



Teachers' notes

Written by Dr Susan La Marca

A Girl like Me

by Penny Matthews

Plot

Set in South Australia in 1901, this story explores the true story of the murder of a thirteen-year-old girl, Bertha Schippan, through the eyes of sixteen-year-old Emmie Brooker. Matthews does an excellent job of weaving the real life murder into a fictional world. Emmie longs to be in love and wants to write and experience life, but she is constrained by the views and social code of the time in which she lives. Emmie is inexperienced and naive and at first rather unsettled by the younger Bertha who comes to their farm as home-help. Bertha has a confidence and worldly attitude that are a result of her life experiences; a life where she has been exposed to things barely imaginable to Emmie.

Bertha and Emmie become friends and, as their connection grows, both learn a great deal more about each other's lives. Without realising it, Emmie learns more about Bertha, her family and her relationship with her sister Mary's fiancé, Gustave, than it is perhaps safe to know.

This is a story of the rite of passage events that mark our lives, the story of a young woman chafing against the constraints of Victorian-era, rural Australian life. As such, it explores the nature of class and family, gender and relationships at a time immediately preceding the many changes of the early 1900's that would irrevocably alter the world. But it is also the story of an unexplained, violent murder of a young girl that has remained unsolved.

Structure

Each chapter of this text has a short extract to help set the scene. Re-read some of the extracts that come from the Mary Wood-Allen book *What a Young Woman Ought to Know*, a real book that, according to Matthews, was published first in the United States in 1899. It could have easily been a book owned by a girl like Emmie.

- What do these extracts tell you about the expectations of girls during this period in history?
- Can you think of a modern day equivalent?

A Girl Like Me is created in three parts or sections—

- Part One pages 5 to 89
- Part Two pages 93 to 208
- Part Three pages 211 to 303

What is the difference between each part? Why has the narrative been segregated in this way?

Do you feel there is a shift in the narrative with each new part? A change in purpose or tone?

Cover

The cover of this novel is distinctive.

It combines minimal colour and a decorative font with an old-fashioned historical photo.

- What is it about the photograph that gives it a historical feel?
- In what ways is the cover relevant to the story?

The title page and the pages that indicate each new section also appear old. What has been done, artistically, to give an aged feel?

Title

The significance of the title, 'A Girl Like Me', is explored first on page 259 and then on the closing page of the novel (p.303).

- What does its use indicate about Emmie and her connection to Bertha?
- Bertha's story, and this period in Emmie's life have changed her, in what ways?

Notes on the story (pages 304-5)

The content of the notes on the story is addressed in the later section titled 'Fiction based on fact'.

Writing style

The book reads as if it was written very shortly after the events of January 1902. Matthews has in some ways recreated the style and vocabulary of a nineteenth-century novel. Most of the story is Emmie's personal narrative, which is present tense and immediate (but still rather formal by today's standards), interspersed with the more mannered 'romantic' style she uses when writing her novel.

- How does the use of present tense work? How does it make you feel as a reader?

Compare these sections of the novel to the other styles that are presented – reporting, letters and the extracts from the writings of others (e.g. chapter heads).

Characters

Ada Hammond

- Ada is introduced on page 9. How would you describe her? Refer to her actions, her words in the text – is she similar to Emmie or of different character?
- Ada questions Emmie about befriending Bertha (p.71-2); why does she find the relationship so disconcerting?
- How does Ada behave around James? (p.140 and 144)
- What do her actions tell us about her and James?
- Ada blames Bertha, 'a servant', and Emmie for putting Bertha in James's proximity in the dairy (p.205). She calls Bertha 'a person of the worst kind'. (p. 206)
- Is there a great deal of difference in the way both Bertha and Ada behave?
- How do you feel a girl like Ada would fare in our world? Is she a girl of her time?

German people

On a number of occasions the differences between Emmie's family, of English heritage, and the characters of German heritage are noted. The Wends (described p.24), a minority Slavic people from part of Germany, are viewed as lesser by those of English heritage, but the lack of understanding-is mutual.

The two groups live together harmoniously enough day to day (p.19) but do not socialise with each other, and the friendship between Emmie and Bertha is not

approved of by family members on both sides. Consider some of the ways Bertha, her family and her community are viewed:

- Emmie's family see them as *'foreigners'* yet many were born in Australia (p. 34).
- Emmie will not make her character German *'of course'*. (p.42)
- Emmie describes the Schippan family farm (p.56-7) and house (p.66-7).
- *'rough, uneducated peasants'*. (p.75)
- *'these people are not like us...peasant mentality'*. (p.286)
- Mary tells Bertha they should *'stick to their own side of the fence'*. (p.110)
- Emmie sees the humour in each side thinking that friendship with the other is *'not fitting'*. (p. 111)
- In celebration they are much more fun than she had thought they would be. (p.84)

The religious differences between the English and German immigrants contribute towards their separate identities (p.19 & 24).

This is not the only time in history when religion has separated people that in many other ways share a great deal.

- Do you think such separation continues in modern day Australia? Do our communities contain groups that are considered different due their religious beliefs?

