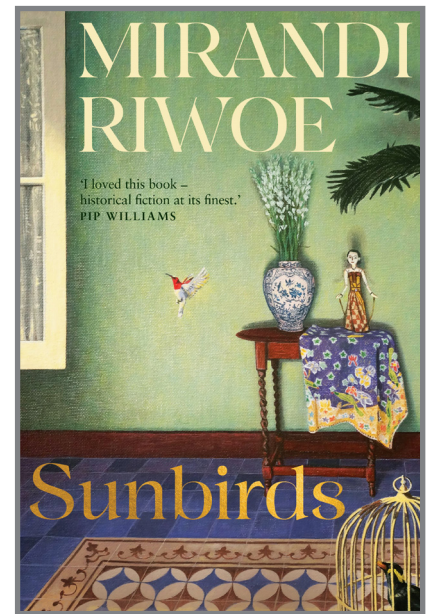


Sunbirds

AUTHOR

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RECOMMENDED FOR: Upper Secondary
(Violence, Sexual Content, Alcohol References)

SYNOPSIS

Anna van Hoorn is young, affluent and recently engaged to Dutchman Mattijs. But life on her family's tea plantation —wanting for nothing and surrounded by servants—does little to satisfy Anna's desire to connect with her Indonesian heritage, nor has it led her to fully accept that which she has been raised to value. As Japanese invasion draws closer, the far-reaching tentacles of racial inequality and gender imbalance affect her fractured family, which harbours much hurt and anger.

Meanwhile, the van Hoorns' housekeeper, Diah, aspires to a better future, while also wanting to protect her rebel brother, who seeks justice and equality as part of a nationalistic movement.

Set in West Java against the backdrop of World War II, *Sunbirds* is a beautifully told story of love, heartbreak, identity, and sacrifice.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mirandi Riwoe is the author of *Stone Sky Gold Mountain*, which won the 2020 Queensland Literary Award—Fiction Book Award and the inaugural ARA Historical Novel Prize, and was shortlisted for the 2021 Stella Prize and longlisted for the 2021 Miles Franklin Literary Award. Her short story collection, *The Burnished Sun*, includes her novella *The Fish Girl*, which won the 2017 Viva la Novella prize and was shortlisted for the 2018 Stella Prize. Her work has appeared in *Best Australian Stories*, *Meanjin*, *Review of Australian Fiction*, *Griffith Review* and *Best Summer Stories*. Mirandi has a PhD in Creative Writing and Literary Studies and lives in Brisbane.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF NOTES

Christina Wheeler, who is a practising teacher librarian with a background in the Australian curriculum (English).

THEMES

- Love, family, relationships
- Acceptance
- Identity, belonging
- Equality, fairness
- World War II

STUDY NOTES

- Read the prologue in its entirety before pausing. How has this passage drawn you instantly into the text? How has figurative language been used to describe both the action and the characters' reactions during this scene?
 - Re-read the prologue after completing the novel. What connections can you make between the characters, settings and events of the text upon this second reading?
- Discuss the use of description and figurative language in the following excerpt from the prologue:

'She looks out her window too, down on a glorious band of azure water between darker ocean and coast. A craggy bight scoops inward, and it seems to her that the cove's straggling shoreline, the white surf, the bleached sand are in the shape of a witch, the fine tributaries her spindly, sharp fingers, reaching, reaching.' (p 4)
- In the role of one of the servants, write a journal entry describing the van Hoorns' Sinterklaas party.
- What role does the setting of Serehwangi play in *Sunbirds*? Why do you think the author has chosen such a lavish setting for this story?
- How does the author depict racial inequality throughout *Sunbirds*? Use evidence from the text to support your thinking.
- Why, at the Sinterklaas party, does Anna feel 'everyone seems drunker than usual' (p 15)?
- In the role of Anna, write a reflection about 'how difficult it is to believe that the war in Europe could touch them here' (p 16).
- Explain Anna's need to understand and accept her 'mixed blood' (p 16). Why does she refer to this as a 'slippage of lineage' (p 18)? How do you think this story would be similar and different if it were set in the twenty-first century?
- What does Anna mean when she says, 'men like her brother would never allow themselves to be captivated so far as to be trapped' by someone like Rosa (p 17)?
- What effect does the murder of Fientje de Vries have on Anna?
- What impact does having never been 'back home' to the fatherland have on Anna (p 19)? Do you think as an older adult she will make a point of visiting Holland? Discuss.
- Why does Anna feel a 'prickle of disgust, embarrassment' about Hermine's behaviour at the party (p 20)? How might her feelings about this evening change later in the text?
- Create a character profile of Hermine. How does your opinion of her change as the story progresses?
- What role does Sigit play in *Sunbirds*? How would the story be different without him?
- What does the following memory of Mattijs's share about his youth? Why is this important to the story?

