



SONG OF A BLACKBIRD

Written and illustrated by MARIA VAN LIESHOUT

RECOMMENDED FOR: Ages 14–18 YEARS OLD (MIDDLE TO UPPER SECONDARY)

GENRE: Young Adult graphic novel / historical fiction

THEMES: Holocaust, Dutch Resistance, Nazism, family history, European history, WWII, street art, poetry, trauma, courage

CURRICULUM LEARNING AREAS:

- English: Literature, literacy and language
- Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS): History
- The Arts: Visual Arts

NOTES WRITTEN BY: Karys McEwen

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PLOT SUMMARY

Fictionalised but based on true events, *Song of a Blackbird* has two intertwined timelines: one is a modern-day family drama, the other a thrilling true story of a WWII-era bank heist carried out by Dutch resistance fighters.

Emma is a young student about to be drawn into what will become the biggest bank heist in European history: swapping 50 million guilders' worth of forged treasury bonds for real ones – right under the noses of the Nazis. Emma's life – and the lives of thousands, including a little girl named Hanna – hangs in the balance.

Almost seventy years later, Annick discovers something surprising about her family. Her grandmother needs a bone marrow donor but none of her relatives is a match. In fact, they are not even related. Desperate to find a living blood relative, Annick dives into the past, aided by her grandmother's only childhood possession, five copper etchings, and the name of their maker: Emma Bergsma.

In this stranger-than-fiction graphic novel, Maria van Lieshout weaves a tale about family, courage and the power of art. Deeply personal yet universal, *Song of a Blackbird* sheds light on a remarkable WWII story and sends a powerful message about compassion and resistance.

A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

'I was inspired to create *Song of a Blackbird* after my grandmother passed away in 2011 and I found several documents among her belongings that described the things my grandfather experienced with his friend Frits in the Amsterdam resistance. They also described in detail what they experienced when their house was bombed.

'Finding these documents was like finding a treasure, and they inspired a scavenger hunt for more information. I learned about the bank heist that the Amsterdam resistance plotted and about the Jewish children who were saved from deportation.

'Along the way, I became inspired by the brave women and artists who played a role in pulling off the heist and in saving lives of Jewish children. I decided to make a graphic novel, from the perspective of a fictional female artist.'

Maria van Lieshout

BEFORE READING

- Have students come across any WWII narratives previously: books, films, tv shows, artworks, poems, or anything else? What do they know about this era based on what they have read or watched?
- Find some maps of German occupation during WWII, such as the ones available through the [Holocaust Encyclopedia](#). Are students aware of how Nazism spread through Europe at the time? Are there any occupied areas or countries that they didn't know about?
- Discuss as a class: Ask students what they know about Dutch involvement in WWII. Many of them would have heard about Anne Frank, who became one of the most-discussed Jewish victims of the Holocaust with the 1947 publication of *The Diary of a Young Girl*, written while her family hid in an attic in Amsterdam. What would life have been like in that part of the world at that time?
- Encourage students to investigate where their own family members were during WWII. Were any of their ancestors involved in WWII? Did any family members migrate to Australia post-WWII?
- Watch this [TedX Talk: Why Comics Belong in the Classroom](#). Ask students to consider the opinions voiced in the video and discuss in pairs or small groups.
- Predict and reflect: Ask students to make some predictions about *Song of a Blackbird* based on the title and front cover. What do they think the story is about? What could the significance of the title be?
- What is a motif? Ask students to think about one example of a motif in a book they've read, and how it worked to shape the story.
- Research the meaning of these terms: resistance, propaganda, deportation, rationing, occupation, freedom, courage, execution

Note: Consider reading *Song of a Blackbird* aloud as a class. Students could take turns reading different pages or characters. The format and length of this graphic novel will work well for this kind of shared reading experience and will enhance students' appreciation and engagement with the text.

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

ENGLISH

LITERACY

- Why do you think Maria van Lieshout chose the graphic novel medium for her story? What are the pros and cons of this, compared to a traditional novel format? Create a list of these and discuss them with your class.
- Select a double-page spread with multimodal elements from *Song of a Blackbird* to analyse in detail. Some that may work well include:
 - Page 50–51
 - Page 66–67
 - Page 134–135
 - Page 194–195

Photocopy or take a photograph of the page so that you can annotate it. Note down any evocative language, use of collage and letters, narration, drawing choices, facial expressions, poetry, or anything else that stands out.

Write a paragraph about how the page has been laid out to achieve a particular purpose. What is the author trying to tell the reader?

- In graphic novels, the author must be discerning when it comes to what they show in writing and images, and what is left unsaid. Choose one chapter of *Song of a Blackbird*, and consider why this particular scene was selected (over other potential options)?