James

James treads a *'shining path'*, while Emmie's life is a *'crawl through brambles'* (p.136). His dirty dishes are greeted like a *'fine present'* by Anna (p. 149).

- Why is this so? Do you think it would be different for a brother and sister of the same age in a different time period? A different country? A different class?
- Compare James's and Emmie's relationship and interaction to that between Bertha and her brothers. Discuss

Re-read the occasions when we hear of Emmie's brother James - returning home (p.27, 143), his relationship with Bertha (p.149, 194) and as one of August Schippan's *'chief tormentors'* (p. 150).

- Consider how he is treated by others, how he is perceived, and how he is compared to his siblings.
- How does he see himself?
- Towards the end of the novel he says: *'People – family – they expect so much'* (p.195)

At the end of the book, James tells Emmie that he and Ada *'are right for each other'* (p.301).

- Do you agree? Refer to what we know of them both from the text to support your assertion.

Dorothea Brooker (Emmie's Mother)

Emmie's mother is a complex character. She is devoted to her family and cares for them all deeply, but she is unable to convey this in a meaningful way, especially to Emmie (p.31-2, 59, 105, 290). Why?

- Mother appears much tougher on Emmie than she is on the boys (p.31-2, 136). Why?

One of Mother's maxims for life is to *'be cool but courteous'* (p. 44).

- Why is it important for her to behave in this manner? What might be your own mother's or father's maxim for life in this century? Do you have a rule, or rules, that you try to follow when interacting with others? Why might they be different to Emmie's mother's 'rules'?

Emmie bemoans the fact that she cannot communicate with her mother. She is sad that after the Kluge incident (p.105) she cannot turn easily to her mother for help. After Bertha's death, Emmie thinks that mother feels no remorse or guilt, and is somewhat relieved that Bertha is no longer a threat to James's future (p.218 -9).

- Do you think Emmie is being too harsh on her mother in her judgments?
- On page 175 Emmie's mother slaps her. Is this in character? How do each of the characters react to this event?
- Mrs Brooker has no time for what she terms *'unhealthy introspection'* (p.248). What does she mean by this? Contrast this to present-day views on 'introspection'.

Emmie claims, *'I know her as my mother, but not as a person'*. (p. 290)

- Is it impossible to know those we are close to in a familial relationship as people in their own right? Does any bond or relationship cloud our vision of the real person?

Mother softens somewhat after being pushed by Emmie (p.298). They share their own reactions to Lizzie's death and lay some ghosts to rest.

- Could the Emmie we know at the beginning of the novel have helped bring this about?

William Brooker (Emmie's father)

Emmie's father plays a small but quite significant role. He is undemonstrative and clearly has little understanding of women or girls, but he is also far less class-conscious than his wife and provides a contrast to her more rigid ways. He has no

objection to Emmie attending a German wedding feast (p.81) and is considered eccentric because he is modern enough to insist that Emmie ride astride, not side-saddle (p.113). He judges people for what they are, not for what society says they are.

- Do you think William Brooker is a man of his time?
- Is Emmie more like either of her parents or does she combine characteristics of both?

Leo Fraser and Gustave Nitschke

Leo and Gustave are both representative of the 'romantic hero'. Matthews has played cleverly with the archetypal characters created by Bronte, referencing the characters of Linton and Heathcliff from *Wuthering Heights*. Leo/Linton is quiet, decent, reliable; Gustave/Heathcliff is dark and dangerous (although unlike Heathcliff he's also unfaithful).

- The dark and dangerous romantic bad boy is a common character in romance stories. Can you identify other examples of this stereotypical character in books or movies?
- Bertha says she loves Gustave because he's '*a bit wild, and he does what he wants*' (p.129 – 30). Emmie sees Leo as nice but boring.

Both Emmie and Bertha are exploring their feelings and attitudes, with little help, trying to discern what they want and need and also the differences between ideals and reality.

- Do you think romance means different things to today's teenager?
- We may be better informed but are we still naive? Impressionable? Romantic?
- What part does the media play in influencing today's views? What influenced the views of Emmie and Bertha?

Bertha

When we first meet Bertha, as she comes to work for the Brooker family, one of the things Emmie notices is how confident Bertha is with her mother (p.34). On more than one occasion this confidence, or bravado, is noted, often in relation to her knowledge of men and the wider world:

- Puts her finger through the underwear (p. 36). Emmie is '*mortified*'.
- '*never known a girl like Bertha*' (p.38), '*there seem to be many Berthas*'.
- '*She is younger than I am, but there is something knowing about her, and I am certain that it relates to men.*' (p.38)
- Emmie describes her as '*womanly*'. (p.48)
- Bertha stands up to August for Emmie. (p.177)
- '*Don't worry about me Emmie. I can look after myself.*' (p.169)
- '*Why would you read about it when you can have the real thing?*' (p.132)

What do you make of Bertha's relationship with Gustave? How much of this is imagination? What do you think his intentions are? Consider the following moments of insight:

- Bertha wishes she could have a baby of her own. (p.49)
- Talking '*conspiratorially*' with Gustave (p. 86), holding hands (p.88).
- Claims Gustave was her sweetheart before he was Mary's. (p.94)
- Claims he is more than a friend – '*he makes out we're just friends so nobody will know we're really in love*' (p. 95), '*he's made me a solemn promise*'.
- Bertha has bewitched Gustave with a spell. (p.97)
- She has a gold bangle she says is a gift from him. (p.115)
- Emmie sees Gustave kissing another woman while in town. (p.122)
- Bertha claims Gustave has asked her to go to Adelaide with him. (p.147)
- Bertha considers making Gustave jealous by flirting with James. (p.150)
- Mary finds out, via Emmie, that Bertha has gone to Adelaide with Gustave, and claims she will tell their father. (p.185-6)

On page 157, Ada and Emmie discover Bertha and James in the dairy.

