

TEACHERS NOTES

MY FATHER'S WAR by Sophie Masson

SYNOPSIS

Sophie Masson's *My Father's War* is the latest title in the successful and popular My Australian Story series. Although for almost a century Australian attention to World War I has been focused on the Gallipoli campaign, which immediately became a national icon, increasingly historians and the population generally have begun to acknowledge the courage of Anzac troops on the Western Front. This is the context for the story Masson's narrator tells.

My Father's War opens in February of the year that the war will eventually end: 1918. An Australian girl, Annie Cliff, records in her diary a journey she makes with her mother to France, in search of her father, who has not contacted them for months. It is a kind of coming home for Annie's mother, because she was born in France, and yet because of her distress and the changes made by war, it is a home that in some ways she seems barely to recognise.

Clearly, Australia has not become much of a home to Annie's mother yet. Her husband's regard her actions as silly and impulsive, and their deliberate mispronunciation of her name Marie-Claude as 'Mary-Cloud' signifies the distance between them. But Marie-Claude has used her difference as a source of independence, too. She pays for the long sea voyage she and Annie take to France with the money she has earned from giving French and Latin lessons.

They find accommodation in a canal house owned by Madame Baudin in the village of Amiens. The village is strangely quiet, but people know the German army is coming. Things are not so quiet in Madame Baudin's house, though. Her grandson Paul, who lives with her, makes life difficult for Annie at first. And both Annie's mum and Madame Baudin are convinced Annie's father is alive. Perhaps he has done something wrong and is in prison. Annie's mind works overtime trying to think through the mystery; her mother keeps disappearing and when she comes back she is more jumpy and irritable than ever.

When Annie's mother takes off one night to pursue the mystery, Paul is kind to her for the first time and gives her *The Scarlet Pimpernel* to read. She knows that he has given it to her as a sort of code, to help her understand what her father might be doing behind enemy lines.

As the Germans advance, Madame Baudin, Paul and Annie head for Normandy with a family called the Clermonts, but their car is hit, Madame Baudin and the Clermonts are all killed. Annie had got up and wandered off in the night and Paul followed her. It is the only reason they have survived and have ended up in hospital. When, still recuperating, they return to Amiens, they are shocked to find how much of it has been destroyed.

A Red Cross nurse gives Annie a lead when she says a man has been brought in by ambulance, with no identity papers, victim of a gas attack. All they know is that

he is an artist, because the ambulance driver recognised him as a man who had drawn his portrait a year earlier. Annie knows immediately that it is her father and when she is told that she is too young to travel back to Villers-Bretonneux with the nurse and driver to see him, she and Paul decide to take their cat, hide among the supplies in the van and go anyway.

When they stop they are sprung by some Australian soldiers, who recognise the cat, take pity on Annie and agree to help them get to the hospital. Annie hardly recognises her father, who is unconscious and although a nurse wants to send her and Paul packing, a doctor agrees to let them stay and help with the cleaning as long as they keep out of the way.

Despite the success of the Australian troops in holding back the German advance, Annie feels keenly the loss of two of the men who have been so kind to her. But as she looks at the German soldiers and then at the Australians, she realises that they don't look very different at all, and death brings an implied realisation that war is pointless. Her father regains consciousness, her mother at long last reappears and Annie's story finished with her memory of friends who have died.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Indonesia of French parents, Sophie Masson spent her childhood moving back and forth between France and Australia. A dedicated bookworm as a kid, Sophie also loved writing stories to entertain herself and her younger sisters and brothers. Now the author of more than fifty novels for young people, Sophie is published in many different countries. She lives in rural New South Wales with her husband, and has three grown-up children. Sophie's other books include *The Hunt for Ned Kelly* and *The Phar Lap Mystery*, both part of the *My Australian Story* series. Her most recent book for Scholastic is a mystery titled *The Understudy's Revenge*.

FROM SOPHIE MASSON

I'm French-Australian. In both my cultures, World War I created a lasting legacy. In every French town and village, memorials with columns and columns of names of the dead stand as mute testimony to the scale of the slaughter and suffering of this terrible war, while Armistice Day, 11 November, is one of the most important commemorative dates in the French national calendar, with ceremonies held across the country.

Meanwhile, in Australia and New Zealand, the Anzac story of bravery, mateship and suffering is crucial to our national identities, and Anzac Day, 25 April, which commemorates the sacrifice of troops at Gallipoli, is one of our most important national holidays, with ceremonies across both nations that began spontaneously in 1916, the year after the event. Increasingly, these ceremonies are also held in the places where the Anzacs fought, especially at Gallipoli, and on the Western Front battlefields of northern France and Belgium, too, where the majority of Australian soldiers fought and died.

In the southern battlefields of the Somme valley, a fertile rural area of low chalk hills, green fields, canals and woods, near the charming ancient city of Amiens, on Anzac Day in 1918 Australian troops helped to bring about a decisive turnaround in

the war. It occurred in the strategically important village of Villers-Bretonneux, just 15 km east of the charming ancient city of Amiens. Because Villers-Bretonneux is on a rise, there is a direct line of fire from the village to Amiens and from this vantage point the Germans were pounding the city. Though it was not the last battle for the defence of Amiens, and though the war itself did not finally end till November that year, the defeat of the German troops here was a notable victory - not only because of the selfless bravery and brilliance of the Australians, but because strategically important Villers-Bretonneux was never seriously threatened again.

