



# I AM CHANGE

suzy zail

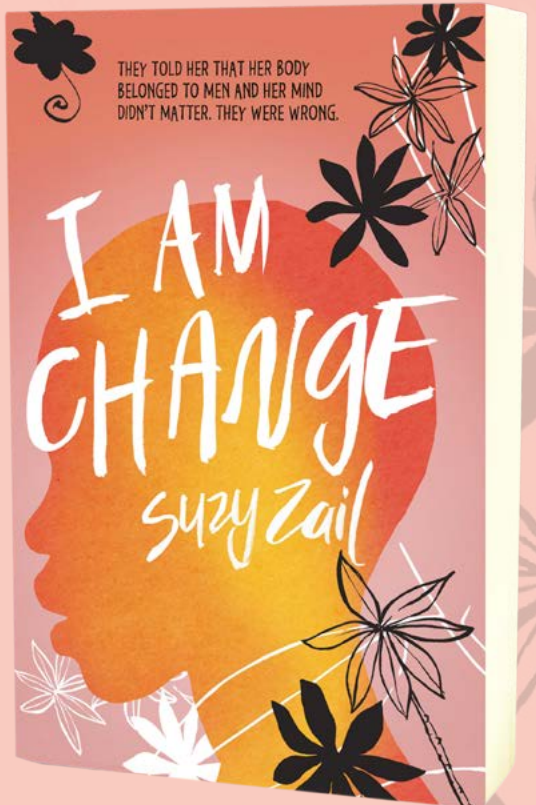
TEACHER NOTES BY ISABEL GALEA

# I AM CHANGE

Suzy Zail

Set in a Ugandan village, Lilian has learned to shrink herself to fit other people's ideas of what a girl is. In her village a girl is not meant to be smarter than her brother. A girl is not meant to go to school or enjoy her body or decide who to marry. Especially if she is poor.

Inspired by and written in consultation with young Ugandan women, *I Am Change* is the tragic but empowering story of how a young girl finds her voice and the strength to fight for change.



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## Themes

- Gender roles/inequality
- The power of words
- The female experience
- Overcoming adversity
- Hope
- Oppression

## Also Available



## Suzy Zail - Author

Suzy Zail has worked as a litigation lawyer, specialising in Family Law, but now writes full time. Among other titles, she has written her father's story, *The Tattooed Flower*, his life as a child survivor of the Holocaust. Her first novel for young adults, *The Wrong Boy*, was short-listed for the Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA) Book of the Year Awards, the Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature, the WAYRBA, USBBY and YABBA awards. Her second novel with Black Dog Books, *Alexander Altmann A10567*, was a Notable Book at the CBCA Awards. She lives in Melbourne and has three children.



## Isabel Galea - Teacher Notes Author

Isabel Galea is a High School English and Drama teacher in the South Western suburbs of Sydney. She studied English, music, theatre and film at the University of New South Wales where she developed her passion for the arts. She is proud to be part of the public education system and has been engaging teenagers with the joy of reading for over a decade. Isabel is an avid bibliophile and looks forward to watching her own two children's imagination blossom as they explore the wide world of literature.





# Discussion Guide

## Before Reading / Building the Field

Lilian's story is set in a fictional village named Walumira, but is a realistic portrayal of life in a small Ugandan village. Use the following links to find statistical information, descriptions, outreach programs and other relevant information which might help students understand the novel's historical and social context:

- <https://www.unicef.org/uganda/>
- <https://data.unicef.org/country/uga/>
- <https://www.wvi.org/uganda>
- <https://www.uwonet.or.ug/>

The author, Suzy Zail, is a passionate advocate for social justice. Read about her past novels and her life to help students understand her personal context. [www.suzyzail.com.au](http://www.suzyzail.com.au).

This text follows the life of people whose experiences are decidedly different to most students'. Help students understand this diversity by exposing them to either Peter Menzel's photo collection "Hungry Planet" or John Thackwray's "My Room" photo collection as a hook activity. Both collections depict families and individuals all over the world in their own homes and will confront students with their personal privilege and introduce students to genuine images of poverty and difference. After viewing the images, students could either photograph or write a description of their own room and grocery shop, then write a personal reflection statement. They might also choose an image and complete an empathy task.