- Why does Bertha allow, or assist, this situation to come about? Is this the act of a secure and happy girl?
- Why is Bertha so affronted by Mr Kluge's behaviour? Why does she say '*over for you*' to Emmie and appear to be close to crying? (p.112)
- Why does she have a '*livid bruise*' on her leg? (p. 113) Both Bertha and her mother have burns; she says they are from the stove. (p. 114-5)
- Bertha finally shows Emmie the bruises and welts all over her body. Her father beats her, beats all of them, if he feels he is not respected. Her older brother August is also abusive as he '*wants a girl.*' (p.167)
- Emmie muses on how Bertha cannot feel safe in the one place in which she should be able to (p.170).
- Bertha claims '*we are all scared of each other*' (p. 179). Are they all scared, or are some more a target than others? Why or why not?
- Is Bertha in danger long before her murder?

The Schippan family appear to be coping with various forms of violence in the home.

- Do you feel we learn, through witnessing or experiencing it, that violence is a solution? Discuss

Emmie fears Bertha was lost '*in a make-believe world of romance and passion*' (p.259) – she saw '*the world differently – more brightly coloured, more filled with possibility. Less real*'. (p. 259)

- What evidence can you find in the text to support Emmie's assumptions about Bertha's personality?

Emmie

Emmie is our story's narrator.

- What sense do we get of her character?
- Does she evolve or mature as the story progresses?
- Why can Emmie not take Leo's compliment seriously (p.145)?

On page 246, Emmie contemplates death in all of its stark reality. Even at her young age, she has experienced the death of two people, both of whom were close to her – Lizzie and Bertha. Both died in unsettling circumstances.

- Do these experiences shape Emmie and her views?

At the end of the book Emmie decides on her future, a future ahead of her time, because she is a girl '*who knows what she wants*'. (p. 293)

- Does this fit with Emmie's behaviour and attitudes as expressed earlier in the text?
- How well do you think Emmie will survive in the world she wishes to inhabit?

Mary

Emmie witnesses Mary killing a sheep for the family's food. (p.68)

- What does this tell us about Mary and about Emmie?
- Slaughtering an animal in this way would have been a commonplace part of country life at this time. Can we legitimately connect this behaviour to the murder?

Emmie witnesses Mary and Bertha in conversation and sees what she thinks is evidence of a close and loving relationship between the sisters. (p.108)

- Relationships are complex. Why do some harm, hurt or even murder those they love? Consider, for comparison, current news stories of family conflict.
- Emmie is horrified to learn that Mary and Gustave Nitschke are in a sexual relationship (p.95 -7). Why?
- Why does Mary ignore Emmie? (p.109)

Themes

Family

The Schippan family are, for Emmie, different, almost exotic.

Compare the two families, their attitudes and behaviours, and explore the similarities and differences. The following page references will be useful:

- Matthes (the Schippan father) (p. 28-9, 37)
- Schippan brothers - August and Willie (p.29)
- Mrs Schippan – ‘gentle’ (p.70)
- Bertha describes her family for Emmie (p.45)
- Emmie’s mother (p.31-2, 59, 105, 175, 290)

Bertha says ‘*You can’t run away from your family. They’re part of you, no matter what. Even if I could leave, where would I go?*’ (p.168)

- Is this true? Is it still relevant today?

Our families are so much a part of who we are that we cannot escape them even if we are able to physically leave. Discuss

Women

The prevailing views on women in Emmie’s world are clearly delineated in the text. Consider the following examples of how women are treated or expected to behave:

- Behaving boastfully and being immodest (p.6)
- No more school for Emmie as she is a girl, different for the boys (p.7 & 8)
- Girls need to marry (p.8)
- Emmie’s mother embarrassed by anything personal (p.19)
- Life is a ‘*secret burden solemnly borne*’ (p.20)
- Emmie keen to escape tedium (p.20)
- Wash day (p.35)
- Young women must set ‘*appropriate limits*’ (p.39)
- Emmie’s parents blame Bertha for the incident with James. ‘*James is a gentleman*’; Bertha is dismissed (p.174)
- Reporting not suitable for a woman as ‘*the work is far too hard*’ (p.236)
- Emmie continues to refuse to clean James’s room; ‘*small rebellion*’ (p. 288)

What do these incidents and views tell us about the role of women in society at this time in history?

Compare and contrast this with current day attitudes in any cultures you are familiar with. Consider similarities and differences.

