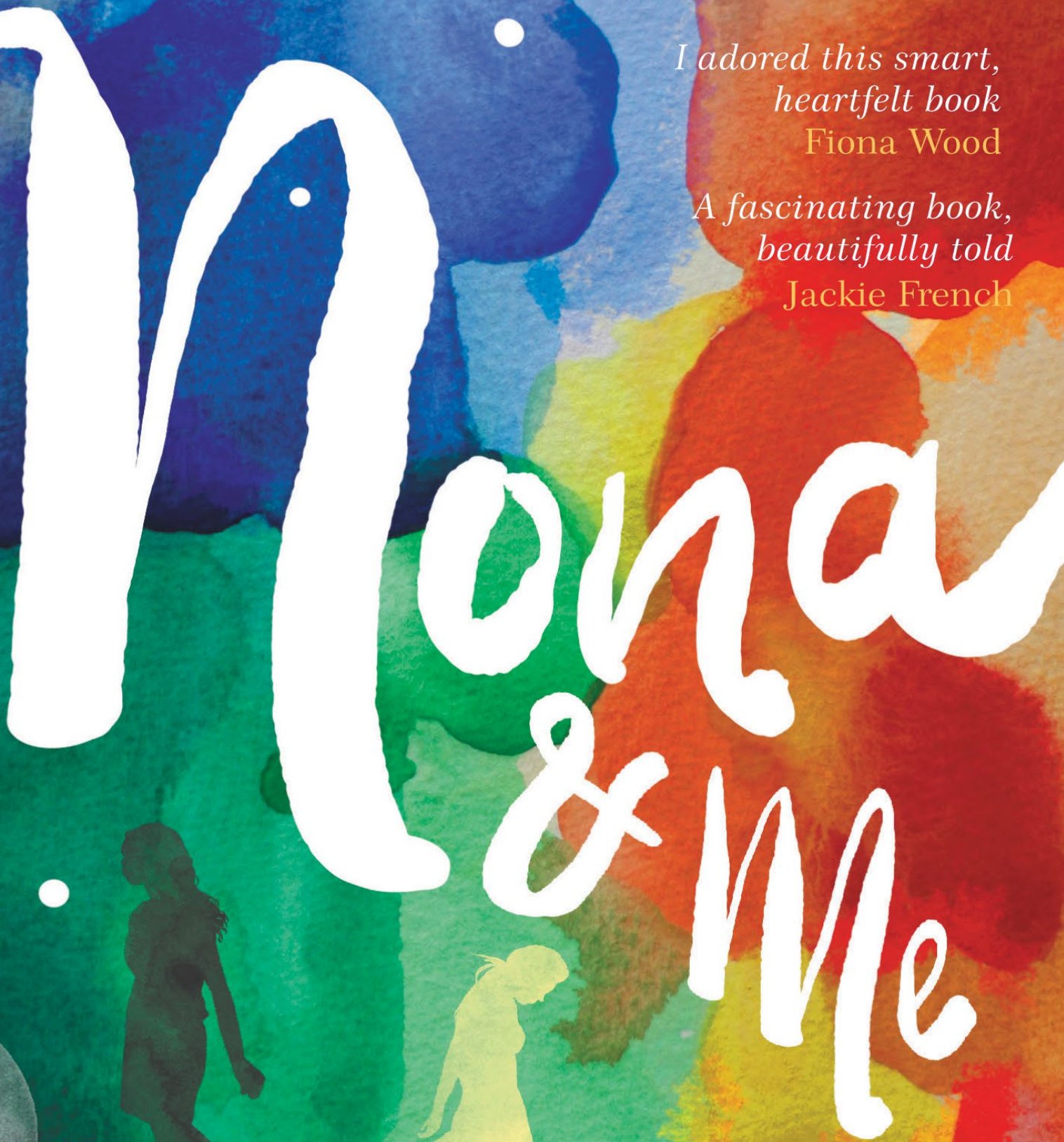


• Clare Atkins

*I adored this smart,
heartfelt book*
Fiona Wood

*A fascinating book,
beautifully told*
Jackie French

Mona & Me

The background is a vibrant, abstract watercolor wash in shades of blue, green, yellow, and red. In the lower-left quadrant, there are two dark silhouettes of women walking. The overall style is artistic and expressive.

TEACHING NOTES BY LAURA GORDON

‘A fascinating book, beautifully told, with rich insight into a deeply Australian but little known community.’

—JACKIE FRENCH

‘Rosie’s story brims with the joy and pain and complexity of friendship and love at sixteen. I adored this smart, heartfelt book about family, kinship, country, and finding out what really matters.’

—FIONA WOOD

To view footage of Clare Atkins speaking about *Nona & Me* and download free education resources, visit www.blackincbooks.com/teachers

Nona & Me

By Clare Atkins

PLOT SUMMARY:

Set in a divided Northern Territory town, where the development of a mine has impacted significantly on the local Aboriginal community, years have passed and Rosie has become a teenager and fallen in love. Many years have passed since she was inseparable from her *yapa* – sister – Nona, and so much has changed in her life. She is no longer a nine-year-old, immersed in the life of the community and living happily with her mum and dad and the extended Aboriginal family that adopted them so many years before. Now Rosie is in Year 10 at the town school and she hasn't seen Nona for many years, so when Nona walks into her classroom and back into her life, Rosie doesn't know how to respond. Torn between the teenage obsession of fitting in, and the rich and vivid memories of time spent with Nona, Rosie utters a sentence that will change her life irrevocably. The humiliation it causes for her family is nothing compared to the guilt it breeds inside her. And then Nona leaves to live with her 'promised' and gets pregnant. Now that Nick, the boy she has had a crush on for many years, is in Rosie's life, Rosie finds it even harder to undo the damage. Deep down Rosie realises the words are not the meaningless jokes she has been telling herself they are; she has to stand up and say something. She knows her Dad is right about Nick and she knows what she needs to do to repair some of the treasured relationship she has broken; it all just seems impossible. The death of Nona's brother gives her an opportunity to right the wrongs. Rosie spends some time over the summer with her Dad in the community he has moved to. After she gets over the betrayal at finding out his secret, it reminds Rosie of the wonder and joy her childhood was filled with. It reminds her of Nona. She returns to Yirrkala and seeks out Nona. She ends the relationship with Nick. Rosie gets in touch with Mrs Reid and asks her to help Nona go back to school and fulfil her dream of becoming a nurse. Nona has a beautiful baby girl and decides to name her Rosie. It seems there is hope for these two *yapas* yet.

