and how they understand themselves.

5. An interesting comparison for this portion of the text would be Christos Tsiolkas’ *The Slap* (either the book or the ABC miniseries adaptation). Like *Heat and Light*, *The Slap* also deals with family relationships and looks at the way people and events are viewed differently by different characters.

Students could consider the similarities and differences between these two texts from a number of perspectives: writing style, the cultural background of the authors and characters, the gender of the author or narrator, and the way this appears in each of the works.

‘WATER’

SYNOPSIS

Although it shares some common themes, ‘Water’ sits quite separate from the ‘Heat’ and ‘Light’ sections of the book. Unlike the other two sections, this is a single novella, rather than a collection of short stories, and it is set in the future, whereas the rest of the book sits fairly well in the present or the not-too-distant past.

‘Water’ follows Kaden, a young Aboriginal woman who has taken on a position with a company who are responsible for the development of Australia 2. The new Australia is a project that has been initiated by President Tanya Sparkle, who is determined to make up for what the Aboriginal people have lost by offering them a purpose-built second country formed from the islands off southern Moreton Bay.

There is a sharp wit to this piece, used to draw out real political issues and the problems associated with blanket understandings or simplistic assumptions about collective groups of people. President Sparkle describes herself as ‘an optimist’ who believes that ‘one day Aboriginal people will get back what they lost and more’. Her unquestioning optimism blinds her to problems with identity during the application process, the disconnect to culture experienced by Aboriginal youths, and the issue of the land rights held by the native inhabitants of the islands being used to create Australia 2 – a breed of plantpeople, considered non-human and therefore not worthy of consideration.

Kaden is forced to confront these issues in relation to her own ethics and identity. As Cultural Liaison Officer, her job is essentially to convince the sandplants, or plantpeople, to leave their islands willingly. Early on, she develops a bond with one of the plantpeople, Larapinta. Their relationship forces

Kaden to consider her role in the displacement of the plantpeople, and to reconnect with her own cultural identity.

THEMES

Cultural identity
Ethical responsibility
Land ownership
Sexuality
Politics
Humanity

READING QUESTIONS

- ◆ What is the story trying to say?
- ◆ How does Kaden feel about the Australia 2 project?
- ◆ What is her relationship to the islands?
- ◆ How does Kaden's relationship with Larapinta influence her actions?
- ◆ How is humour used in this piece to highlight important issues?
- ◆ What are the political and social issues arising from this piece?
- ◆ Why does Kaden think that 'plantpeople are more sensitive than sandplants'?
- ◆ How do both President Sparkle and Milligan use language to push their agenda?
- ◆ What is the nature of Kaden's relationship with her family? How does this influence her confidence and her actions?
- ◆ Are the plantpeople human? Does it matter?
- ◆ What makes Kaden decide to help the plantpeople?
- ◆ On page 96, why is Larapinta satisfied that Kaden finally makes what she calls 'a political statement'? What is the statement? Why is it political?
- ◆ What is the ethical responsibility of people beyond their 'individual jobs'?
- ◆ What are the problems with Australia 2?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. The last paragraph of 'Water' reads:

'In the clear water behind the ferry I can see them. They are everywhere. Stretching out as far as my vision reaches. And then I know there are as many behind them. The brown reeds of their hair are all that is showing. They move in formations, in shapes similar to the last letter of the alphabet. Larapinta is one of them. There must be thousands. I step onto the ferry and stand next to my uncle. The water is rising around us and I can feel the force in the leaping waves and what we're about to do.'

Consider everything that has led up to this scene, and write the next part of the story. You could choose to write a piece that follows on immediately from the paragraph above, or imagine the outcome for the characters from 'Water' slightly into the future. Try to keep your characters faithful to those van Neerven has created. Think about why they act the way they do, and the implications this might have.

2. 'Water' evokes parallels between the treatment of the plantpeople on Australia 2 and the treatment of the Aboriginal people at the time of the European settlement of Australia. Consider this story against the historical context.

- ◆ Research European settlement, and discuss the similarities you find between this period in Australia's history and this story.
- ◆ Consider your responses to this piece based on your new historical knowledge. Have your reactions to this story changed based on your research?
- ◆ Look also at current affairs. Discuss whether current issues affecting Indigenous people are reflected in this piece as well, or whether it seems entirely fictitious.

'LIGHT'

SYNOPSIS

The final section of *Heat and Light* returns to the short story form. These stories are linked thematically, showing a series of young people searching for both freedom and belonging. The

characters in these stories are finding themselves – physically, sexually and emotionally. They battle to matter, to make a mark on the people and places around them.