Read over the chapter headings that are taken from an ‘improving’ book of the time. The preamble for chapter 21 reads: ‘*Girls have a wonderful responsibility in regard to the moral conduct of young men...*’ Mary Wood-Allen (p.159).

- Is this still the case? Why or why not?
- How difficult do you think it would have been growing up as a girl at this particular place and time in history?
- Can you think of any time throughout history when it might have been beneficial to be female?

- What other factors impact upon what life is like for us, regardless of gender?
- Are any of these factors influential in *A Girl like Me*?

Consider the behaviour of the piano teacher, Mr Kluge, and Emmie's response. At first, Emmie '*sat very upright and pretended it did not happen*' (p.57). But Bertha says that Mr Kluge is a '*dirty old man*' and he must be stopped. Bertha claims she would '*belt him one*'. (p.98-9) Inspired, Emmie stands up to him (p.103).

- Does Emmie do the correct thing?
- Why does Emmie not involve her parents?
- Do you feel something like this could happen today?

In calming Ada down, Emmie says to her that '*James would never behave like that with you, because he respects you*' (p.159).

- This implies a difference between the behaviour that Ada and Bertha can expect. Despite them both being young women they are different. How?

Love/Romance

The idea of romance dominates much of Emmie's world, both her reality and her creative impulses. For her, romance is an idealised state that has little to do with the day-to-day life of those around her. Bertha has a far more pragmatic view of the world and relationships, as well as a knowledge that Emmie envies.

- Why are the two girls so different? What has shaped them in this regard; upbringing, education or experiences?
- Does our culture idealise romantic love? What evidence can you use to support your view? For example: advertising, movies or books.

Emmie spends a great deal of time contemplating and comparing the relationships she experiences and the relationships around her:

- her parents – Is this romantic love? Was it once? (p.59)
- Leo asks her to '*be his girl*' and her first kiss (p.190)
- Claims: '*I have no idea how it must feel to love somebody so completely*'. (p.197)
- Develops feelings for George (p.260 & 278-9) but he is in love with another (p.283-4)
- You might also consider Emmie's attempts to write about romance and passion (e.g. p.117)

Friendship

Compare the relationship between Emmie and Bertha with that shared by Emmie and Ada.

- Are either of these relationships friendships?

- Emmie has few options for friends yet she is surprised by her blossoming friendship with Bertha (p.64). Why?
- Bertha invites Emmie to a '*polterabend*' (p.78), a possible indication of their growing relationship. Why does Bertha do this?

After the wedding Emmie considers Bertha a friend (p.93).

- In normal circumstances, in the absence of the harrowing events that unfold, do you think Bertha and Emmie could have remained friends? Discuss the possible future of their friendship, bearing in mind what the text shows us of their families and the wider communities in which they live.
- On page 199, Emmie goes to the Schippan house to confront and question Mr Schippan. Is this the act of a friend?

Class

- *A Girl like Me* contains a range of references to class in its various manifestations. What has stayed with you from your reading that demonstrates the distinctions between the different groups of people in the text?
- What factors contribute to the differences between people in the text? Is it just a matter of social class? What indicates class? Is it money? Breeding? Education? Behaviour? Or opinions and attitudes?

When Bertha first arrives to work for the Brooker family, she brings a cake as a gift. (p.33) This suggests an equality between the families.

- Is this the way the Brookers perceive it?

Emmie notes that Bertha smells of '*onions and sweat*' in the heat. She considers Bertha deficient in the area of personal hygiene (p.44).

- Is this an indicator of class in Emmie's mind? What of her mother, or Bertha's mother – what would their view be?

On page 45, Emmie asks Bertha - '*How do you live?*' Later, it is made clear that Bertha is insulted by this (p.165).

- Emmie makes her feel less than human. Is this intentional?
- Are the girls really that different? What sets them apart? Is it more than attitude or perception?

Emmie notes of Josef Friedmann that '*although he is not high born he is the kindest and most gentle of men*'. (p. 41)

- Emmie appears to think that kind and gentle only align with those of high birth; she appears to see Josef as an aberration. Why?

- Does she have evidence for this view in the people she knows?

Abigail (a visitor from the city) is disparaging of Emmie and the countryside (p.74-5) and assumes a general air of superiority.

- How does this make Emmie feel? Does she think Abigail's views justified?

Mother says of Bertha that '*she is a very simple girl, an uneducated girl*' (p. 80), yet she has had the same amount of education as Emmie.

- What is it, then, that Mrs Brooker thinks sets Emmie above Bertha?

Father lets Emmie go to the wedding feast (p.81).

- Why does Mother not want her to go? Is it just about perceived class?

Unsolved murders

The South Australian Police Historical Society suggests a similarity between the Lizzie Borden case and Bertha's death – in both the accused were acquitted, but remained suspect:

One of America's most famous unsolved crimes is that involving Lizzie Borden, who, in 1892 at the age of 32 was charged with the axe murder of her father and her stepmother. Though she was later acquitted of the crime many people thereafter insisted that the jury had erred, and that she was in fact guilty of the brutal crime.