PLAY DOUGH GALLERY:

An interactive and kinaesthetic way to remember the narrative details is to have students physically create a symbol that represents each of the key events. As a class make a list of exactly the amount of key events as there is students in the class. They need to decide what to leave in and what to take out to have one event per student. Each student is given a ball of play dough and they need to design a symbol that effectively represents one event from the text. Students leave the symbol on their desk with the list displayed in the room and they move around to each desk to see how others students have interpreted the various plot developments from the text. Visual cues make it much easier to remember these details.

POLITICAL COMMENTARY:

This is a coming-of-age story, it is a story about culture and tradition and it is a story that reveals the clash of two worlds and the people caught in the middle of it. Atkins deliberately gives voice to both perspectives in the discussion about the way Australia's Indigenous people are being treated, educated, judged, maligned and spoken for. She creates characters that are complex and likeable, even when their attitudes are based in fear in ignorance. She opens up the floor for discussion about why Australians think these things about the Indigenous population

and presents an alternative view; the experience of the Aboriginal people, in this case the Yolŋu people from Yirrkala, who are on the receiving end of these decisions. She has deliberately chosen to set this story in the birthplace of Yunupingu, the lead singer of Yothu Yindi. His grandson's band Eastern Journey also features as the headline act in the final chapters of the book. This is a place of progress; of using the best of Aboriginal culture to lift up and unite a town. Yunupingu was not just a powerful musician who left a great legacy; he was an educator and a great man. Atkins has made a very deliberate choice in the place her story is set, perhaps from her own time spent in Arnhem Land.

The Intervention initiated by the Howard Government as a response to 'The Little Children are Sacred' Report, which revealed extensive child abuse and violence in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, features in this text. In 2007, in response to this report, The Government intended to curb this abuse by implementing a range of measures including increased policing, limiting alcohol and pornography in Aboriginal communities, removing the permit system, linking welfare payments to school attendance, changing land ownership rules and removing the use of customary law in bail and sentencing decisions. It was a highly criticised policy and after the change of Government, and a name change, lost its momentum somewhat. In *Nona & Me* the views of people at the coalface, those affected by the policy and those in support are all represented. It is up to readers, encouraged to align themselves with Rosie and her first-hand experience of living in an Aboriginal community in outback NT, to make up their own minds about the way the government of the day chose to respond. And the reality of what impact this had on the very people it was designed to protect.

The other key political event that is referred to in this text is the formal apology Kevin Rudd made to the Stolen Generation in 2008. In Rosie's school, like in many schools throughout the country, the students stopped and listened to this momentous announcement. The emotion is palpable for those who witnessed this acknowledgement of the wrong that had been done. Students reading this text have an opportunity to reflect on this historical moment and the impact it has had on the Australian conscience.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Depending on the age of students and their prior knowledge, educators may need to explore the specifics of each of these political moments. Students could be asked to research one for homework, or share their own understanding of these events.

SETTING & STRUCTURE:

Most of the story is set in 2007, with flashback chapters to the childhood of these two girls. The start of each chapter gives the year it relates to. So anything that is not 2007/08 is a memory. Many of these memories are bittersweet, not because of what happened at the time, but what has triggered the memory. Divided between the mining town, Nhulunbuy, and the remote Aboriginal community, Yirrkala, where her mother works in the art centre and her father was once a teacher, Rosie has drifted away from the life she once had. The campfires, dancing, cooking and eating together and spending every minute with Nona is long gone. Now town beckons with its swimming pool, school friends' houses and parties. It is not easy to get home when you live in Yirrkala and your mum is reluctant to keep trudging in and out to pick you up.

But when you have a boyfriend who can drive, you would think it might get easier. It does, except for his reaction as he arrives in Yirrkala. He can only see the “run-down houses and abandoned cars”. The families sitting together on mats don’t represent the extended family to Nick like they do to Rosie. These unexpected images fuel his fear and disapproval. For Rosie Yirrkala has meant laughter and family and happiness. Now she is not so sure, especially as the boy she loves sits beside her unimpressed by this place she loves. And in the back of her mind, Sydney and the Art School it promises seems an impossible dream.

PLACE AND PEOPLE:

Do some research into the real places that are Yirrkala and Nhulunbuy in Arnhem Land. Read about the history of this place and make links between the narrative that has been set here. Clare Atkins, the author, spent time living in Arnhem Land when she was writing this book. Students might like to see photos of this beautiful part of Australia and the people who live here. This website is a good place to begin; <http://www.eastarnhem.nt.gov.au/yirrkala/>

CHARACTERS:

ROSIE:

“It is only when I finish that I realise what I have drawn. It is me. Matjala. Driftwood. Smooth and shaped by the ocean. Pushed around by the tides. Washed onto a shore somewhere and lying unnoticed. Broken.” (p246)

“Then I’m sobbing. Sobbing for my dad and some woman I’ve never met. For my mum and the boyfriends who keep leaving. For me and Nick and his hurtful words. For Lomu and his tiny daughter. Nona and her unborn baby. For love and hate and all the confusion in between.” (p255)

“There’s an art school in Sydney that would be perfect for Rosie. COFA. But Sydney’s so expensive...she’d have to start saving now...” (p269)

“Have I changed? Has she? Or is it the whole world that’s shifted?” (p272)