The characters in the ‘Light’ section are in a tug of war between the fight to separate their identities from the image their families hold of them, and the desperate need to feel a part of something bigger. The character in ‘Anything Can Happen’ is forced to choose between her role as a daughter and her role as a partner. ‘S&J’ follows two young Aboriginal women on a trip as they reconnect with their past, and each fights to claim her own identity. In ‘The Falls’ and ‘The Wheel’, young girls struggle against the suffocation of family secrets.

In this section, van Neerven also examines the notion of ‘otherness’, looking at the way characters are defined or limited by their circumstances. These scenes introduce characters set apart by disability, economic disadvantage, sexuality, race and family circumstances. Without preaching or resorting to didacticism, this collection of stories offers readers a chance to explore their own subjectivity and attitudes.

‘Light’ rounds the book out nicely, bringing many of the themes introduced in the earlier parts of the book into this selection of intimate snapshots of the lives of young people.

THEMES

Sexuality
Freedom
Belonging
Self-awareness
Isolation
Abandonment
Disadvantage

READING QUESTIONS

- ◆ Which characters are abandoned in these pieces? Who by? How does their abandonment influence their actions and, as a result, the outcome of the story?
- ◆ What family relationships are explored in these pieces? How are families depicted differently in

the ‘Light’ and ‘Heat’ sections? What impression does this create of the characters in each of these parts of the book?

- ◆ Although the author rarely (if at all) tells us the exact locations of the stories in ‘Heat’, they all have a strong sense of place. What techniques does van Neerven use to create this? How does the place in each of the stories further develop the themes of the piece? How does it shape each of the characters?
- ◆ How would you describe the endings of the stories in ‘Light’? How are they different from the endings of the stories in ‘Heat’ or ‘Water’? What do you think happens after each story ends? Do you need to know?
- ◆ Which characters in these stories are similar? How?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. In one interview Ellen van Neerven talks about the characters in this section. She describes them as ‘making it’ or not. What do you think she means by this? Make a chart of the characters you think have made it, and those who haven’t. Choose one character from each side and respond to the following.

- ◆ How has this character’s success or failure been defined by their own actions?
- ◆ How has it been influenced by the actions of others?
- ◆ Has the character who has ‘made it’ done better than the character who hasn’t? Are they happier?
- ◆ See if you can write an alternative ending for your chosen character. What would need to happen for things to end well? What would need to go wrong for things to end badly?

2. Read the following piece by the author Richard Ford on writing short stories.

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/nov/03/featuresreviews.guardianreview1>

- ◆ Discuss in class what you think are some key elements of a short story. Using Ford’s piece as an inspiration, consider such aspects as beginnings and endings, the differences between novels and

short stories, and the techniques used to involve the reader. How does Ellen van Neerven achieve these elements? What makes her stories resonate?

- ✦ Think about the themes from the stories in 'Light', and your discussions about what makes a good short story. Use this to inform you as you write a short story of your own, inspired by one of the themes or characters from this final section of the book.

FURTHER READING

On Ellen van Neerven and *Heat and Light*

Away!: Radio National: Ellen van Neerven: *Heat and Light*

http://mpegmedia.abc.net.au/rn/podcast/2014/09/aye_20140906_1805.mp3

Digital Writers' Festival 2015: *Kill Your Darlings* First Book Club: Ellen van Neerven's *Heat and Light*
<http://digitalwritersfestival.com/2015/event/kyd-book-club/>

Digital Writers' Festival 2015: Presenting the Stella Prize Longlist (Ellen reading from *Heat and Light*)
44:00-47:53
<http://digitalwritersfestival.com/2015/event/stella-longlist/>

Kindness and Failure: The journey of writing *Heat and Light*: Ellen van Neerven: *Kill Your Darlings*
<http://www.killyourdarlingsjournal.com/2015/01/kindness-and-failure-the-journey-of-writing-heat-and-light/>

Review by Tony Birch: Readings Books
<http://www.readings.com.au/products/18549479/heat-and-light>

Review by Linda Funnell: *Newtown Review of Books*
<http://newtownreviewofbooks.com.au/2015/03/05/ellen-van-neerven-heat-and-light-reviewed-by-linda-funnell/>

The Stella Interview: Ellen van Neerven
<http://thestellaprize.com.au/2015/04/the-stella-interview-ellen-van-neerven/>

Stella Prize 2015: the shortlisted authors on the stories behind their books: *The Guardian*
<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/17/stella-prize-2015-six-australian-authors-on-the-stories-behind-their-books>