- <http://myroomphotos.com/the-project/>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/gallery/2013/may/06/hungry-planet-what-world-eats>

Prediction activity: Consider the design of the book jacket carefully. Discuss the significance of the title, tagline and blurb. Students predict what the novel's plot may entail, the protagonist's personality and challenges and its themes. Students should record their initial response to the visual design and written content in their book. They can refer to this after they've completed their novel study to check their accuracy.

## Whilst Reading

Students complete a reading log for each chapter throughout their close study of the text. This should involve a short plot summary, an effective line from the text, themes explored and the reader's personal response to the chapter. This could be done informally in a journal or in a structured table:

Chapter	Plot summary	Quote from the text (Choose a line that had a significant impact)	Themes explored	My personal response
1				
2				

Make a timeline plotting the major events of the story. Students could extend their timeline by plotting it along a narrative line graph exploring the level of tension or interest experienced by the reader. Teachers could use Freytag's pyramid or a three act narrative structure graph to help guide students.

The book allows readers to witness the everyday events and way of life in a small and isolated African village called Walumira. As students read, collect pieces of information about daily life in Walumira and Kampala. What do they eat? How do they make money? How do they travel? What kind of houses do they live in? Compose a short piece of writing entitled "A typical day in Walumira" or create a photo essay, using images found online of key locations and activities students read about.

*"I turned the pages of Suzy's book, adding a Luganda word here, typing the words of a song there."* (8-9) Zail intentionally worked with Namukasa Nusula Sarah to integrate Luganda words throughout the text to create an authentic voice. Make a vocabulary list of all the words students come across and their definitions. How has the inclusion of this language affected students' responses to the text? Use the following page references to get started, however there are many more examples throughout the text: 20, 24, 26, 31, 32, 45, 52, 98, 151.



# Discussion Questions and Activities

## The Power of Words

Lilian's love of telling and writing stories strengthens her resolve to complete her education and have a career. Her stories also impress the adults around her and prove her potential and intelligence. Recount how and why Lilian was invited to attend school along with her brother Wekesa (36-39).

Education rates for women in Uganda are decidedly lower than rates in economically developed countries. Make a list of at least 4 obstacles Lilian and her friends are faced with on their quest to complete their education, even to a primary level. Students can research this further on the internet:

- <https://borgenproject.org/facts-about-girls-education-in-uganda/>

*"It's like slipping into someone's skin...you can be anyone, do anything... It's like dancing Taata. The same magic spreads through me when I open a book."* (80-81) Lilian discovers that reading allows her to escape her difficult life and imagine herself in different circumstances and hope for change. Let students identify a text that had a similar impact on them and explain its effect on them and their outlook on life.

*"I'm just writing what I see"* (305)

Zail gives us short excerpts or plot summaries of Lilian's stories. As Lilian matures, her stories change and reflect her current emotional state and understanding of the world. Trace her development as a writer by re-reading the following excerpts and analysing how her life experiences have affected her writing:

- *"Once upon a dark time in a place where you can't sing or dance or dream, a girl was born. Her father cried when he saw the child was a girl, for he knew that in this land that made girls invisible, his daughter would suffer."* (102)
- *"They came to the small room at the edge of the slums..."* (194)
- *"The Barefoot School – No shoes. No feet"* (204)
- *"Return of the stork princess"* (223)
- *"As she read, her writing changed. She wrote powerful women on her page, women who ran their own households. Doctors and poets, engineers and inventors, both black and white."* (228)

- *"She tried to commit their love story to paper...but every time she tried to paint the story in words, her mind returned to the room where Mr Musoke had undressed Dimple, and the words disappeared."* (263)
- Also consider the story about the bird with the golden beak (ch 24) the story of her sister's magical sewing (ch 20) and changing the wise man to a wise woman (ch 26).

*"The cassava are rotten. Can we eat your sentences?"* (103) Lilian's ongoing education causes economic stress on her family and is a source of tension between Lilian and her mother. Why does Maama resent Lilian's ongoing education? Consider their argument on page 136 when forming your answer. How does Lilian prove that her education does have practical value for the family? Refer to pages 182-192 and 303 for textual evidence.