The events leading up to this battle and after it are the focus of *My Father's War*. To this day, the people of Villers-Bretonneux and of the Somme region generally remember the brave young men who came from so far away to fight alongside French soldiers and sacrificed their lives to help liberate their region. The links between Australia and the Somme are real and strong, and when you travel there, it is incredibly moving to observe them at first hand.

It's not only the sight of the massive war cemeteries, with their rows and rows of white headstones on the sweeping green fields. It's not only the joined Australian and French flags, honouring the dead of both nations in the Anzac Day ceremonies. It's not just the thought that so many died there; it's also the memory of them in life, and of the friendships they formed with the locals. Those friendships are perhaps most clearly exemplified by the fact that in the 1920s, thousands of Victorian schoolchildren helped to raise money for the rebuilding of the shattered school at Villers-Bretonneux. And today, each year increasing numbers of Australians make the pilgrimage to Villers-Bretonneux and the other Somme battlefields, where a corner of France will always feel like part of Australia.

I wanted my novel to reflect this shared heritage that I feel even more strongly because of my own background. But I did not want to focus exclusively on the experience of soldiers at war; I wanted to bring in as much as possible the experience of civilians, who suffered greatly and displayed outstanding courage, too—medical staff and soldiers' families and local people, whose villages and towns were destroyed.

I wanted to convey a strong sense of place, too. I was in France for several months while I was working on *My Father's War*, and saw at first hand Amiens, Villers-Bretonneux and many other places. The rural charm of this region, with its gentle landscapes and lovely towns and villages contrasted oddly at times with the accounts of suffering and devastation that I was reading, but that irony, too, was an important part of the conflict—even at the time.

Even after leaving the Somme, my research involved reading many books around the subject, including first-hand accounts, by both French and Australian writers. I also bought original French magazines and newspapers of the time, which reported battles in graphic detail and included fantastic photographs of daily life on the frontline as well as battle scenes. The photographs referred to in the book—such as the one of the newspaper-seller on the frontline—are among these invaluable primary sources.

WITH YOUR STUDENTS

There are always many factors involved in a war, but what does Annie learn about the beginning of World War I? [pp.18-19]. When did it begin and when did it end?

With your class, consult maps of Europe to find Austria-Hungary, Germany, Russia, Sarajevo, Gallipoli, the Somme, Amiens, Villers-Bretonneux, Normandy, Paris, Rouen, Reims. (You may have to locate some of them on maps of individual countries that include greater detail.) On a map of Europe mark the main locations referred to in *My Father's War*.

Ask your students to use the library and the internet to support their reading of *My Father's War*, and find out how people travelled between Australia and Europe in 1918. How long did it take? As a class, chart the main route and some of the stops along the way. Discuss the possible difficulties encountered on such a long journey at that time [boredom, sickness, cramped conditions and fights, loneliness, lack of privacy, noise, absence from work and school, delayed news and lack of communication, vulnerability to attack during wartime]

How does Annie feel on the long voyage to Europe and how do her mother and Mr Van Delden act? [Her mother is irritable and snaps at her with little reason, she loses weight and paces the deck constantly; Mr Van Delden is a know-all, who goes on and on about the war in a very depressing way, because it seems that it will never end.]

Annie speaks about each of several locations as a kind of 'other world' or haven, however temporary - removed and protected from the horrors of war. What are some of the havens she sees? [Australia, the ship, the village, the *hortillons'* world, Normandy, the hospital]

Australians have repeatedly portrayed the arts as less important than sheer survival and the struggle to make a living in their often harsh environment. But the artistic life is seen as far more significant in *My Father's War*. Discuss the functions of the creative arts in this novel: drawing, writing, reading, storytelling. [Reading is a cure for boredom p.25, Paul gives Annie a book to help her understand what has happened to her father p.120, theatrical disguise and changing of accent act as protection p.120, portrait drawing used to identify Annie's father p.170, storytelling used to help revive her father p.193]

My Father's War includes brief references to some famous historical figures. Use the library and the internet to find out more about Nurse Cavell p.10, the Red Baron p.24, Will Dyson p.27 and Arthur Streeton p.27.

As well as playing an important role in developing the plot, Cat has a kind of symbolic function. What is it? [a homeless stray, p.140, Cat reminds us of the troubled relationship several characters have with home: where is Marie-Claude's home - Australia, France, or neither country? Annie's father is missing, the Clermonts are taking Annie and the Baudins to safety when they are killed. Paul suddenly has no family or home and Annie has no home. Annie resists the idea that she and Paul should go to an orphanage]

Perhaps because Annie is a writer, she notices words. Review with your class the meanings of 'haring off' p.6, 'chip off the old block' p.7, 'Fritz/Jerry/the Hun' p.16, 'the AIF' p.44, '*hortillon*' [pronounced 'or-tee-yon'] and '*hortillonage*' p.87, '*petite*' p.131, 'blarneying' p.151, 'dixie-basher' p.189.

Annie discovers that her father is the victim of one of the most devastating new weapons that are being used in World War I. What is it? [gas] Use the library and internet to find out why this was such a terrible weapon.

In the context of a different culture, the traits of an individual character or group of characters often appear more distinctive than they do at home. How are Australians portrayed in *My Father's War*?