On cultural context and reading Indigenous literature

Teaching Indigenous literature: An ethics of voice by Alice Healy

http://www.academia.edu/1631032/Teaching_Indigenous_Literature_an_Ethics_of_Voice

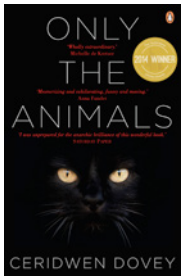
http://ecommons.usask.ca/bitstream/handle/10388/etd-10252006-070549/balzer_dissertation.pdf

On writing short stories

'Highwire Performers' by Richard Ford: *The Guardian*

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/nov/03/featuresreviews.guardianreview1>

Longlisted titles



Only the Animals
by Ceridwen Dovey
PENGUIN AUSTRALIA

SYNOPSIS

‘Perhaps only the animals can tell us what it is to be human.’

The souls of ten animals caught up in human conflicts over the last century tell their astonishing stories of life and death. In a trench on the Western Front a cat recalls her owner Colette’s theatrical antics in Paris. In Nazi Germany a dog seeks enlightenment. A Russian tortoise once owned by the Tolstoys drifts in space during the Cold War. In the siege of Sarajevo a bear starving to death tells a fairytale. And a dolphin sent to Iraq by the US Navy writes a letter to Sylvia Plath ...

Exquisitely written, playful and poignant, *Only the Animals* is a remarkable literary achievement by one of our brightest young writers. An animal’s-eye view of humans at our brutal, violent worst and our creative, imaginative best, it asks us to find our way back to empathy not only for animals, but for other people, and to believe again in the redemptive power of reading and writing fiction.

From www.penguin.com.au

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ceridwen was born in South Africa and raised between South Africa and Australia. While studying social anthropology at Harvard as an undergraduate, she made a documentary about South African wine farm workers, *Aftertaste*. She wrote her first novel, *Blood Kin*, while living in Cape Town, then returned to the US for graduate studies in social anthropology at

New York University. She now lives with her husband and son in Sydney, Australia.

Taken from the author’s website
www.ceridwendovey.com

THEMES

Humanity
Literature
Ethics
History
War
Art

LINKS

Teaching notes for this title can be found at the following link:

https://www.penguin.com.au/extras/81/9781926428581/other-file/Teaching_Notes.pdf

‘A joyous deception: Ceridwen Dovey’s *Only the Animals*’: Claire Hielscher: *Kill Your Darlings*
<http://www.killyourdarlingsjournal.com/2014/09/a-joyous-deception-ceridwen-doveys-only-the-animals/>

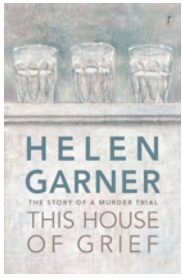
Ceridwen Dovey’s *Only the Animals*: Books and Arts Daily: Radio National
<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/booksandarts/animal-tales/6048464>

‘Ceridwen Dovey’s *Only the Animals*’: Richard King: *The Monthly*
<https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2014/may/1398866400/richard-king/ceridwen-dovey-s-only-animals>

‘Go Ape’: Review by Delia Falconer: *Sydney Review of Books*
<http://www.sydneyreviewofbooks.com/only-animals-ceridwen-dovey/>

Review by Romy Ash: *The Guardian*
<http://www.theguardian.com/books/australia-culture-blog/2014/may/16/only-the-animals-by-ceridwen-dovey-book-review>

Review: *The Saturday Paper*
<https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/2014/04/30/only-the-animals/1398434400#.VWGAbkLfLdk>



This House of Grief by Helen Garner

TEXT PUBLISHING

SYNOPSIS

'Anyone can see the place where the children died. You take the Princes Highway past Geelong, and keep going west in the direction of Colac. Late in August 2006, soon after I had watched a magistrate commit Robert Farquharson to stand trial before a jury on three charges of murder, I headed out that way on a Sunday morning, across the great volcanic plain.'

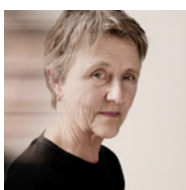
On the evening of 4 September 2005, Father's Day, Robert Farquharson, a separated husband, was driving his three sons home to their mother, Cindy, when his car left the road and plunged into a dam. The boys, aged ten, seven and two, drowned. Was this an act of revenge or a tragic accident? The court case became Helen Garner's obsession. She followed it on its protracted course until the final verdict.