*"Education is the ladder out of poverty."* Discuss this statement with detailed references to Suzy Zail's book *I Am Change* and your own research.t

## Gender Inequality

What is a patriarchal society? Research the term and discuss whether the social structures in Walumira and Kampala are examples of a patriarchy. How does this impact women?

Zail uses Lilian's voice to highlight the clear gender inequality in Ugandan society through short recounts of male cruelty. The audience is expected to feel the same outrage as Lilian and in turn question inequality experienced within their own society. Students can brainstorm different examples of gender bias, sexual abuse and domestic violence described in the text and evaluate which example is the most effective at evoking a strong audience response. Use the following page references to get started, however there are many more examples throughout the text: 71, 90, 118-119, 128, 166-167, 241.

*"Girls aren't as smart"* (267)

The audience hear many examples of sexist language throughout the text. What examples of sexist statements, language or behaviour have students experienced or witnessed? What impact did these examples have on both genders? Students could create a promotional poster or pamphlet explaining why sexist language is unacceptable.

Zail has purposely created a variety of male characters of different wealth, status and age. However, every male character exhibits some negative traits which impact the lives of the women around them. Students form groups to create a character profile for the one of the following characters. The profile should include a line of dialogue spoken by the character, a description of their personality traits and a list of their crimes against female characters:

- Mr Igbe
- Mr Musoke
- Uncle Beneh
- Kimanje (Taata)
- Wekesa (Brother)
- Thomas
- Dimple's father

## The Female Experience

*I Am Change* is fundamentally about the adversity and oppression faced by women in third world countries and aims to encourage women to rise up and challenge their society's restrictive expectations and excessive control. Look at the list of all the main female characters and consider their fictional fates. Describe the personal circumstance of each character, their hopes and how their story ends. Write an extended response to the following question: How has Suzy Zail utilised characterisation to educate her readers about the devastating consequences of patriarchal societies for women?

- Nnalongo (Maama)
- Dimple
- Trinah
- Nasreen
- Sunrise
- Nakato
- Goodness
- Masani
- Afia

Use the "hot seating" strategy to encourage students to empathise with minor characters and develop their higher order thinking and understanding of character motivations and perspectives. Hot seating is when one student takes on the role of a character and must be interviewed by the class. For more information visit <https://dramaresource.com/hot-seating/>

*"Men are snakes... and scorpions."* (100)

Maama's advice to Lilian seem more like warnings and threats that make Lilian fearful and rebellious. Make a list of warnings issued by Maama. Use the following page references to get started, however there are many more examples throughout the text: 12, 57, 74, 94, 218, 310. What pieces of advice or wisdom do parents traditionally teach their children? How different is their advice to Maama's? How do students respond to them do they agree, or do they rebel?

*"The Sabiny way is the only way Maama knows"* (197)

Zail gives the reader small insights into Maama's life in a traditional Sabiny tribe, and the trauma she experienced. What horrific things did she witness and experience? How does her history affect the way she parents her children and the values she instills in





them? How is the audience positioned to view her; are they sympathetic to her fears or do they view her as Lilian's antagonist? Does this change by the end of the text? Consider: *"She's not brave, Lilian realised looking at the stranger who was supposed to be her mother. She's afraid. Not of snakes or hard work, but almost everything else."* (281)

*"It is my role as your Ssenga to teach you how to satisfy a man... Your body will begin to change and, when it does, I will prepare you"* (15)

Lilian's visits to Aunt Afia provide the readers a window into traditional female customs and rituals in Uganda. Students could compare the rituals associated with marriage and puberty in Uganda with those they have personally experienced or witnessed in other mainstream media. Students could select one of the following passages and rewrite the advice and customs described by Afia into a modern format such as an advice column or transcript for a podcast/vodcast.

- 17-20 (Understanding the female body)
- 107-111 (Menstruation)
- 314-316 (Marriage)
- 324-326 (Wedding Preparation)
- Ch 1 and other meetings with Afia (How to attract a partner)

Despite Afia and Maama's warnings, Lilian explores her sexuality both alone and with Amal. *"It was her body and she'd decide what to do with it"* (293). Why does Lilian take this risk with Amal? Is it fair to expect girls to remain chaste throughout their teenage years? What is the purpose of discouraging young girls from exploring their sexuality with boys?