Rosie is our fifteen-year-old narrator. She has lived all of her life in a community in Arnhem Land, a twenty minute drive from the local mining town. Living only with her mother who runs the art centre in the Yolnu community, Rosie goes to school in town and talks on the phone weekly to her dad. She has been immersed in the culture of this place since birth. She is only five days older than her *yapa* Nona and they were inseparable for many years. But now things have changed. She no longer spends all her time playing and hunting and exploring with her adopted family, in fact there is not much in the community she is involved with anymore. The town has more to offer; the pool, school, friends’ houses and of course Nick. He is Selena’s older brother and he has just noticed her. Her wildest dreams come true and they end up together. He becomes her first love. She goes to parties with him and stays at his house, lying to her mother about where she is. They spend hours at the pool and watching *The Simpsons*. She is even willing to lose her virginity to him. And then the truth hits home. There is a reason she has been hesitant, she is just not sure if she can pretend he is someone different anymore. The jokes start to sting, the graffiti is offensive and the argument with her dad is too much to bear. She understands where it comes from, fear from an attack a long time ago, but she can’t excuse it anymore. Her mum is right, her dad is right; she knows it in her heart. When Lomu dies and once again she is immersed in this culture, among these people she has called family for so long,

it comes clear. Paralysed by the guilt for what she said about Nona, struggling to gain independence from her mum and ashamed of the views Nick holds, she cannot keep up the façade anymore. And once the truth comes out, she is relieved. Her heart is broken, but it is also starting to heal. She can finally see her mum in a new light and hope to gain the forgiveness of the one person who really made her world make sense. And when she holds that tiny baby in her arms, she knows it's going to be okay again.

1. Describe your first impression of Rosie. What surprises you about her? Do you know anyone who is a little bit like her? Is she an average teenager or do her circumstances make her quite different?
2. When Nona overhears her words, how do you feel toward Rosie? Describe whether your view of her has changed. What caused this response? Is this justifiable?
3. How does the author make Nick seem appealing to readers? Do you like him? Can you understand why Rosie does?
4. At any point in the story do you think Rosie did the wrong thing? Why?
5. Describe the relationship Rosie has with her mum? Is this realistic? Is it fair? Compare this with the relationship she has with her dad.
6. What does her Yolŋu name 'driftwood' say about Rosie?
7. Explain the significance of the Triptych.
8. Rosie deserves Nona's forgiveness. Do you agree?
9. Rosie's dad deserves her forgiveness. Do you agree?
10. What is the moment that captures Rosie's turning point? Explain.
11. How must Anya feel toward Rosie? Why is it so important that she comes out to the community at the end of the novel?
12. Discuss the statement: Rosie is a different person at the end of the novel from who she is at the beginning.
13. Choose one symbol that defines Rosie.

NONA:

"It was a family joke when I was little. I arrived in the world five days before Nona, but she beat me in everything else. She smiled first, laughed first, took her first steps months before me. She learned multiple languages while I struggled with one." (p224)

"She'll be sixteen soon too. Sixteen and six months pregnant." (p248)

"Nona says, 'I called her Rosie.'" (p283)

Nona is spoken about in the past much more than she is in the present. She is almost a ghost of Rosie's past, haunting her future. The memories Rosie shares of her childhood with Nona and her family are punctuated with laughter and happiness. Nona is who she runs to when her father tells Rosie he is moving out. These two girls, *yapas*, wear matching pants, they share two languages, they run and play and imagine together. Then Nona's father dies. Her mother turns to alcohol and she is left to be cared for by her grandmother Rripiipi and eventually Rosie's mum. When it all gets too much she decides to go and live with her mum in Elcho Island. It is many years before she returns. The courage she shows, turning up to that school without a uniform or much experience of being in a school setting, is immense. It is tough enough for any teenage girl to walk into a new school when they hardly know anyone. When the students in that school feel the need to be openly nasty, and the one friend you have, your sister, denies you, it is no wonder she doesn't come back. Instead she goes to her promised. Not long after, Rosie discovers Nona is

pregnant. She is fifteen. Rosie knows what has been lost. Nona wanted to be a nurse, she wanted to go to school and be educated. She wanted to be able to help support her family and find a meaningful job. Now all of that is so much more difficult to achieve. When the death of her brother Lomu hits, Rosie realises this is her chance to make amends, to redeem herself. Her words cannot be undone, but she can try to rebuild what she has broken. Not only does Nona forgive, but she names her baby girl after her sister. Nursing is still possible, and her future looks hopeful. After all she has her *yapa* back to help her along the way.

1. What is your favourite memory from their childhood that Rosie recalls?
2. How do you feel toward Rosie when she says that being sisters doesn't mean anything? How do you feel toward Nona?
3. Are you surprised that Nona is married and pregnant at the age of fifteen? Why does the author include this in the novel?
4. Nona has had some difficult battles to face; the death of her father, an alcoholic mother, the move away from the community she loves, racism at school, betrothed and pregnant at fifteen, and the suicide of her brother. What does it say about Nona that she deals with each of these things in her young life?
5. What would Nona say to Nick if they had met?

NICK:

"Nick's not racist, he just doesn't know much about Yolŋu culture. A lot of people don't. It's hardly a crime." (p150)

Nick is the heartthrob of the book. He is the swimming teacher, the older brother of Selena and the handsome boy that Rosie has had a crush on for ever. When he finally notices her, and not just to swim laps against in the pool, she is immediately head over heels for him. The saying 'love is blind' exists for a reason; when people are consumed by this idyllic feeling, the reality of the situation is hidden. Even from the very beginning, the harmless jokes Nick makes around his dad and his friends bite at Rosie. He laughs them off as just words, not hurting anyone, but Rosie knows the damage even a few words can do. They can change lives. At first she is completely absorbed by his adoration for her, his patience, his attentive texting, his invitations. But when he drives into Yirrkala for the first time – he has never bothered to go there until he has drop Rosie home – he can't hide his horror. Meeting Rosie's mum and dad go as badly as expected. Nick's comment that the Intervention might be a good thing and his justification that denying the Yolŋu family access to the pool is fair because "they're different", reveal his vastly different perception of what is happening. When he fails to justify either of these positions with any of the compassion and understanding Rosie's family share, it is the beginning of the end. Rosie doesn't follow what her parents say because she has to, she shares their beliefs because she knows it is the right way to consider Yolŋu people.