Think about what might happen after Annick's oma and her brother, Sol, are reunited. Using the same writing and illustration style, write a plan for an additional chapter that shows how they reconnect in some way. Make some decisions regarding the selection of images, text inclusion, colour and collage elements. You may like to map it out using a [comic strip template on Canva](#) or another similar program.

ENGLISH ASSESSMENT IDEA:

Research and take notes about the purpose and appeal of graphic novels, especially in terms of supporting literacy and engagement with literature. Then, use your findings to write a persuasive text that encourages schools to consider purchasing and/or teaching more graphic novels. Use examples from your experience of studying *Song of a Blackbird* to make your case. Put particular emphasis on why the format works well to represent the issues and events in the book, and how this reflects the context and purpose of the story in an effective way for readers of differing abilities and interests.

Choose the following format for your assessment:

- A letter to your school librarian, urging them to stock and promote more graphic novels at your school
- A letter to the head of the English department, requesting that they add more graphic novels to the booklist for future years
- An article for your school newsletter, informing parents and the school community of how graphic novels should be read, shared, and studied
- A poster for your school library or noticeboard, encouraging all students to read more graphic novels

Year 9 & 10: Analyse how representations of people, places, events and concepts reflect contexts ([AC9E9LY01](#))

Year 9 & 10: Analyse and evaluate how language features are used to represent a perspective of an issue, event, situation, individual or group ([AC9E9LY03](#))

Year 10: Analyse and evaluate how authors organise ideas in texts to achieve a purpose ([AC9E10LY04](#))

Year 9 & 10: Plan, create, edit and publish written and multimodal texts, organising, expanding and developing ideas, and selecting text structures, language features, literary devices and multimodal features for purposes and audiences in ways that may be imaginative, reflective, informative, persuasive, analytical and/or critical ([AC9E9LY06](#))

LANGUAGE

- Read the epigraph of *Song of a Blackbird*, written by the author Maria van Lieshout:

One cold morning,
late in Amsterdam's Hunger Winter of 1944–45,
when my mother was five years old,
she heard a blackbird's uplifting song.
She asked my grandmother
whether the blackbird knew it was wartime.
After giving it some thought,
my grandmother answered,
'Yes, I believe the blackbird knows.
And I believe it sings so beautifully
not in spite of it,
but because of it.'

Reflect on this prior to starting the graphic novel and then go back and revisit it at the conclusion. How has your view of this anecdote changed after reading the dual connected stories of Emma and Annick? Write a short paragraph describing why you think the author included this at the beginning of her book.

- The blackbird is used as a motif throughout the story, serving as the omnipresent third-person narrator. The evocative language used by the blackbird is in contrast with the realistic dialogue spoken by the character in the dual timelines. Why do you think the author chose to narrate the story in this way? What do you think the blackbird narration adds to the story, and how might it have been different if it was written in first person? How does the author use language to evoke messages of resistance and hope?
- Display the following lines from the blackbird narration and in small groups or pairs, discuss what you think they mean in the context of the graphic novel and more broadly, and if you agree or disagree with the sentiment. You may choose to use something like a [four corners](#) technique to express and visually represent your opinions.
 - *'It's the eyes that tell me everything.'* (pg 33)
 - *'Time has ticked forward but has left cracks for you to squeeze through.'* (pg 102)
 - *'If you spot me in the wild, and you listen to my song, my melodic flute will lull you into marvel. But each of my verses ends with a squeak like a rusty gate. This is so you don't become too enchanted. Too trusting. Too uninhibited. This is part of my song, too.'* (pg 107)
 - *'Retelling. Remembering. This is how we keep stories and memories alive. This is how we keep people alive.'* (pg 157)
 - *'Flying is magic. We spread our wings to explore, to expand, to connect or reunite. Or to heal what was fractured. Even if that healing won't be smooth.'* (pg 160)
 - *'Light is always on our side. But darkness can be on our side too.'* (pg 163)

ENGLISH ASSESSMENT IDEA:

Set up a double-entry journal to fill in as you read through *Song of a Blackbird*. Rule pages in half and label one side **In The Text**, and the other **Reactions/Connections**. Make notes about what happens, and how you react/feel, including any personal connections you find in the text. You may like to read aloud some sections of the text as a class to assist this process, and your teacher may also provide some prompts to help you focus on certain aspects of the text.

Once you have finished reading, write a reflection on the section that you most connected with, and why. It may be that you identified with a certain character or event, or that it stirred up a particular emotion. Be honest and creative in your writing.