*"Lilian couldn't imagine how keeping house for a man could ever come close to following a line of words into a new world"* (63)

Throughout the text, Lilian makes her view about marriage clear. She tells Afia that she does not want to get married, but is presented with two husband options and ultimately selects neither.

- "They are all beautiful,' Bukenya sneered, 'until they open their mouths to speak."* (318) How does Bukenya expect his wife to act? Why is he a poor match for Lilian?
- "Amal was different to the other boys. They'd been alone in the bush and he hadn't tried to kiss her."* (259) The audience is positioned to like Amal because he doesn't fit into a misogynistic stereotype and values Lilian's intelligence. Lilian has romantic feelings for

Amal, but is ultimately disappointed by him. What does Amal say and do that makes it impossible for Lilian to marry him? Refer to Chapter 31 for textual evidence. When were these qualities hinted at earlier in the text?

- Why didn't Zail create a third possible husband for Lilian? What is the author suggesting about marriage?
- Students to answer the following question: Who would you choose if you were in Lilian's position? Justify your answer with detailed reasons and references to the text.

Research arranged child marriage on the internet (A useful starting point is the UNICEF website and fact sheet <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/> and <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/>). Compare the facts found with the depiction of child marriage in the text.

Consider whether the marriages of Nasreen, Goodness and Amara are accurate depictions of the practice.

Create a bank of quotes that depict attitudes towards arranged marriage. Use the following page references to get started, however there are many more examples throughout the text: 57, 63, 113, 142, 226, 310, 314.

Despite being aware that child marriage is illegal in Uganda, Lilian is still forced to marry Bukenya. What are the conditions of her marriage? Students to discuss or write about whether they think Lilian should have married Bukenya or refused.

*"The last thing Lilian put in her suitcase was a banana fibre doll. She knew it would be crushed inside the case."* (321) Lilian's small homemade dolls are a recurring symbol throughout the text. When did she make them and for what purpose? What did they symbolise initially? What does this quote reveal about how arranged marriage is going to affect Lilian?

In Chapter 29, Lilian is horrified to discover that her mother is forcing her to go through Wonsetibik. (female genital mutilation). Research FGM on the internet (a useful starting point is the Unicef website and fact sheet <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/female-genital-mutilation/>). How did it make students feel to be confronted with detailed descriptions, photographs and other primary

sources? Did students learn anything new from this researches. Lead a class discussion about student reactions to this information and section of the book. Had they expected this to happen? Did Goodness's experience foreshadow it? How did it change or strengthen their understanding of Maama and Lilian?

Maama wants Lilian to keep her "cutting" a secret, but Lilian discloses her experience to her father and later tells her school cohort. Why does she do this? Consider her father's response; "*His face darkened 'Cultures change. We break traditions that don't please us and invent new ones to draw us close.' He took Lilian's scarred hand in his. 'People invent traditions and people discard them. People make a culture. The culture doesn't make us'*" (284-285). Students can brainstorm other cultural practices that have either been questioned, discarded or invented.

## Female Empowerment

Lilian's school in Kampala introduces her to feminism, through the Female Empowerment Club and the character of Kamali. However, there are still contrasting attitudes concerning the abilities of women. Find and compare Grace's comments on page 172 to Kamali's comments on page 179. Which character has a significant impact on Lilian? Students must make detailed reference to the text to support their answer.

Madam Cherop is another female role model who gives Lilian advice. Make a list of her inspirational statements and explain the effect they have on Lilian. How is this advice different to Maama's or Afia's? Students could select their favourite statement and create an inspirational image.

*"Beyonce... she was brown, like them. An African woman who sang about women doing whatever they wanted."* (224) Lilian was astonished to find that women of colour were given opportunities to perform, flourish and speak their minds. She is also inspired by the works of NoViolet Bulawayo and Mariama Ba. Students could research one of these influential women by finding examples of their work and explaining how they might encourage Lilian (and others) to protest for women's rights. Students could create a list of other powerful and influential women who might inspire Lilian.