Nick justifies his anger, his fear, his dislike for Yolŋu people because of an attack he experienced by a group of Aboriginal teens in Sydney. They threatened him with a knife and he was petrified. He has carried this fear, which burned a deep hatred inside him, all this time. The jokes, the graffiti, singing 'Another One Bites the Dust' after the death of a Yolŋu boy was announced are all indicative of his underlying racist beliefs. It has been ingrained by his father, who has made a lot of money working in the mines. It is reinforced by his mates and it goes unchecked by Rosie. The tattoo of the Southern Cross he got in Bali after the attack epitomises this. Nick is proudly

patriotic, but at the exclusion of the original inhabitants of Australia. He cannot see anything wrong with any of his ideology, and is reluctant to see Yolŋu people as anything but violent drunks who waste the government money they are given. It is not an isolated view in this town, nor in the wider landscape of Australia. But it is reflected against the sense of community, kinship, connection to land, passion for culture and history that the people Rosie knows are so proud of. She stops trying to change his mind and finds refuge in the knowledge that she is finally doing the right thing.

1. How is Nick portrayed in the text? Is he likeable? Why is this so important to the narrative, but also the broader comment being made by the author?
2. Are the views Nick holds commonly held in Australian society? What makes you say that? How do you feel about that?
3. What is it about Nick that Rosie falls in love with? What does she fall out of love with?
4. Abuse of alcohol is a substantial problem for many Aboriginal communities. How is it portrayed in this text? How does it compare with Nick and his mates? Why do you think the author includes this?
5. Is Aiden justified in what he thinks about Nick?
6. Consider the argument Nick has with Rosie's dad. What arguments does Nick present? How does her dad counter these? Which view do you share? Why?

SELENA:

"Selena is always lending me clothes. She has a cupboard full of dresses by designers I've mostly never heard of. She buys them online or on frequent family holidays to Darwin, Cairns or overseas. Her dad works at the mine: he's loaded." (p3)

"Selena always talks like that. Us and them." (p6)

Selena is the archetypal popular girl. She picks and chooses who will have a good reputation and who will not, and it is all to do with the impact they have on her. Her capacity for revenge and nastiness terrifies Rosie. It paralyses her from speaking out, doing the right thing. Rosie can think of nothing except other girls Selena has torn down, and with the prospect of being with Nick, Selena's brother, she denies Nona, her sister, the respect she deserves. Rosie relies on Selena, not just for clothes to wear to parties, other than the handmade creations of her mum, but also for a place in the social hierarchy. As a fifteen year old, this initially seems more important than her kinship and connection to Nona. She immediately knows she has made a mistake, but it is too late. Selena is brash, insensitive, ignorant and nasty, to everyone except her friends. And when Selena finds a better version of what she deems a friend to be, she is happy to remove the other ones from her collection. It takes Rosie a while, and a summer away from town, to realise it's not a collection she wants to be part of anyway.

1. Can Rosie blame Selena for what she says about Nona?
2. Why do these girls remain friends when they are so different?
3. Do you think Selena shares Nick's views about Yolŋu people? Find quotes to support this.
4. How do you explain Selena's cruelty toward Nona? Where does it come from? What does it say about Rosie?

ANYA:

"She looks smug. We used to be good friends." (p2)

"It must be amazing to be part of this. To be part of a community." (p281)

Anya is the only other friend Rosie really has at school. She has lived here much longer than Selena, and she knew Rosie when Nona still lived close by. She knows the bond they shared and she understands it, but when Anya speaks of Nona as Rosie's sister, her desperation for Selena's approval has the words shoot out of her mouth before she can help it. The damage is done. Anya has lived here a long time. She is not willing to stand by, like most of the others, and allow the cruelty of Selena's words and actions go unchecked. She reports her harsh words and is proud of the fact. She has more courage than Rosie, Nona's supposed sister. Eventually Anya tires of the hypocrisy and parts from the group. It is not until the new school year, when Nick has gone, Selena has found the Elites, and Rosie has found herself, that their friendship reignites. As they listen to the band in Yirrkala, the pride and awe Anya feels for Rosie and her connection to the community is starkly different to Nick's response. Rosie had assumed a great deal about Anya that wasn't true, and again her assumptions were wrong. This is someone Rosie can be friends with, this is someone who can see the beauty and richness in this culture, just as Rosie always has.

1. Are you surprised it is Anya who reports Selena's nasty comments? How do you feel toward her when you find this out?
2. Why does Anya really remove herself from this group?
3. Imagine what it must be like to live in a really small place and have your closest friends ignore you. What does it say about Anya that she is willing to give Rosie a second chance?
4. How does Anya's response at the end of the text differ from Nick's initial response to visiting Yirrkala?

MUM:

"I glare at her. She knows the answer; I can't bring myself to tell Mum I don't want her to sew clothes for me anymore. She's been doing it since I was little. It's her way of convincing herself I'm not a 'neglected single-parent child'." (p3-4)

"She hugs me back, squeezing like she doesn't want to let go." (p234)

"She just listens. I realise I've underestimated her." (p242)

"Then I remember our fight. Mum hurt and angry, saying Dad wasn't honest or open like her. That he didn't tell me things." (p253)

Rosie's mum gets a raw deal from her teenage daughter. She is single, again, surviving on limited income in an isolated outback community. Despite the unusual living arrangements, the relationship between this mother and daughter has many of the same flaws and fractures that occur as many young women, all over the country, try to make sense of their world. Rosie is completely self-absorbed for most of the text. Concerned only with Selena's approval, Nick's attention and wracked by the guilt of her words about Nona, the impact this has on her mother becomes the least of her worries. And typical of many teenage girls, the disapproval directed toward Nick does nothing to caution her developing feelings for him. As usual, it does the opposite. Rosie is attracted to Nick even though she shares the ideology her mum fiercely promotes, but she has to come to that realisation herself. Not just about how wrong Nick is for

her, but about how much her mum has sacrificed for her, and how open and honest her dad really is. It is a credit to Jen to not tell Rosie the truth of her dad's relationship. She has learnt that telling her daughter what to think about people only backfires, and she is careful to let her discover the truth for herself this time. Returning from her dad's community sees an inevitable shift in this relationship. Rosie is starting to come-of-age and make sense of her world in an adult way. She knows what she has to do with Nick, with Nona and also with her mum. She makes the right choices, mostly due to her mum's parenting.