The following rhyme was often recited within her hearing:-

Lizzie Borden took an axe

And gave her mother forty whacks.

When she saw what she had done,

She gave her father forty-one.

A similar case arose in South Australia in 1902 when 21-year-old Mary Schippan was charged with the stabbing death of her 13-year-old sister at the family home at Towitta. Mary had excellent Court representation and was acquitted of the crime but faced a lifetime of being taunted and accused of having committed the crime.

As with the Borden case the crime was never officially solved.

<http://www.sapolicehistory.org/clippings.html>

Murder, and solving murders, is a constant in books and television.

- Can you think of any cases that you have heard of, real or fictitious, that are similar to Bertha's murder?
- Television murder mysteries are a genre in themselves. Bertha's case seems much more ordinary, more shocking. Do you agree or disagree? Discuss.

Death

Emmie compares the death of Queen Victoria to the death of Bertha. She witnesses very different reactions to the two deaths – Bertha’s death is ‘*entertainment*’ (p.2); it is like ‘*Dogs devouring a rabbit*’ (p.2). Whereas the Queen’s death is a time of great mourning, conducted in structured reverence. Why?

- Emmie’s family did not meet the Queen, yet they knew Bertha. Do you think people today would behave similarly to the same deaths now? Consider the reaction to Princess Diana’s death.

Anna describes the murder of Bertha as it was believed to have unfolded (p.212) – ‘*her throat was cut from ear to ear*’. (p.213)

- What does this remind you of?
- Bertha’s violent death enters the dreams of both Emmie and her young brother, Oliver (p.225). Do you think it will haunt them for the rest of their lives?

Writing

Why *Wuthering Heights*? (p.11)

Those who have read this classic novel may be able to discern why it has struck such a chord with Emmie.

Emmie thinks herself similar to Emily Bronte. (p.14-15)

- Consider Emmie’s views on *Wuthering Heights* and why she finds it so attractive. Are there parallels between what Emmie reads in this book and the events that unfold around her?

Discussing her own writing with George, Emmie decides that the characters she has created are sometimes unreal and often not likeable. (p.272)

- Does this make them true to life, or unbelievable?
- Do you think you would enjoy reading Emmie’s novel?

Compare the tools of writing in 1901 described on page 16 with the way you might go about writing a novel now.

Mrs Wood-Allen, in her book about personal improvement, advises against reading novels (p.20). At the time fiction was considered harmful by some.

- What modern day entertainment(s) does this equate to? What modern day entertainments suffer from negative press? Do you think time will change this too?

Nowadays, it is considered improving to read novels.

- Do you think present day entertainments will also eventually become ‘respectable’?

Emmie is impressed by Bronte's description of Wuthering Heights. She compares this to her own surroundings in the town of Towitta (p.22 – 3). Emmie thinks Towitta is the '*plainest, flattest, most unromantic place in the world*'. (p. 22)

- Have students describe in a paragraph or two a town or a building they know well.

Emmie describes her main character (p.25) and then changes this description, adding adjectives after reflecting on her admiration for Bronte's work.

- Have students write a first paragraph describing a character and then swap this writing with a partner, who will add further detail and descriptive elements.

Bertha reads to the twins from her own copy of *Struwwelpeter*.

The Heinrich Hoffman translation of this famous collection of tales is available online at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/12116>

There is a free audio recording at

<http://www.booksshouldbefree.com/book/struwwelpeter-english-by-heinrich-hoffman>

Students may be amazed at the violence of these early didactic, instructional tales. We often romanticise the past, assuming things to have been much rosier, simpler and kinder in early times. Perhaps tales such as Hoffman's indicate that this is an unwise assumption.

- Discuss with students the violent and gruesome nature of tales from earlier centuries. Fairytales would make a useful focus. Compare the Disney versions of famous tales to the originals. *Struwwelpeter* can then be seen in context.

Emmie appears to be using Bertha's life as inspiration for her novel (p.116).

- Do you think authors generally take inspiration from those they know? Is Emmie right to use Bertha's story?

George Wilson, the newspaper reporter, comes to stay (p.232). He is both a writer and someone who has been to where the Brontes lived. (p. 233)

- He has a great effect on Emmie. Why?
- Why does Emmie put the manuscript she has been working on away under her bed? (p.302) Why does she put the book *What a Young Woman Ought to Know* with it?
- Do both of these items represent a part of Emmie's life?

Why does Emmie start a new writing exercise called *Bertha – A Girl Like Me*?

- Do you think this will be a work of fiction? What does this show us about Emmie? Is she a different person to the one we meet at the beginning of the story?

At the close of the book, inspired by her encounter with George, Emmie is keen on a career as a journalist.

- Do you feel, using the knowledge you have gained of her from the text, that Emmie will achieve this aim? Will she also become a fiction writer?

Historical period

- What does the prelude (p.1- 2), covering the reaction in the town to Queen Victoria's death, tell us about the historical period, the people and their allegiances and attitudes?