In this utterly compelling book, Garner tells the story of a man and his broken life. She presents the theatre of the courtroom with its actors and audience, all gathered for the purpose of bearing witness to the truth, players in the extraordinary and unpredictable drama of the quest for justice.

This House of Grief is a heartbreaking and unputdownable book by one of Australia's most admired writers.

From www.textpublishing.com.au

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Helen Garner was born in 1942 in Geelong, and was educated there and at Melbourne University. She taught in Victorian secondary schools until 1972, when she was

dismissed for answering her students' questions about sex, and had to start writing journalism for a living.

Her first novel, *Monkey Grip*, came out in 1977, won the 1978 National Book Council Award, and was adapted for film in 1981. Since then she has published novels, short stories, essays and feature journalism. Her screenplay *The Last Days of Chez Nous* was filmed in 1990. Garner has won many prizes, among them a Walkley Award for her 1993 article about the murder of two-year-old Daniel Valerio. In 1995 she published *The First Stone*, a controversial account of a Melbourne University sexual harassment case. *Joe Cinque's Consolation* (2004) was a nonfiction study of two murder trials in Canberra.

In 2006 Helen Garner received the inaugural Melbourne Prize for Literature.

From www.textpublishing.com.au

THEMES

The Australian legal process
Grief
Murder
Family
Journalism

LINKS

Jennifer Byrne Presents: Helen Garner: The Book Club (VIDEO)

<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/firsttuesday/s4092311.htm>

In conversation with Ramona Koval: *The Monthly Book*: MWF (VIDEO)

<http://www.themonthly.com.au/video/2014/september/03/1409719725/monthly-book-helen-garner-conversation-ramona-koval>

Review by James Ley: 'Gut Instinct': *Sydney Review of Books*

<http://www.sydneyreviewofbooks.com/this-house-of-grief-helen-garner/>

Review by Katherine Hattam: 'A Psychoanalytical Reading of Helen Garner': *Crikey*

<http://dailyreview.crikey.com.au/a-psychoanalytical-reading-of-helen-garner/15050>

'Robert Farquharson case struck author Helen Garner with 'a terrible gong of horror': Interview with Susan Wyndham: *The Age*

<http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/books/robert-farquharson-case-struck-author-helen-garner-with-a-terrible-gong-of-horror-20140812-102jqn.html>



Golden Boys

by Sonya Hartnett

PENGUIN BOOKS AUSTRALIA

SYNOPSIS

Colt Jenson and his younger brother Bastian have moved to a new, working-class suburb. The Jensons are different. Their father, Rex, showers them with gifts, toys, bikes, all that glitters most – and makes them the envy of the neighbourhood.

To Freya Kiley and the other local kids, the Jensons are a family from a magazine, and Rex a hero – successful, attentive, attractive, always there to lend a hand. But to Colt he's an impossible figure in a different way: unbearable, suffocating. Has Colt got Rex wrong, or has he seen something in his father that will destroy their fragile new lives?

Sonya Hartnett's new novel for adults is an unflinching and utterly compelling work from one of Australia's finest writers.

From www.penguin.com.au

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sonya Hartnett's work has won numerous Australian and international literary prizes and has been published around the world.

Uniquely, she is acclaimed for her stories for adults, young adults and children. Her accolades include the Commonwealth Writers' Prize (*Of A Boy*), *The Age* Book of the Year (*Of A Boy*),

the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize (*Thursday's Child*), the Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year for both Older and Younger Readers (*Forest*, *The Silver Donkey*, *The Ghost's Child*, *The Midnight Zoo* and *The Children of the King*), the Victorian Premier's Literary Award (*Surrender*), shortlistings for the Miles Franklin Award (for both *Of a Boy* and *Butterfly*) and the CILP Carnegie Medal (*The Midnight Zoo*). Hartnett is also the first Australian recipient of the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award (2008).

Taken from the author's website
www.sonyahartnett.com.au

THEMES

Family
Innocence
Trust
Male friendships
Class
Manipulation
Paedophilia

LINKS

Teaching notes for this title can be found at the following link:

http://www.sonyahartnett.com.au/ui/pdf/Golden_Boys.pdf

'Not for children?': Review by Victoria Flanagan: *Sydney Review of Books*

<http://www.sydneyreviewofbooks.com/golden-boys-sonya-hartnett/>

Review by Robyn Annear: *The Monthly*

<https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2014/october/1412085600/robyn-annear/golden-boys-sonya-hartnett>

'Sonya Hartnett's *Golden Boys* explores the troubles of childhood': Review by Peter Pierce: *The Australian*