1. Find as many quotes as you can to describe Rosie's mum through her eyes. Now write a description of her from Rosie's dad's perspective and then Rripipi's perspective.
2. How do you feel about Jen after Graham leaves?
3. Is it fair that her mum disapproves of Nick?
4. What do the homemade dresses symbolise?
5. Describe how Jen responds to the death of Lomu. What do we learn about her after the news and during the weeks of the funeral?
6. How does art eventually heal some of the wounds between them?

DAD:

"He's probably wondering where this mad bushman came from. Dad is dressed in khaki shorts and a Garma T-shirt from 2001. His chin is covered in stubble and his hair is greying, pulled back in a thin twist of ponytail. His nose is sunburnt red: the dusty Akubra on his head can't be too effectual." (p208)

This description is the first visual we get of Rosie's dad in the story. He has not lived with Rosie and her mum since she was six years old. But it is perhaps the distance, and the unknown secrets, that enable her to be much more honest with the father she never sees, than the mother who looks after her full time. Their commitment to talking on the phone every Wednesday night allows Rosie to skip the mundaneness of the everyday and reflect on the highlights of the week. She can keep her boyfriend hidden from her father, continue to believe that her father is much more honest with her and treats her like an equal than her over-sharing mother does. Rosie's world is tipped upside down when she is finally invited to fly down to see her dad's community and the life he has created. The discovery that he has been in a relationship for a few years, which he has failed to tell her about, is a cruel realisation that her harsh words to her mum a few days before were completely wrong. The truth sheds new light on the way her mum has raised her and while her relationship with her dad stays intact, it is the trust this transfers over to her mum that is a truly positive outcome from this visit. Not only has she reconnected with her childhood, but she is finally able to repair some of the damage her thoughtless words have done.

1. How do you feel when you first meet Rosie's dad? Are you surprised about anything?
2. Is he fair on Nick? What do you think about his counter arguments?
3. Is Rosie justified in being angry at the secret her dad has kept?
4. How does his story about Bolu help Rosie realise what she needs to do?
5. What is the significance of place in the visit to her Dad?

AIDEN:

"The word sorry puncture the air like the beat of a drum. Aiden's lips contort, like he's trying not to cry." (p275)

"My nan was taken. From the desert." (p276)

It is not until the very end of the text that Rosie realises Aiden is Indigenous himself. Despite knowing him most of her life, travelling on the bus together to school and living in Yirrkala, Rosie had never considered if Aiden was Aboriginal. She had always assumed that his family had been adopted into the community, like hers. He didn't look Indigenous and he seemed to behave like the other Anglo-Saxon students she went to school with. When Aiden first expresses his dislike for Nick and his behaviour, Rosie is reluctant to believe Aiden is telling the truth. She wonders about his motives for making this up. It is not until she begins to see the truth in his words, and discovers Aiden's Aboriginality that she can understand how hurtful Nick's words and actions have been. Aiden is deliberately set in this story to challenge preconceived ideas about Aboriginal people in communities. The revelation is intended to shock both Rosie and the reader as she realises how wrong it is to assume things about people based on their appearance. She has been furious at Nick for exactly this mistake. It is only because Aiden trusts her enough that she finds out who Aiden really is.

1. Were you surprised to learn that Aiden is Indigenous? Why does this matter in the context of this narrative?
2. How does it change the way Rosie sees him?
3. Why does the author include this character in the novel? What assumptions is she challenging? Is this successful?
4. Explain how hurtful Nick's words would have been to Aiden. What does it make you think about the racist 'jokes' Nick and his friends tell each other?

LOMU:

"He hung himself Rosie. Hung himself from the banyan tree near the bungul ground." (p191)

"What was he thinking? Was he thinking at all?" (p192)

Lomu is the gentle older brother of Nona and the loving father of Kaneisha. In this way he is also Rosie's brother. At the tragically young age of eighteen, he takes his own life. The town is devastated and the image of his daughter hysterically screaming; "my daddy can't breathe ... let my daddy out ..." (p195) is a heartbreaking image. It is particularly poignant as only weeks earlier Lomu was cradling his beloved daughter on his lap in the lounge room of Rosie's house. His death is tragic and shocking. And sadly, not isolated.

1. How does Lomu's death reignite Rosie's connection to her family? How does she feel about being offered condolences on her 'wāwa's' death?
2. Which image in the weeks of the death and funeral do you find the most confronting?
3. Does Lomu seem older than Nick, despite also being eighteen? Why?
4. What is the significance of Lomu's death? Does it have any link to the Intervention?
5. Given the author's experience of living in Arnhem Land, why does she include this in the narrative?

RRIPIPI:

"She shakes her head. 'Yaka, 'float around'. It's a strong name. The wood is strong." (p270)

Rripipi is integral to the adopted family that Rosie is part of. She is Nona's grandmother, and after the death of Nona's father, Bolu, Nona's mother, Guḷwirri turns to alcohol as means of salving the pain. She starts to neglect Nona, her brothers and "the smalls", Nona's two younger sisters. Rripipi begs the establishments in the area not to serve Guḷwirri, but they won't oblige, so eventually she organises for her to go Elcho Island, where there is more support. Rripipi is the matriarch. She raises so many of the children in the community; she loves Rosie as if she is one of these children. She is a great support to Jen and works in the art centre in town. When Lomu dies, Rripipi is understandably devastated. Her world comes crashing down and the Aboriginal tradition of the women throwing themselves to the ground reveals the depth of her grief and despair. She has known loss before; too many young Aboriginal people die before their time. When this eighteen-year-old boy, already a loving father to Kaneisha, dies, the weight is incredibly difficult to bear.

1. Rripipi is responsible for the Indigenous name given to Rosie. What does she name her and how does she explain this to Rosie?
2. In what ways has Rripipi supported Jen in her time living in Yirrkala?
3. How does this woman keep tradition and culture alive? List some of the experiences she invites Rosie to be a part of, both now and as a child.
4. What would she say to Rosie about her harsh words regarding Nona?

SYMBOLS:

The Southern Cross tattoo:

Spending a lot of time swimming in the pool, Rosie notices Nick's tattoo early. She wonders why he chose to get that particular image and eventually asks him. He tells her that his mum let him get it while he was in Bali in 2005. He explains it's because he loves this country. Much later in the text the more sinister reason is revealed. The image of the Southern Cross has come to symbolise more than just a patriotic love for this country. It is often associated with protests and organisations that are considered right-wing and at times racist due to its use during the Cronulla Race Riots. The Southern Cross was a key image during the Eureka Stockade and has been adopted by many political groups throughout history.