There are a range of events and daily rituals in the book that frame the historical period in which the book is set:

- Wash day (p.35)
- Hawker's visit (p.61)
- Riding to the store to collect mail (p.107)

The novel is set a little over a hundred years ago. There have been major changes across this period that have greatly affected the way we live. Brainstorm the developments, inventions, and social changes that have contributed to the ways the world has developed.

Emmie, Ada and Bertha all have had siblings who have died (Lizzie, p.50 and Pauline, p.45, Ada's baby brother and sister, p.51).

- How commonplace would this be today?
- Is it seen as unusual by any of the girls? On page 228, Emmie says to her younger brother *'Lots of little babies die, you know that. They fall ill so easily'*. (p.228) When thinking about Lizzie, Emmie says:

'Ada had lost both a baby sister and a baby brother – one to croup, the other to diphtheria. She told me once that God only lends us babies and sometimes He decides unexpectedly that He wants them back again, but I found her explanation no more reassuring than Father's.' (p.51)

- Are these treatable diseases now?

Emmie is ignorant of sex compared to a similarly aged girl today. She says:

'For a time I hoped mother might have another baby, but that has not happened either. I don't know why, but it is certainly not a subject I can raise at tea table.' (p.55)

- Is this due to Emmie's particular upbringing or is this level of understanding common for the historical period?

Fiction based on historical fact

The inquest report from the newspaper appears in the book from page 228 onwards. Discuss the language, the vivid description of events and the length of the article. Compare this, if possible, with a current murder report from the newspaper.

The reporter, George, questions Emmie (p.262). He suspects the Schippan family due to the facts, as they are presented (p.264).

- Do you get a sense that real reporters during the trial also suspected those close to Bertha? What influences your thinking either way?

Eventually Emmie confides in George and tells of her fears about the murder (p.275).

- Are Emmie's views justified in light of the facts?

George says, '*People are often least forgiving of those they love best*' (p.275).

- What does he mean?

The inquest finds Mary guilty (p.281) and she shows no emotion.

- How does this make you feel? Does it help or hinder her case?

Parts of original newspaper articles reporting on Bertha's murder exist online, but they are difficult to read. The following is the text of one of them; it outlines details of the trial.

- As an extension activity, students could compare the reported testimony to the details in the text. All stories, whether fact or fiction, are a matter of interpretation. Consider the different possibilities offered by any given view.

'Mary Schippan in the box' in *The Advertiser*, South Australia, January 11th 1902

To be found at: <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article4896487>

Mary Augusta Schippan, who was attired in a brown dress, and wore an apron and a black hat, was the next witness. She was composed and collected as she took her seat.

Mr Foster-I think this witness should be cautioned about giving evidence at this inquest.

The Assistant Crown Solicitor -This is rather improper. First of all, there is no witness sworn.

Mr. Foster-I will ask your worship to tell her she need not be sworn unless she wishes it.

The Coroner-She must be sworn.

Mr. Foster-If the witness is sworn I think it is only fair that your worship should tell the witness that she stands in a suspicious position.

The Assistant Crown Solicitor-No, no; I object to that. There is no suspicion. It is an open enquiry.

The Coroner-I will take her evidence the same as the others.

Mr. Foster-I think she should be told she need not answer all questions.

The Coroner-No. I will take the evidence pure and simple.

Mr. Foster-Which may incriminate her.

The Coroner-I think she is old enough.

The Coroner's Clerk-There is no harm in telling her.

The Coroner to witness-You need not answer any questions that you think will incriminate you.

Witness-Yes.

The witness, who was examined by Detective Fraser, said-I am 24 years of age, and am a daughter of Matthew Schippan. On January 1 my parents were away at Eden Valley. They were to return on January 2. On New Year's Day Bertha and I were in the house all day until dinner-time. The boys were out shooting parrots after breakfast. They came back, and my brother Willie cleaned the birds outside in the stable. No one helped him. In the morning Bertha was dressed in the black skirt and dress produced. Willie used a black-handled knife to clean the parrots with; the larger of the two produced yesterday, found in the safe. After he had cleaned the parrots he washed the knife. I don't know where he dried it. He said he put it on the kitchen table. I don't remember seeing it afterwards. I don't know where he washed it, but he washed the parrots in a tin dish. I am not sure whether he brought the birds in- side and gave them to me. I put them in the safe. The boys afterwards got dressed and went to Jim Blenkiron's place and stayed there until dinner time. They came home for dinner and then returned to Blenkiron's. Bertha had dinner with us. We had salt meat for dinner and had no fresh meat in the house. We had the last fresh meat before father and mother went away. Bertha and I remained home until about 5 o'clock. Bertha changed her clothes in the afternoon, putting on a red striped blouse and white skirt. Bertha went away at about 5 o'clock with two of Henke's girls. I saw her in the paddock at about half-past 6 at the back of our house. I called to her to help me to water the sheep. Bertha came home then along the road. When she came home we watered the sheep and went into the house. I made tea, and Bertha and I had tea together about 7 o'clock. I cleared the table and we washed up. When this was over we sat outside on the form until nearly 8 o'clock. We went inside then and I lighted a lamp. I had just gone into the bedroom and was taking the lamp to go to bed when my two brothers came home. Bertha went into the room with me. Bertha and I were in our bed-room when the boys came home. We were not in bed and were not undressed. When the boys were in the kitchen I took out the lamp from our bedroom to them, and placed it on the kitchen table. The boys asked for cake, and I gave them some out of the safe. I sat on the sofa in the kitchen and waited for them to finish. When their tea was over I left everything on the table. The boys said, "We are going to bed now," and Bertha and I went as well. The boys went out and shut the kitchen door. It was fastened with a latch and could be opened by pulling a string from outside. The door can be fastened from inside with a peg above the latch, but we never fasten it. When the boys went to bed Bertha and I were left alone in the house. Before going to bed I wore a black skirt, pink blouse, and white apron. I undressed, put the skirt and blouse and apron in the pantry, a little room at the far end of the kitchen. I had to go outside through the kitchen door to do this. I came