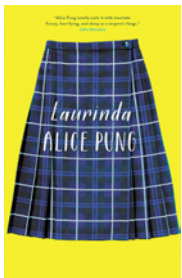
<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/sonya-hartnetts-golden-boys-explores-the-troubles-of-childhood/story-fn9n8gph-1227030839278>

'Sonya Hartnett's *Golden Boys* is a tale of darkness in summer': Review by Linda Funnell: *The Sydney Morning Herald*

<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/sonya-hartnetts-golden-boys-is-a-tale-of-darkness-in-summer-20140830-10a62b.html>

Sonya Hartnett's *Golden Boys*: Books and Arts Daily: Radio National

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/booksandarts/sonya-hartnett/5759412>



Laurinda by Alice Pung

BLACK INC.

SYNOPSIS

'When my dad dropped us off at the front gate, the first things I saw were the rose gardens spreading out on either side of the main driveway and the enormous sign in iron cursive letters spelling out LAURINDA. No 'Ladies College' after it, of course; the name was meant to speak for itself.'

Laurinda is an exclusive school for girls. At its secret core is the Cabinet, a trio of girls who wield power over their classmates – and some of their teachers.

Entering this world of wealth and secrets is Lucy Lam, a scholarship girl with sharp eyes and a shaky sense of self. As she watches the Cabinet at work, and is courted by them, Lucy finds herself in a battle for her identity and integrity.

From www.penguin.com.au

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Alice was born in Footscray, Victoria, a month after her parents Kuan and Kien arrived in Australia. Alice's father, Kuan – a survivor of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime – named her after Lewis Carroll's character because after surviving the Killing Fields, he thought

Australia was a Wonderland. Alice is the oldest of four; she has a brother, Alexander, and two sisters, Alison and Alina.

Alice grew up in Footscray and Braybrook, and changed high schools five times – almost once a year! These experiences have shaped her as a writer because they taught her how to pay attention to the quiet young adults who others might overlook or miss.

Alice's first book, *Unpolished Gem*, is an Australian bestseller that won the Australian Book Industry Newcomer of the Year Award and was shortlisted in the Victorian and NSW Premiers' Literary Awards. It was published in the UK and USA in separate editions and has been translated into several languages including Italian, German and Indonesian.

Alice's next book, *Her Father's Daughter*, won the Western Australia Premier's Award for Nonfiction and was shortlisted for the Victorian and NSW Premier's Literary Awards and the Queensland Literary Award.

Alice's latest book, *Laurinda*, has been shortlisted for numerous awards in 2015, and she was named one of the *Sydney Morning Herald's* 2015 Young Novelists of the Year.

Alice also edited the collection *Growing Up Asian in Australia* and her writing has appeared in *The Monthly*, *The Age*, and *The Best Australian Stories* and *The Best Australian Essays*. Her series of children's books, 'Meet Marly' from the *Our Australian Girl* series, are published in 2015.

Alice is a qualified lawyer and still works as a legal researcher in the area of minimum wages and pay equity.

Taken from www.alicepung.com

THEMES

Identity
Stereotypes
Class
Family
Education
Self-acceptance

LINKS

Teaching notes for this title can be found at the following link, along with a wealth of resources for teachers on the book:

<http://www.myfirstlesson.com.au/teaching-notes/>

Digital Writers' Festival 2015: Presenting the Stella Prize Longlist (Alice reading from *Laurinda*) 32:00-36:12

<http://digitalwritersfestival.com/2015/event/stella-longlist/>

'Alice Pung recalls high school's hard lessons in first novel *Laurinda*': *The Australian*

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/alice-pung-recalls-high-schools-hard-lessons-in-first-novel-laurinda/story-fn9n8gph-1227115573447>

Laurinda Q&A: Alice Pung

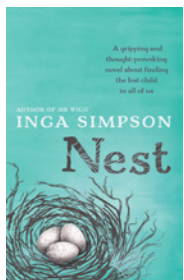
<http://www.alicepung.com/2014/11/13/laurinda-q-a/>

Review by Danielle Binks: 'Mean girls, bullies and private school privilege: Alice Pung's *Laurinda*': *Kill Your Darlings*

<http://www.killyourdarlingsjournal.com/2014/11/mean-girls-bullies-private-school-privilege-alice-pungs-laurinda/>

Review by Thuy On: 'Alice Pung's *Laurinda* alive with schoolgirl tyrannies': *The Sydney Morning Herald*

<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/alice-pungs-laurinda-alive-with-schoolgirl-tyrannies-20141013-115avl.html>



Nest by Inga Simpson

HACHETTE AUSTRALIA

SYNOPSIS

Once an artist and teacher, Jen now spends her time watching the birds around her house and tending her lush subtropical garden near the small town where she grew up. The only person she sees regularly is Henry, who comes after school for drawing lessons.