1. What is your perception of the Southern Cross as an Australian symbol?
2. Why do you think the author chose for Nick to have a Southern Cross tattoo?
3. What is Rosie's perception of the tattoo? How is this revealed?
4. How does Nick confirm this suspicion on page 189?

AUSTRALIA IS...

Design your own symbol that represents Australia in a contemporary setting. It must be a personal response to the values Australia holds, Australia's relationship to the world and what it means to you. It may be an existing familiar symbol, or something unique and specific. Draw the symbol and write a piece explaining your choice.

The Banyan Tree:

Rosie's great passion and talent is her artwork. When she is set the task by her teacher to create a triptych, the middle image is set in the symbolism of the banyan tree. She draws this in the middle section of her piece; it comes to her easily from her memories of all of the time she spent in the arms of the tree with Nona. But it is not really the banyan tree, it is Rripipi, her *momu*, and it represents her home, her solace and her safety.

TRIPTYCH:

Imagine the task Rosie completes has been set for another character in the novel. Perhaps it is Selena, or Nick or Nona or even Rosie's mum. What are the three linked images they would choose to represent themselves? Would the three panels be linked in any way? What medium would they choose? Design the final version.

Aboriginal Language:

Rosie steps in and out of the language of the Yolŋu people. It acts as a reminder of how ingrained she once was in the life and culture of her adopted family. It also acts as a point of difference. The notion of family and kinship in Aboriginal culture is very different to non-Aboriginal culture and the words the Yolŋu people use often don't have a direct translation to English. It represents the rich history and the diversity of Aboriginal people. This language is specific to this Aboriginal clan. It speaks specifically of this place and these beliefs. It alerts readers to the difficulty the Yolŋu students would have being taught in English when it clearly is not their first language. The Aborigines in this story speak English, they understand how important it is for their children to converse in the national language, but they also treasure the history and tradition that can only be shared in their communal dialect. The two are not exclusive as we see in the way Rosie, Nona, Aiden and Rosie's parents use the two languages as appropriate.

YOLŊU LANGUAGE:

Do some research into the Yolŋu people who live in this area in Arnhem Land. See if you can find some more words than the ones used in the text. Create a glossary of the words that are used in this text. Write the word and the meaning. Consider Nick's argument that the students should learn English. Consider Rosie's dad's response to this about the importance of maintaining their traditional language as well. Consider another situation where this happens, where the language of the family's ancestors is still spoken in the home to retain a connection to their history.

Art:

The use of art to express oneself, or escape the reality of the situation, is used repeatedly throughout the text. It is Rosie's mum's job, managing the art centre, it is Rosie's great passion and gift, and it is a connection between Nick and Rosie. While Rosie's art is complex and representative, Nick's seems to be more about rebellion and expression. He was caught in Sydney tagging public places and at the end of the novel is again back to his old ways, graffitiing the road on the way to the mine. His art seems to come out of confusion, and later anger. It is something he loves, but only something he uses to cause trouble and divide the people around him. For Rosie art is connecting, it helps her make sense of her world. The opportunity to create the Triptych in class allows her to explore the difficult emotions she is struggling with. It enables her to find her place in the world again, to understand how family affects her and to bring forgiveness and atonement where it is needed. The final image of her under the water is

ambiguous as to whether she is swimming or drowning. Art is also the future and while it seems it may take her physically away from her mother, it is the recognition that this is her great love that actually brings mother and daughter closer together.

ATONEMENT:

Imagine Rosie creates something to give to Nona on the birth of her baby girl as a way of healing the relationship and attempting to start again. Design the artwork she creates. What symbols does it use? How does it convey repentance, the memories of their childhood together and hope for the future? What medium does she create it in?

THEMES:

QUOTE OFF/ STICKY-NOTE QUOTE:

These two tasks are excellent for revision and exploring the key ideas of the text. Quote Off involves dividing the class into two teams. Each student must share one quote. One student from the other team must identify the context of the quote and the character it came from. Each team gets a point if they complete it correctly. Each student is only allowed to answer once and offer a quote once.

Sticky-Note Quote involves a pack of sticky notes and some brain power. Each student writes a quote they can remember from the text. They put their own name on the back and then stick it on the whiteboard. Everyone comes up and takes a different sticky note. As each quote is called out, the teacher can collate the list and the student will identify context and character. The quotes can then be used to organise into themes, as the starting point for a writing piece or debate topics.

ONE MINUTE DEBATE:

There are a number of key historical people who were vocal in the introduction of the Intervention. These may include politicians, Aboriginal elders, local people, the media, representatives of key organisations; e.g. Mal Brough, NT Ministers, Galarrwuy, Noel Pearson, human rights advocates, musicians, etc. Divide the class in half and give every student a persona; some could be characters from the text who have a view on this. They need to research what their identity would have thought, said and contributed to the debate on the Intervention. Then divide them into two sides, according to the view the persona they are given holds. E.g.: In support of the Intervention – Mal Brough, John Howard, Nick. Against the Intervention – Rosie's Mum, Galarrwuy, human right's advocate, etc. Each student has only one minute to present a key argument with evidence to support their point of view. Take it in turns to have one view from each side present their side. Students may also rebut the argument before them, but all in one minute.

DONUT:

Prior to or instead of, you can debate the issue of the Intervention, or any issue raised by the text using the 'donut' structure. Divide the class into two even groups. Arrange the two groups in two concentric circles on chairs in the middle of the room. The students on the inside circle argue in support of the statement being discussed. The student directly behind must rebut and present an opposing argument. All of the students on the inside circle present their views first,

while the outside circle take notes. Then it is the outside circle's turn and then four students from each circle get a final chance to rebut.

'Rosie does not deserve Nona's forgiveness.'

'Everyone is entitled to their own opinion.'

'The Intervention disregarded the Racial Discrimination Act.'

'Nick's views were based in fear and ignorance.'

