

Teacher Notes

The Rooftop

By Toby Hammerschlag

(Approximate age range 9-13 years)

The novel, *The Rooftop* is suited for use in the classroom. The author brings thirty years of teaching, focused on children with special needs into the writing of the novel. It is versatile, being suitable for English literature classes based on the National curriculum and Personal Development classes. The novel lends itself to be used as a text leading up to 'Harmony Day' in schools and 'Refugee Week'.

The book is unique in that it is primarily a novel but structured in such a way that it can be used as a work-book by teachers. Each time the teacher relates the story of the ancient Israelites fight for freedom, the students in the novel are encouraged to respond in different ways. The activities include, painting, dressing up and eliciting oral responses and personal anecdotes. Teachers could follow these activities for their students and add their own.

This is a novel about inclusiveness, as is Harmony Day. At the inner city Sydney school where the narrative unfolds, the students come from the richest to the poorest parts of Sydney. The friendship between the four protagonists crosses socio-economic and religious boundaries. Maha is from a Muslim family, Talia is Jewish and Simon and Emma are not affiliated to any religion.

Harmony Day also celebrates cultural diversity. Class activities could include the telling of personal stories, as do the main characters. Students could share different cultural based foods, as in the novel the four friends sit on the rooftop where Maha shares her spicy humus in pita and she herself tastes for the first time a muesli bar. A pivotal event in the novel is when the students and their teacher go to Talia's house for a Passover celebration. Students could bring interesting objects relating to different cultures to share with the class. Or the novel could be a stimulus for discussions about inclusiveness and diversity in the lead up to Harmony Day

The text is also suitable in preparation for Refugee Week. The importance of inclusivity is discussed above. Social justice and the right to live in freedom for refugees and all people are key themes in the novel. Maha and her family live with the threat of deportation from Australia. The family, from war-torn Iraq gives a human face to the plight of refugees. Her father, who was a doctor in Iraq, is now a cleaner in Sydney. When the threat of deportation becomes real, the three friends spring into action.

In a literature class, the four protagonists whose very different stories evolve in the novel would stimulate and lend itself to character analysis. Simon has recently moved from Melbourne to Sydney with his mother and struggles with divorced, warring parents. Talia is a Jewish girl, who is originally from South Africa. She reflects the daily struggles of a student with learning disabilities. Maha and her family are new immigrants from war torn Iraq and face the constant threat of deportation. And Emma, the archetypical Sydney girl has never considered the value of freedom.

Another interesting activity would be the study of the varied language of the characters. Students could study the descriptive, story-telling style of the teacher. In contrast, are the oral responses of the students, which include that of Maha who is still learning English.

The novel straddles literature and history and is suitable for the integrative emphasis of the National Curriculum. *The Rooftop* could be used as the basis to get the students to research historical and contemporary struggles for freedom. Apartheid in South Africa, the Stolen Generation in Australia and the recent war in Iraq are all intertwined in the novel through the stories of the different characters. It also lends itself to be used as a comparison to other media such as movies (Example 'Rabbit Proof Fence' on the same theme as the Stolen Generation).

Students could also research historical figures such as Martin Luther King who used the story of the Exodus as a blueprint for man's right to live in freedom, free of tyranny (see speech when he accepted his Nobel Peace prize). Cromwell was also seen as a 'Moses' delivering his people.

This novel would stimulate and facilitate discussion and activities in a Personal Development class. As previously mentioned, friendship is a central theme in the novel as is the concept of inclusivity. Various ethical issues are raised in the novel such as the intervention of a person to aid another. Moses intercedes when a slave is being beaten. Mr Zulman asks the students if they have ever come across such a person. Simon immediately thinks of the judge during his parents' bitter custody battle. Maha brokenly talks about how her father who was a doctor in Iraq was injured while aiding others.

The novel could be a springboard to elicit discussions of personal everyday struggles and how to resolve them. *The Rooftop* follows the journeys of the four protagonists to personal freedom. The reader gains insights into a child with learning disabilities. One manifestation is when Talia who is desperate to join her friends on the netball court, is so uncoordinated that she simply cannot catch a ball. Simon's fiery temper has to be controlled when playing netball. The protagonists also have challenges in their relationships with their parents, which are revealed and evolve through the novel. In contrast to Emma who has a 'laid back' mother, Simon's mother is a high flying corporate lawyer who is never home, Talia's mother is overbearing, desperate to help her child with her learning and Maha's mother is fearful for her child. *The Rooftop* meets the aim of the National Curriculum to engage and stimulate the reader.