When a girl in Henry's class goes missing, Jen is pulled back into the depths of her own past. When

she was Henry's age she lost her father and her best friend Michael – both within a week. The whole town talked about it then, and now, nearly forty years later, they're talking about it again.

Everyone is waiting – for the girl to be found and the summer rain to arrive. At last, when the answers do come, like the wet, it is in a drenching, revitalising downpour.

From www.hachette.com.au

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Inga Simpson is a Queensland-based novelist and nature writer. Her most recent novel, *Nest*, has been shortlisted for the ALS Gold Medal, and was longlisted for the 2015

Miles Franklin Literary Award and the 2015 Stella Prize.

Inga's first novel, *Mr Wigg*, was published following her participation in the 2011 QWC/Hachette Manuscript Development Program, and was shortlisted for an Indie Award and longlisted for the Dobbie Award.

Inga is also the winner of the 2012 Eric Rolls Nature Writing Prize, and was shortlisted for the 2009 Queensland Premier's Award for best emerging author.

Inga has a PhD in Creative Writing from the Queensland University of Technology. She has published short stories, as well as academic and nonfiction articles in *The Review of Australian Fiction*, *Clues*, *Writing Queensland*, and the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*.

Her first career was as a professional writer and researcher, including for federal Parliament and the Commonwealth Ombudsman.

She is currently completing a PhD in English Literature through the University of Queensland, which explores the history of Australian nature writing as an environmental strategy.

Inga lives among trees in the Sunshine Coast hinterland. She leads writing retreats, workshops and mentorships.

Taken from the author's website
www.ingasimpson.com.au

THEMES

Family
 Friendship
 Place
 Environment
 Missing children

LINKS

Digital Writers' Festival 2015: Presenting the Stella Prize Longlist (Inga reading from *Nest*) 36:54-43:00
<http://digitalwritersfestival.com/2015/event/stella-longlist/>

Inga Simpson's *Nest*: BooksPlus: Radio National
<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/booksplus/inga-simpson-nest/5694670>

'Interview with Inga Simpson, Author of *Nest*':
 Annabel Smith: *Australian Women Writers*
<http://australianwomenwriters.com/2015/02/interview-with-inga-simpson-author-of-nest/>

'Inga Simpson turns to nature after *Mr Wigg*': Review by Dianne Dempsey: *The Sydney Morning Herald*
<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/inga-simpson-turns-to-nature-after-mr-wigg-20140912-10fl8z.html>

Review by Suzanne Steinbruckner: Readings
<http://www.readings.com.au/review/nest-by-inga-simpson>



In My Mother's Hands by Biff Ward

ALLEN & UNWIN

SYNOPSIS

There are secrets in this family. Before Biff and her younger brother, Mark, there was baby Alison, who drowned in her bath because, it was said, her mother

was distracted. Biff, too, lives in fear of her mother's irrational behavior and paranoia, and she is always on guard and fears for the safety of her brother. As Biff grows into teenagehood, there develops a conspiratorial relationship between her and her father, who is a famous and gregarious man, trying to keep his wife's problems a family secret. This was a time when the insane were committed and locked up in Dickensian institutions; whatever his problems, her father was desperate to save his wife from that fate, but also to protect his children from the effects of living with a tragically disturbed mother.

In My Mother's Hands is a beautifully written and emotionally perplexing coming-of-age story about growing up in an unusual family.

From www.allenandunwin.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Biff has worked in radical secondary education, equal opportunity, Indigenous adult education, human resource development and mental illness education. Her poetry and essays have appeared in various anthologies. Her memoir, *In My Mother's Hands*, is about her family's experience of her mother's mental illness at the same time that her father, Russel Ward, was writing *The Australian Legend*. Biff has three children and four grandchildren. She lives on the Monaro, in Canberra.