FAMILY:

"I've never been so ashamed, Rosie. They're our family. They adopted us. That means something to them. Hell, it means something to me. It's not a plaything. Family is family. They don't deny each other. As Rripipi put it – they don't raki-gulkthun, break that string, that bond." (p65)

"Not me – my grandmother. She was adopted here, ages ago, by that old lady. The whole thing trickles down though, which means I'm adopted too." (p149)

The notion of family is underpinned by the Yolŋu people's understanding of family. It is not simply about bloodlines and family trees, it is much more complex than that. They feel connected to each other in a way Anglo-Saxon Australians resist. It is not dissimilar to many other cultures, where cousins are like brothers and sisters and aunties and uncles are as important to the raising of a child as the birth parents. They understand kinship, they feel each other's pain, and they never break these bonds. Rosie's father was born into a family of missionaries living in Yirrkala. They were the first ones adopted into this Yolŋu family, they became a part of it. Rosie's dad grew up with Bolu, they were brothers. They drifted apart as they lives diverged, but once he returned to Yirrkala and found Bolu again, their bond reignited. His loss is felt heavily by not just the Yolŋu community but by Rosie's family as well. When Rosie and Nona are born five days apart, their destiny seems set; two little girls, sisters, *yapas*, growing together in the love and protection of this community. When Rosie denies this connection and Nona overhears, her heart is broken. Not only was Rosie her oldest and dearest friend, but she was her chance at an education. Rosie's mother is not only ashamed, but hurt. Hurt that Rosie has chosen these recently acquired friends over a bond that has existed for generations. Rosie immediately knows her mistake, she can feel it. It is only due to Nona's capacity for forgiveness that the bonds can heal.

The other version of family that is portrayed is the single parent home Rosie has lived in since she was six. Her dad has moved away, and although she is in constant contact with him, it is her mum who has to establish the boundaries and hold firm with the expectations. This mother-daughter relationship is fraught. It is easier to trust the parent who isn't around to enforce the rules, who can make jokes and seem understanding. But as Rosie quickly realises, if relationships aren't based on mutual trust, the respect for the other person diminishes. It is the realisation of her dad's secret that makes her really understand the job her mum has been doing.

IDENTITY:

"I'm talking about standing by your principles, no matter what." (p186)

"The problem is I don't know what that is anymore." (p214)

"I can't help feeling I haven't earned their condolences. I haven't been here. And I wasn't there for him. He had become a stranger. Like Nona." (p216)

"I thought I would feel released and whole. I thought it would feel like I was starting again. But Nona's not here, and I don't and it doesn't." (p231)

This is a text for young people trying to make sense of their world. Young people who are faced with a conflict of values, when the appeal of the people they are attracted to loses its shine and they are forced to really consider what is important to them. Rosie has to reconsider who she is and who she wants to be. She has to make hard decisions, between her first love and her best friend, between what she thinks is right and what others hold important. She knows these are more than words, they are hurtful and vindictive and they indicate what really lies at the heart of these people she has come to love. But there is no denying her childhood, her sense of community and connection to the Yolŋu people who are her home. As she watches the old man bashed by the bouncers at the front of the pub and then hears the venom in Nick's voice as he claims he deserved it, something ugly turns inside Rosie that she cannot deny. This is not what she believes, this is not acceptable. As she stands in the darkness, with the music of Aiden's band washing over her, and Anya standing beside her filled with awe, she realises she is home. This is so much of who she is, trying to fight it has left her tormented and confused. Now that she is back in the middle of the community, recognised, loved, she can see how "amazing it is to be part of this."

GUILT & ATONEMENT:

"Yolŋu families adopt people. That's just what they do. The whole sister thing, it doesn't mean anything. We were kids. I don't even know her anymore." (p29)

"I'm glad you're giving your mum a chance, being open with her about things. I'm sure it means a lot to her.' Guilt swamps me." (p85)

She picks up her mug of tea and takes it to her bedroom. I feel even worse than before." (p204)

"Something inside me screams, Just tell her you're sorry! But I don't get the chance." (p227)

"Sorry. A little word that means so much. Sorry. A simple word, but so hard to say." (p276)

Guilt works on a number of levels throughout this text. On the surface is Rosie, her harsh denial eating away at her. She knows the rejection of Nona at school caused her to walk away and not return. It is the reason she agrees to go and live with her promised and subsequently falls pregnant. Her mother's shame at being told of Rosie's rejection burns a little deeper into her psyche. She knows what a terrible thing she has done, and she can't quite figure out how to make it right. On another level, guilt works through her family. After visiting her father and discovering he has had a girlfriend for years that he has never told her about, Rosie realises just how harsh she has been toward her mother. She can't explain why she has always trusted her dad and confided in him, but as she realises it was not reciprocated, she feels betrayed by her dad, and cruel toward her mum. The truth, as it so often does, finally dissipates the tension and the relationship between Rosie and her mum is repaired. On a deeper level is the political tension in Australia. The Intervention is being rolled in, Kevin Rudd has said sorry for the treatment of Stolen Generation. The Apology was not about guilt, but about acknowledgement. It was a chance to say we caused pain and we are sorry for that. As Rosie says: "[it is] A little word that means so much." She knows how hard it is to say, to admit you are wrong, to

take responsibility, but as she sees the solace in Aiden's eyes just from hearing these words, she knows how significant these words are. It's not enough to admit you are wrong; you need to seek redemption and forgiveness to truly atone for the sins of the past.