back again, shutting the kitchen door after me. Bertha was just going to bed when I got into the bedroom. I took off my shoes and blew out the lamp and went to bed, Bertha being already there and lay alongside her. The bedstead is in the north-east corner of the room. Bertha slept next to the east wall. It was about half-past 8 o'clock when we went to bed. I remained awake for about a quarter of an hour. I had the pink blouse produced on in bed and the stockings produced, and I had on the pink flannelette chemise produced. My sister had on a blue blouse and white chemise, and the old red petticoat produced.

The door leading from my father's room, which leads into the yard at the side of the house, was closed and fastened on the inside by the peg produced. The clothes Bertha took off when she went to bed were her stays, drawers, a pink flannelette petticoat, and red striped blouse and white skirt. She wore the blue pinafore produced in the morning. We went to bed at half-past 8 and were talking for a quarter of an hour. Bertha said the boys did not bring any rabbits home. I don't recollect anything else that was said. I think Bertha went to sleep before I did.

I did not hear any thing until I woke, about 10 o'clock, and I then felt something, lying across me. As I turned round a person jumped up and I got out of bed. He caught me by the two arms and pushed me up against the side of the sewing machine, and I got near to the kitchen door, and then I was knocked against a little table. When I got near to the middle door I felt he had something in his hand, which I thought was a knife. When I was just near the middle door I heard something drop, and it was the knife. Then I got loose and there was an old skirt lying on a chair near the middle door, which leads to the kitchen. I caught hold of the skirt and rushed out through the kitchen door. There was no light. The kitchen door was closed and latched. I pulled the latch up, opened the door, and ran out. While I was struggling with the man I called out loud, "Gustave! Gustave!" and Bertha, who, I think, was in bed, called out, "Gustave" twice.

The Coroner-Did your sister attempt to get out of bed while you were struggling?
Witness-I don't know. Continuing, in reply to Detective Fraser, and while I passed the house I heard her scream out once. I called "Gustave" when I got to the boys' door. I said there was someone in the house. He did not get up at once, and said I was dreaming. I called again to him to hurry. He got up and dressed and I said, "We had better go over to Henke for Mr. Henke." Gustave ran over and Willie and I stayed in the boys' room till he came back. Mr. Henke did not come with him. Gustave told me Mr. Henke said it would be better to go to Lam-bert, the constable. Willie and I got a pitchfork and Gustave got a stick and went to the house. Gustave opened the kitchen door and went as far as the kitchen table and lit the lamp. Willie and I stood by the kitchen-door. The middle door was closed. We could not hear anything. Gustave called out once, "Bertha," but there was no answer. We looked round the kitchen and Willie said, "Look at the blood on the sofa" Gustave blew the light out and came outside. We shut the door, and the three of us went to Lambert's. Gustave called Lambert, and told him to hurry as there was someone in our house. Alf Lambert got up, and came out with his staff and handcuffs, and came down with us. Lambert opened the kitchen door and went inside and lit the lamp. He open-ed the middle door and went into the bedroom, and as he did not see anything he went on to father's bedroom. Willie and I stood by the middle door opening from our bedroom into the kitchen. Lambert and Gustave went to the back door Alf Lambert said, "There lies Bertha, dead" We did not touch anything, but went back again into the kitchen. Lambert put the lamp on the kit- chen table and blew it out. Before that, I got

my shoes from my bedroom near the door and put them on in the kitchen. I took my sun bonnet from a box in my room near the door. After the light was put out we all went outside. Lambert closed the door when we were all out, and we went to Lambert's.

We stayed there till morning. At 8 o'clock I went to Mrs Lambert bed-room and I lay down on her bed. I told her what had happened. I did not go to sleep during the night at all. Came back home the next morning, leaving Lambert's at 6 with Mrs Lambert. We sat down in the shed all the morning, None of us entered the kitchen or either of the bedrooms. Mrs Lambert and I went into the pantry, where I had put the clothes I changed. The clothes I put on were a black skirt, clean blouse, and white apron I did not wash myself, as I did that and my hair at Lambert's. Until the police came I did not enter the other rooms.

By the Coroner-I spoke to Lambert several times on the way over to our house on the night of January 1. We were talking about how the affair happened, I know a man named Gustave Nitschke.