*"You don't have to do anything you don't want. As soon as Lilian said those words she knew they were a lie. Every day, girls were forced to do things they didn't want to do."* (242) Lilian is disappointed upon her return to Walumira to find that her optimistic ideas of female empowerment weren't part of everyday reality for her friends and family. Zail uses the motif of a cage to illustrate this feeling of hopelessness: *"The caged world her mother and the priests lived in, a world you couldn't escape unless you had money or white skin"* (212). Where else in the text has Zail used cage imagery to represent a loss of freedom for women? Is Zail's overall message of optimism realistic? Is it possible for women to be the change they want to see?

*"Being a girl doesn't mean that we are weak. Being female is our strength. We can build fences, do maths and feed our family. We can have businesses and babies. We are not stupid or dirty or lazy or weak. Armed with books and pens we can do anything."* (339) Zail completes Lilian's story with the transcript



of the speech she will perform at school assembly. Students could annotate the speech for examples of persuasive and literary devices. They should perform the speech aloud and note where to pause, emphasis and gesticulate to maximise the speech's impact on an audience. Students could complete a reflection statement explaining what they have learnt by giving Lilian an actual voice or they could compose their own three minute speech about how they can manifest change.

*I Am Change* is an example of a *bildungsroman* narrative, as it follows Lilian's psychological and spiritual growth. However, Amara could be considered a secondary hero who similarly transforms throughout the text. Students create a detailed character map tracing Amara's development from a distant figure mocked by Maama, her introduction as a cold and beautiful housewife, her suffering at the hands of Uncle Beneh to fully independent woman and Lilian's saviour. Students should include quotes to support their ideas. Use the following page references to get started, however there are many more examples throughout the text: 153, 167, 216-217, 227, 320, 330. Alternatively, students could compose the transcript for a hypothetical interview with Amara.

*"I saw this skinny barefoot girl in a second-hand uniform building a future and it made me think, maybe I could too"* (329) How do Amara and Lilian help each other break out of their respective cages?

## Overcoming Adversity

Whilst discussing future careers, Lilian's teacher Mr Lwere offers this wisdom: *"You could try planting an apple tree but nothing would sprout because the conditions aren't right. The soil can't support them."* He lowered his eyes to gaze at her bare feet. *"Your parents can't afford shoes Lilian. Don't cultivate dreams that are beyond your reach."* (28) How does this affect Lilian? Is Mr Lwere's advice accurate? Students compose a diary entry from the perspective of another student in the class that shows their response to this statement.

*"My maama, she gave me a scrap of paper, a pen and a tin. She told me to write down my dreams and bury them. She told me if I really believed in my dreams, if I watered and fed them, they would grow"* (190) Madam Kyobiggya's methods may be unusual, but they help Lilian focus on her ambition. What does the metaphor of watering and planting dreams mean? Teacher-leads students in a similar positive-thinking ritual by asking students to write out their dreams on paper, collecting them and burying them in a time capsule in the school grounds.

Taata gives Lilian the following advice *"If you want to move mountains, you must start by lifting stones."* (338). Suzy Zail, the author, took this advice and established her own initiative and advocacy group *"Help Girls Learn, Uganda."* She also gives the details of 6 other support groups readers can support in order to help girls like Lilian. Students can explore the advocacy groups' websites and use the information to create a poster publicising one of the charities and the important work they do. Students might like to run a fundraising activity within their community and donate the profit to *Help Girls Learn, Uganda*.

The text begins with a letter from Namukasa Nusula Sarah who worked closely with Zail to help her create an authentic voice and credible narrative. She speaks openly about her experiences and says *"Things can change. Me and my friends will make them change. We just need some help"* (9). Students can write a letter in response to Namukasa, explaining what they felt/learnt while reading the book and how they have tried to make a difference either in their own lives or the lives of others. Students can send their letters to the author, who may send the letters forward to Namukasa. Send them to: Suzy Zail, c/o Walker Books Australia, Locked Bag 22, Newtown NSW 2042 or [educationwba@walkerbooks.com.au](mailto:educationwba@walkerbooks.com.au).