THEMES

Family
 Mental illness
 Fame
 Secrecy
 Trust
 Memoir
 Australian history

LINKS

Digital Writers' Festival 2015: Presenting the Stella Prize Longlist (Biff reading from *In My Mother's Hands*) 48:00-52:55
<http://digitalwritersfestival.com/2015/event/stella-longlist/>

'Biff Ward *In My Mother's Hands*: A disturbing memoir of family life' : Review by Kylie Mason:

Newtown Review of Books

<http://newtownreviewofbooks.com.au/2014/06/17/biff-ward-mothers-hands-disturbing-memoir-family-life-reviewed-kylie-mason/>

'Biff Ward's untold stories *In My Mother's Hands*: Interview with Karen Hardy: *The Sydney Morning Herald*

<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/biff-wards-untold-stories-in-my-mothers-hands-20140619-zsdeu.html>

'Historian's daughter uncovers her family's dark secret': Biff Ward: *The Australian*

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/life/weekend-australian-magazine/historians-daughter-uncovers-her-familys-dark-secret/story-e6frg8h6-1226923117993>

The Stella Prize for younger readers

These notes have been written to supplement the Year 7–10 education resources available in the 2014 Stella Prize Schools Program Education Resource Kit. The 2014 kit contains a comprehensive list of recommended titles by Australian authors, as well as questions and activities designed to encourage students to evaluate their reading habits and challenge themselves to read more broadly.

These updated notes include new titles published after 2014, and a series of activities to encourage students to push their reading even further.

NEW AND NOTABLE BOOKS FOR YOUNGER READERS

***Eat the Sky, Drink the Ocean*, eds Kirsty Murray, Payal Dhar and Anita Roy (Allen & Unwin)**

(Year 7–10) Writers and artists from India and Australia collaborate in this collection of short stories that interrogates what it means to be a girl in each country.

***Figgy in the World*, Tamsin Janu (Scholastic Australia)**

(Year 7) Figgy might not be the only Figgy in the whole world, but she's the only one who can get the medicine her grandmother needs to survive.

***Writing Clementine*, Kate Gordon (Allen & Unwin)**

(Year 7/8) Clementine Darcy wants to be herself, but it seems more and more as though being herself isn't going to make her any friends. The only place she can be truly free is when she's writing.

***Song for Scarlet Runner*, Julie Hunt (Allen & Unwin)**

(Year 7/8) This startling fantasy is reminiscent of Emily Rodda's *Rowan of Rin* series. It follows a young girl's search for a home as she traverses the mountains and swamps of another world.

***The One and Only Jack Chant*, Rosie Borella (Allen & Unwin)**

(Year 7/8) A ghost story about growing up, growing old, and moving on, but never forgetting your family.

***Quincy Jordan: Crystal Bay Girls #1*, Jen Storer (Penguin Australia)**

(Year 7/8) Quincy Jordan doesn't want to know that her dad's cheating on her mum. She doesn't want to move to Crystal Bay to live with her hippie cousins. Life is full of unwanted surprises, but sometimes things have a way of working themselves out.

***The Crystal Heart*, Sophie Masson (Random House Australia)**

(Year 7/8) When Kasper joins the elite guard watching over a dangerous prisoner in a tower, he believes he is protecting his country from a powerful witch, until one day he discovers that the prisoner is a beautiful princess.

***The Ratcatcher's Daughter*, Pamela Rushby (Angus & Robertson, Harper Collins Publishers)**

(Year 8) The year is 1900, and thirteen-year-old Issy McKelvie leaves school to start her first job – very reluctantly – as a maid in an Undertaking Establishment.

***Shimmer: The Rephaim #3*, Paula Weston (Text Publishing)**

(Year 8/9) The third book in the Rephaim series, where the ancient battles between fallen angels are fought along the beaches of Queensland's rainforests.

***The Book of Days*, K.A. Barker (Pan Macmillan Australia)**

(Year 8/9) An intriguing debut fantasy about Tuesday, a girl who wakes up in a house where people go to forget.

***The Cracks in the Kingdom: The Colours of Madeleine 2*, Jaclyn Moriarty (Pan Macmillan Australia)**

(Year 8/9) This highly original fantasy story brings together Madeleine, from the World, and Elliot, from the Kingdom, who communicate through a crack between the two worlds.

***The Incredible Here and Now*, Felicity Castagna (Giramondo)**

(Year 9) Michael's older brother dies at the beginning of the summer he turns 15, but this is a story of wonder, not of tragedy.

***The Minnow*, Diana Sweeney (Text Publishing)**

(Year 9/10) This Text Prize-winning book tells the story of Tom, who is cast adrift in the wake of a city-wide tragedy. Tom's relationships are complicated and fragile, as she desperately tries to steer a clear path for herself and the minnow.

***Every Move*, Ellie Marney (Allen & Unwin)**

(Year 9/10) The final book in the *Every* series about teenage detectives Watts and Mycroft.