Year 9: Understand how evaluation can be expressed directly and indirectly using devices such as allusion, evocative vocabulary and metaphor ([AC9E9LA02](#))

Year 9: Examine how authors adapt and subvert text structures and language features by experimenting with spoken, written, visual and multimodal elements, and their combination ([AC9E9LA03](#))

Year 10: Analyse how meaning and style are achieved through syntax ([AC9E10LA06](#))

LITERATURE

- As a class, consider which texts you have read (or watched) that use multiple points of view, and/or move back and forth in time. Make a list of the number of perspectives and time periods. What is the purpose of this kind of structure? What does it achieve?
- Annick and Emma are the two main characters in *Song of a Blackbird*, but there is a large supporting cast of minor characters – Father Theo, Erik, Koenji, Mia, and more. Note down the pages where they play important roles in the narrative, and what their character adds to the overall story.

Write or illustrate (or both) an additional two pages where the reader finds out something new about this character. How could their perspective add another layer to the story? For example: how did Koenji get into street art? What went through Erik's mind when he was arrested by the SS? Be creative.

- Read the final message from the blackbird narrator (pg 228). What is the tone and significance of this concluding narration? Why has the author chosen to end on this note?

ENGLISH ASSESSMENT IDEA:

Song of a Blackbird uses multimodal elements and moves back and forth between two separate timelines. Write an extended response on how this structure reflects and reiterates the message of: 'History isn't a set of events confined to the past. It's a current that pulses through flesh and bones, and it's passed on through generations.' (pg. 204)

Literature unit 1: [Investigate and reflect on different ways of reading literary texts](#)

Literature unit 1: [Analyse distinctive features in literary texts](#)

Literature unit 1: [Create imaginative texts](#) Set up a double-entry journal to fill in as you read through *Song of a Blackbird*. Rule pages in

ADDITIONAL LEARNING AREAS

HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES (HASS): HISTORY

Despite the repression of their opponents, resistance to the Nazis occurred throughout their time in power. This resistance manifested in different ways. Some people joined organised groups of resistance, some participated in armed uprisings, some refused to do the Hitler salute, and others produced secret writings condemning the regime. You can read more about resistance via [The Holocaust Explained resource](#).

In *Song of a Blackbird*, Emma is recruited to smuggle Jewish children to foster families, instead of being deported to concentration camps. She also works in a printshop creating fake ration coupons, IDs and treasury bonds to help Resistance fighters actively counter Nazi rule.

Read the sections where Emma makes the decision to join Mr Nijholt (pg. 28–35), Erik (pg. 72–79) and Gus and Waldemar (pg. 176–189) in their various attempts at resistance. Some succeed, and some fail, with devastating consequences.

What does it mean to be on 'the right side of history'? Discuss as a class.

HISTORY ASSESSMENT IDEA:

Choose and research one resistance group that existed during WWII. This could be the Baum group, Bielski brothers, the White Rose, or any others. Use primary and secondary sources to inform your findings.

Investigate the following:

- The origins of the group;
- Their intentions;
- Their successful endeavours;
- The lasting impacts of their actions;
- Anything else significant that you think should be included.

Present your information visually through a poster, infographic, collage, slideshow, or something else. As a class, create a [gallery walk](#) display of your work that celebrates resistance, compassion and freedom. Using post-its, write and stick constructive feedback on your peers' work.

Year 9 & 10: Develop and modify a range of historical questions about the past to inform historical inquiry ([AC9HHI0S01](#))

Year 9 & 10: Locate, identify and compare primary and secondary sources to use in historical inquiry ([AC9HH9S02](#))

Year 10: The significant events and turning points of the Second World War, including the Holocaust and use of the atomic bomb ([AC9HHI0K03](#))

Year 10: The commemoration of the Second World War, including different historical interpretations and debates ([AC9HHI0K06](#))

THE ARTS: VISUAL ARTS

- After reading *Song of a Blackbird*, consider the artistic influences. Which artists, books, eras or mediums do you think that Maria van Lieshout has drawn upon to create her work? Write a list of anything you think is comparable, as well as any elements that you think are completely unique. Share with your class.

- Select one chapter of *Song of a Blackbird* to analyse in detail. Make notes about the unique visual elements on display. This could be in terms of colour, composition, texture, multimodal elements, or anything else.

Now, in the style of [an artist statement](#), assume the voice of Maria van Lieshout and write a paragraph explaining the artistic choices made in the chapter.

- Discuss and debate as a class: *In graphic novels, images make more of an impact on the reader than words.*

VISUAL ARTS ASSESSMENT IDEA:

Choose a historical building where something momentous took place during WWII. This could be the attic where Anne Frank's family hid in Amsterdam, St Paul's Cathedral in London which survived the Blitz despite being a major target, or even Melbourne's Exhibition Buildings complex, which was requisitioned by the Royal Australian Air Force and used as a barracks and training facility.