ABORIGINAL CULTURE AND TRADITION:

"I can see she feels shame. I can guess what happened. An aunty probably asked to use her shoes that morning. She would've given them to her without blinking." (p13)

"I brace myself for a lecture about how the mine has insidiously destroyed Yolnu culture and knowledge and poisoned the land." (p94)

"Gulwirri takes over again and cleaves the top side of the trunk clean away, exposing a well of sweet liquid gold. Jimmy dives straight in." (p102)

"It's Yolnu land. They're letting us be here. It's not that hard to show respect." (p201)

"It is filled with gapan, white clay paste. I watch them mixing it, checking the consistency ... They start to smear the gapan on each other's faces. A thick white line across the forehead then a thinner one back over the centre of their skulls." (p214-215)

"Her body hits with a sickening thud. Women help her up, she throws herself forward again and again and again. Her body lies, looking soft and broken on the earth." (p229)

"They send sniffers down here to dry out. There are three here at the moment." (p251)

The complexity of Aboriginal culture and tradition is explored by Atkins through the range of identities she includes in this novel. Based on her extensive experience in Arnhem Land, and with first-hand knowledge of Yolnu people, she doesn't shy away from the difficulties facing many communities today. Suicide, disengaged youths involved in crime and abusing alcohol and drugs, and the death of a boy drink-driving highlights the very real and lasting impacts of these problems. She refers to health problems, social problems, difficulties with employment and schooling and describes the run down and damaged areas many live in. But it is without comment. Instead she shows how these communities have their own means to deal with this. Gulwirri is sent away to dry out, Rosie's dad points out the men's shed the young men are sent to stop sniffing and Nona's own desire to become a nurse show the diversity and resilience of these people. Rosie's story of running down the kangaroo to cook and eat, finding the magic of honeycomb in the middle of a tree and the simplicity of searching for mussels on the shoreline are all enduring images. Her sense of community and connection, the description of the funeral and grief process and the laughter of the women who work at the art centre are rich and beautiful reminders of the depth of this culture. And then there are the children. Kaneisha's grief is heart shattering, the loss of her father horrifying and tragic. But the birth of Nona's baby, to her sixteen-year-old mother, fills readers with hope. She is not alone in her hospital room, instead she is surrounded by aunties. This child will also know what it is to be loved.

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION:

"Jessica. From school. She said black people smell 'cause they're dirty." (p68)

"They're just jokes Flipper ... It's not like it's hurting anyone." (p108-109)

"My Dad would say it's a waste of money. I mean places like this ... they're screwed up, right?" (p97)

"We Yolŋu used to feel strong. We felt like we knew how to raise our kids. If they were doing the wrong thing, we felt we could give them a slap. But now we don't know what to do ...". (p123)

"Did you hear him in there? After the meeting? He was singing 'Another One Bites the Dust'." (p148)

"Do you think if we wanted to swim, they'd let us?" Nick shrugs. "That's different.' 'How?' ... 'I know what you're thinking and it's not cause their black. I'm not racist.'" (p210-211)

"THIS IS NOT YOUR LAND. Then whose land is it?" (p244)

Racism is a difficult word to talk about, but it is an important one to discuss. Nick justifies his beliefs by simply stating that he is not racist, and yet his treatment of Yolŋu people, their land, their beliefs and their culture is with complete and utter disregard. It comes from a place filled with fear and hate. It is fuelled by a misguided sense of injustice, of the different treatment being akin to inequality, when in fact it is recognition of hardship and difference. He has no empathy for students being forced to learn in English, or Yolŋu having to adapt to white culture, or being forced to follow laws they don't believe in. He has never even been to Yirrkala, and when he finally drives Rosie home, he allows his first impressions to fan the fire of ignorance and fear already burning in his belly. He will never forget being the target of a gang with knives, nor should he, but tarnishing everyone who is Aboriginal as violent and dangerous is short sighted and ignorant. Running parallel with his individual experience is the implementation of the Intervention. There is some merit in the argument that this policy was inherently racist as it was deliberately exempt from the Racial Discrimination Act. Students can research both the Act and the introduced policy and come to their own decision about what fuelled these new laws, and what the impact was on Indigenous communities.

NINE CARD SENTENCES:

You can construct a range of these including different characters, symbols, events and themes. It is important to have the cards already cut and put into envelopes. This ensures that students will arrange the cards in a random order of three rows of three. They need to write eight sentences, one with three words from each line in the table. The first three sentences use the three horizontal lines, then the vertical lines, then the two diagonal lines. The three words that feature on the cards must all feature in the sentence, in any order and any capacity, as long as the sentence shows a sound understanding of the text. The following is an example for classroom use.

NONA	GUILT	ART
YIRRKALA	ROSIE	NICK
SWIMMING	RACIAL DISCRIMINATION	FEAR

ASSESSMENT TASKS:

- 1. 'Racism is born out of fear and ignorance, but overcome with compassion and respect.' To what extent does *Nona & Me* reflect this?**
- 2. Read the song lyrics by Yothu Yindi included on page 205. In what way do these words and other events in the book inspire hope?**
- 3. "Sorry. A little word that means so much. Sorry. A simple word, but so hard to say." Redemption and forgiveness heal much of the hurt in this text. Discuss.**
- 4. "THIS IS NOT YOUR LAND. Then whose land is it?" *Nona & Me* is a story about place as much as it is about people. To what extent do you agree?**
- 5. Aboriginal culture has many social problems affecting the young people growing up in these communities. How does this text attempt to address some of the complex issues facing not just Yolŋu people, but many Indigenous Australians?**

6. *Nona & Me* is a universal tale about the lessons teenagers must learn before they can really make sense of their world. Do you agree?

About Laura Gordon

Laura Gordon is an experienced secondary English teacher. She currently teaches years 7–12 at St Joseph’s College, Geelong, where she has taught for the past 10 years. She shares her passion for books and reading by creating engaging curriculum and learning activities for the classroom.



CLARE ATKINS has worked as a scriptwriter for many successful television series, including *All Saints*, *Home and Away*, *Winners and Losers* and *Wonderland*. *Nona & Me* is her first book, which she wrote while living in Arnhem Land.

Rosie and Nona are sisters. *Yapas*.

They are also best friends. It doesn't matter that Rosie is white and Nona is Aboriginal: their family connections tie them together for life.

Born just five days apart in a remote corner of the Northern Territory, the girls are inseparable, until Nona moves away at the age of nine. By the time she returns, they're in Year 10 and things have changed. Rosie has lost interest in the community, preferring to hang out in the nearby mining town, where she goes to school with the glamorous Selena, and Selena's gorgeous older brother Nick.

When a political announcement highlights divisions between the Aboriginal community and the mining town, Rosie is put in a difficult position: will she be forced to choose between her first love and her oldest friend?

Recommended for middle and upper secondary

Subject: Fiction

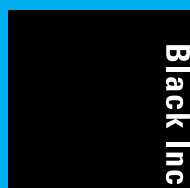
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