***State of Grace*, Hilary Badger (Hardie Grant Egmont)**

(Year 9/10) In this dystopian future, Wren lives in a paradise where everything is just 'Dotly', until a boy from outside breaks in. Then she begins to realise that things aren't as peaceful as they seem.

***The Protected*, Claire Zorn (UQP)**

(Year 9/10) Hannah's sister Katie dies in a car crash, and Hannah is left behind to grow older, pick up the pieces of her family, fall in love and move on.

***As Stars Fall*, Christie Nieman (Pan Macmillan Australia)**

(Year 9/10) The bush stone-curlew is the central image of this book about bushfires, grief, isolation, drug abuse and family.

***The Incredible Adventures of Cinnamon Girl*, Melissa Keil (Hardie Grant Egmont)**

(Year 9/10) Alba would be happy if life could continue as is. But at some point she's going to have to choose between her dream of uni, and staying in her small hometown forever. And if life wasn't already difficult enough, the end of the world arrives in her lap.

***Nona & Me*, Clare Atkins (Black Inc.)**

(Year 9/10) Rosie and Nona are sisters. Yapas. But when Nona arrives back in Rosie's life after years of absence, Rosie needs to choose between her family loyalties and her first love.

***The Astrologer's Daughter*, Rebecca Lim (Text Publishing)**

(Year 9/10) Avicenna Crowe is a genius and eccentric, in that order. She isn't especially bothered if people like her or not, but when her mother goes missing she discovers that she needs help.

***Masquerade*, Kylie Fornasier (Penguin Books Australia)**

(Year 9/10) In the glittering, masked world of the Venetian Carnevale in 1750, everyone has a secret. Seven teens, from the highest aristocrat to the lowest servant, are consumed by their secrets: their loves, desires, loyalties and betrayals.

***The Flywheel*, Erin Gough (Hardie Grant Egmont)**

(Year 9/10) Delilah is just managing to keep her life together. She's juggling high school and managing her dad's café (just), but falling in love might be one challenge too many.

***Cooper Bartholomew Is Dead*, Rebecca James (Allen & Unwin)**

(Year 10) Everyone believes Cooper Bartholomew killed himself. Everyone except his girlfriend, Libby.

***Razorhurst*, Justine Larbalestier (Allen & Unwin)**

(Year 10) Set in the 1930s against the backdrop of Sydney's underbelly, Razorhurst is a riveting ghost story about Kelpie, a young street urchin, and Dymphna, who has more in common with Kelpie than either of them might like to believe.

***When the Night Comes*, Favel Parrett
(Hachette Australia)**

(Year 10) In the greyness of Tasmania, a red ship breaks the monotony of Isla's day. She is drawn to its warmth and a particular sailor who becomes like family.

***In the Skin of a Monster*, Kathryn Barker (Allen & Unwin)**

(Year 10) Three years after her identical twin sister shot seven of their schoolmates, Alice lives a waking nightmare as she struggles with lingering trauma.

***Intruder*, Christine Bongers (Random House Australia)**

(Year 10) When Kat Jones is woken by an intruder looming over her bed, her dad issues an ultimatum: either spend her nights next door, or welcome another intruder in her life.

***Wrath*, Anne Davies (Jo Jo Publishing)**

(Year 10) Luca has been sent to a juvenile detention centre for the murder of his parents and no one knows why he did it. Inside the centre, danger, abuse and despair become his world.

- ◆ What was your challenge?
- ◆ How did it differ from your normal reading patterns?
- ◆ What characters did you learn about?
- ◆ How did this challenge your approach to reading?
- ◆ What other thoughts have you had following the challenge?

In 2013 young adult author Maureen Johnson created the 'Coverflip' challenge, to interrogate the assumptions that arise from gendered marketing and gender-specific book covers. Read the following article.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/07/coverflip-maureen-johnson_n_3231935.html

Look at some of the books on your shelf and consider how their covers have influenced your decision to read them. Create your own Coverflip covers. Who do you think might read your selected books now, based on their 'new' covers? Who might miss out? What does this mean about how we share stories?

CHALLENGE YOURSELF: READ LIKE A GIRL

How many books by Australian women have you read this year? How many books have you read about girls?

Whether you're a boy or a girl, it's important to read widely and well. Do you want to know what people who are different from you are thinking? Do you want to have the opportunity to challenge your preconceptions? Books have the potential to do just that, but it is easy to get stuck in a reading rut.

Read the following article and use it to set yourself a reading challenge. It might be to read only women, or to read only books by Indigenous Australian women – whatever will take you out of your comfort zone.

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jan/22/year-of-reading-women-2014-bias-male-writers>