Based on the style of *Song of a Blackbird*, create four pages in graphic novel format that tell an imagined story about what took place on this site. You will need to do some research to spark some ideas and plan out the story.

Use collage, illustration, panels, balloons for speech, sound effects, gestures and facial expressions, and any other multimodal elements that you think would work well. Consider colour and composition in your work. Demonstrate mastery of the various skills needed to create a successful graphic novel that uses both written and visual elements to tell a story.

Year 9 & 10: Investigate the ways that artists across cultures, times, places and/or other contexts develop personal expression in their visual arts practice to represent, communicate and/or challenge ideas, perspectives and/or meaning ([AC9AVA10E01](#))

Year 9 & 10: Experiment with visual conventions, visual arts processes and materials to refine skills and develop personal expression ([AC9AVA10D01](#))

Year 9 & 10: Reflect on the way they and other visual artists respond to influences to inspire, develop and resolve choices they make in their own visual arts practice ([AC9AVA10D02](#))

Year 9 & 10: Select and manipulate visual conventions, visual arts processes and/or materials to create artworks that reflect personal expression, and represent and/or challenge, ideas, perspectives and/or meaning ([AC9AVA10C02](#))

AND JUST FOR FUN...

Did you notice that each section begins with a boxed image of the blackbird and a coloured drop cap? After completing the book, invite students to put the letters together to discover *Song of a Blackbird*'s key message, **INSPIRATION IS EVERYWHERE. FLY WITH IT.**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MARIA VAN LIESHOUT was born and raised near Amsterdam, where she spent many weekends in the Museum Quarter row house where her grandparents lived with her artist aunt and metalsmith uncle. Drawing while her aunt painted, and pecking stories on a typewriter while her uncle soldered metals, inspired her love for drawing, creating and writing. After high school in Leiden, Maria studied Visual Communications at GWU in Washington DC, and worked in design and innovation at Coca-Cola. In 2000, Maria became an illustrator full-time. She has illustrated/written several picture books. *Song of a Blackbird* is Maria's first graphic novel.



ABOUT THE WRITER OF THE NOTES

Karys McEwen is a school librarian, bookseller, vice president of the Victorian branch of the Children's Book Council of Australia, project manager for Reading Australia, and education advisor for the Melbourne Writers Festival. She is passionate about the role libraries and books can play in the wellbeing of young people, and she writes the substack 'I Read A Lot'. Karys has two middle-grade novels published by Text Publishing, *All the Little Tricky Things* (2022) and *The Paperbark Tree Committee* (2025).

CORRESPONDING LITERATURE

(In alphabetical order of authors)

Catherine's War by Julia Billet and Claire Fauvel

Once by Morris Gleitzman

The Librarian of Auschwitz by Antonio Iturbe

All the Beautiful Things by Katrina Nannestad

White Bird by R J Palacio

Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi

Maus by Art Spiegelman

Salt to the Sea by Ruta Sepetys

OTHER RESOURCES

Holocaust Encyclopedia: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/en>

Anne Frank House: <https://www.annefrank.org/en/>

Verzetsmuseum: <https://www.verzetsmuseum.org/>

Graphic Novels as Teaching Tools: <https://www.readbrightly.com/graphic-novels-as-teaching-tools/>

Occupied City (2023): Available to watch through streaming platforms including DocPlay and Prime Video

The Zookeeper's Wife (2017): Available to watch for free on SBS On Demand or through streaming platforms including Stan and Prime Video

Resistance (2020): Available to watch through streaming platforms including Prime Video and Apple TV

ONLINE LINKS IN FULL

German Occupation – Maps: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/gallery/german-occupation-maps>

Create Your Own Amazing Comic Strips Online with Canva:
<https://www.canva.com/create/comic-strips/>

Why comics belong in the classroom – Gene Yang, TEDxManhattanBeach:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oz4JqAJbxj0>

The Teacher Toolkit – Four Corners:
<https://www.theteachertoolkit.com/index.php/tool/four-corners>

The Teacher Toolkit – Gallery Walk:

<https://www.theteachertoolkit.com/index.php/tool/gallery-walk>

The Wiener Holocaust Library – Resistance:

<https://www.theholocaustexplained.org/resistance-responses-collaboration/resistance/>

Flying Arts Alliance Inc – How to Write an Artist Statement:

<https://flyingarts.org.au/resources/resources-for-artists-artswokers/how-to-write-an-artist-statement/>