All spectators were at this stage, ordered out of hearing by the Coroner at Detective Fraser's suggestion and a guard of police kept watch.

Witness continuing her evidence said: - He is keeping company with me. He has been my sweetheart for about a year. I saw him last in our house on the Sunday before New Year's Day. My parents were away. Nothing took place between us on Sunday evening. Bertha went to Blenkiron's on Sunday afternoon. My two brothers were there also.

Detective Fraser - Did anything take place in the barn between you and Nitschke?
No; we were not in the barn that afternoon.

The Foreman- Could Bertha not have made her escape by the back door?
-No; the back door was fastened.

Was there anything to prevent Bertha escaping while the man was holding you?
I don't know anything of Bertha, except that I heard her sing out twice.

A Juror-Did the man have the knife in his hand when he had hold of both your arms?
-No; he let go my left arm. Then I noticed the knife.

By the Coroner-I felt the knife in his right hand before he dropped it. I did not feel the knife when he had hold of both wrists.

Mr. Sinclair-Was Nitschke on the bunk in your bedroom at any time?

-No, only on the bunk in the kitchen. That was on December 29, the Sunday. Bertha was not home. It was dark when Bertha got home. It was about 8 o'clock when I was on the bunk with him. We were on the sofa all the evening, and were there when Bertha came home. Nitschke and I were lying on the sofa in the kitchen. We had no light. Bertha was lying on the other sofa in the kitchen. Bertha went into the bedroom about 10 o'clock. Before he left Nitschke did something while Bertha was in the other room.

The Assistant Crown Solicitor-What did he do?

Mr. Foster said the witness need not to answer the question if it incriminated her. The Assistant Crown Solicitor said it was not now the time to advise the witness. She had been advised and had been told she need not answer unless she liked. The question was again put by Mr. Sinclair and it was not answered.

Continuing, in reply to Mr. Sinclair, witness said - Nothing of a like nature took place in the barn. Nothing took place in the kitchen on a previous occasion. There is only a small window in the kitchen. The room is very dark. It was dark in the room on the night in question. I don't know if the man had a beard or not. I never touched his face and only felt his hands. I first knew the man had a knife when near the middle door. I know he had it, because he dropped it. Prior to his dropping the knife I did not know that he had one. I think the man was in the room pulling me about for 10 minutes before the knife dropped. We were only struggling on the western side of the room, and the man only pushed me along once.

I think he was nearly as tall as I am. I was not very strong about six months ago. I had fits, but I have been in good health since. I did not speak when I found the man lying across me. I just screamed out. Before I left the house I did not hear Bertha speak or know that she was out of bed. I continued screaming as loudly as I could. I called for Bertha when the man had hold of me in the middle of the room. The man did not say anything except "shut up" while I was screaming. I screamed pretty often. I think the man was about the same height as me. I bumped against the western wall while I was struggling round. So far as I remember I only bumped against the Western wall once. I knew in the dark that the man had a knife in his right hand, because I felt it. I caught hold of part of the handle and the blade. I did that near the middle door. That was before he dropped it. I don't know of anyone who had any ill-feeling against me or Bertha. The man did not let go of me until the knife dropped. He let go the right hand when the knife dropped and I got away from him. My father is generally quiet, but sometimes gets in a temper. I had seen no strangers about before or since. Neither of the boys said "Good-night" as they were going to bed. Neither of the boys returned to the house after going to bed. I went to bed in my stockings, and they are the same as I went to Lambert's in, and that Dr. Steel took off. The hair produced in the paper is combings from my hair. I always wrap up my combings until I get rid of them. My hair is generally crimped, in front and done up with pins behind. On the night of the murder my hair and Bertha's were down as usual at bed time. The man touched no part of my body but my arms and wrists, except to catch hold of my hair. Once he caught hold of my back hair in about the middle of the room.

Related Reading

Atwood, Margaret *Alias Grace*

Donnelly, Jennifer *A Gathering Light*

Godbersen, Anna *The Luxe Series*

Herrick, Steven *Cold Skin*

Jensen, Marie-Louise *The Lady in the Tower*

Pulman, Felicity *Rosemary for Remembrance*

Pullman, Philip *Ruby in the Smoke*

Rijckeghem, Jean-Claude van & Pat van Biers *With a Sword in my Hand*
(Translated by John Nieuwenhuizen)

Syrie, James *The Secret Diaries of Charlotte Bronte: A Novel*

Wynne-Jones, Tim *The Boy in the Burning House*

References

The Schippan Mystery, ABC TV Show, Director Di Drew, Writer Kenneth G Ross, 1984.

It appears a television show was made about Bertha's murder 26 years ago. Whilst I have not been able to find a copy it may be in existence somewhere. It would be fascinating to explore this film and compare it to the *A Girl like Me* and its interpretation of events.

Heinrich Hoffman translation of *Struwwelpeter* online at:

<<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/12116>>

Audio recording at <<http://www.booksshouldbefree.com/book/struwwelpeter-english-by-heinrich-hoffman>>

'Mary Schippan in the box' in *The Advertiser*, South Australia, January 11th 1902

To be found at: <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article4896487>>