'bringing forth dreams of the summer he spent on Onrust with his father. The searing dark sand that squelched between his toes. The dizzying shimmer of the water's surface, the blue hush when he was submerged beneath. The rasp of coral, of rocks, against his pruned fingers. The little fish he tried to catch between cupped hands. Floating underwater for as long as he could hold his breath, until his chest cramped, his ears rang. And, looking up, watching the tumult of waves above.' (pp 35–36)
- With reference to the below excerpt, discuss why Anna has agreed to marry Mattijs:

'She imagines a cream house with brick inlay in the shape of surprised eyebrows above tall windows. Perhaps a red-tiled roof and a gable with scalloped white trim like icing on a cake. The house's reflection trembles across a waterway's mossy water. A dog, longhaired and loonish, gambols through pink flowers that shiver in the cool breeze. Snowflakes, as fine as ash, fall from the sky and alight upon the tip of her nose, her eyelashes, her top lip.' (p 45)
- Why does Diah describe Gerrit Braam's photograph as 'handsome with a crocodile smile' (p 47)?
- Why is Hermine concerned that Anna could become confused with a 'type of woman' like Fientje (p 53)?
- Why does Hermine 'often [stare] like this into nothingness, her eyes moving to some inner dance' (p 67)?
- Why is Mattijs concerned that Anna could be 'too much like her mother' (p 68)?
- What role does Willem play in *Sunbirds*? Why include a character like this?
- Why does Mr van Hoorn have regrets about sending Sigit to Europe (see p 70)?
- Explain the relationship that Hermine has with her beo.
- Discuss the comparison of the village Baturaka to a turtle on p 75.
- What evidence is there that 'Anna has always been one to daydream herself into other lives' (p 80)? Why does she

yearn 'to go beyond her chameleon imaginings'?

- Why does Anna want to dance like Javanese women?
- Why is Anna 'a little affronted' when Sigit says, 'there wasn't that much difference between you and Fientje, really' (p 85)? Why is she also embarrassed that 'her initial response . . . was an inner shudder' (pp 85–86)?
- Why does Diah believe that Hermine brings out 'all her finery, all her treasures, like a peacock proving its value' (p 88)? Is this really what she is doing? Discuss.
- Discuss the following description of the girls at Fientje's school being snakes:

'Swiftly returned because of those waspy girls, snake eyes swivelling my way every time I entered the classroom or dormitory, forked tongues quivering as they whispered to the headmistress of the note I received, tightly folded and tucked into my Bible, from the language master.' (p 101)
- Why do Sigit's words—'like mother, like daughter'—come back to Anna (p 116)? Why is the word 'promiscuity' on its own line? In what ways is Anna feeling promiscuous?
- What is the significance of Diah reading the Tuan's book (see p 118)? Why does she later tear the book and throw the pages into the fire (p 136)?
- What doubts do you have about the relationship between Mattijs and Anna? What doubts do they have?
- In what ways is Theodor van Hoorn a hypocrite?
- Why is Anna reluctant 'to draw that imperceptible yet viscid silk thread between herself and Fientje' (p 127)?
- What does Anna mean when she says, 'Sigit is a dialect she still has to learn' (p 147)?
- In what way was Chang Shen's offer to Fientje 'the beginning of the end' (p 166)?
- Discuss the contribution of figurative language in *Sunbirds*. Examples include:
 - 'Stars of light explode against the night sky. A shower of purple, plumes of pink.' p 11
 - 'She knows that beyond the men's lingering touch, beyond the admiring curl of their lips, there's a taint, as
 - 'my mother's fingers as tough and gnarled as galangal, her back as crooked as the ginger cat's tail' p 63
 - 'A delman rolls past, and in the post-rain heat, the petrichor stench of the pony rises from its rough coat like mist.' p 85
- Reread the passage on p 172 in which Anna is again likened to a chameleon. How does this reveal the confusion she feels towards her identity?
- Why does Sigit tell Anna 'you are like your father . . . Toying with the natives' (p 233)? Why is she filled with 'a bruising shame' when she 'realises that she is very much like him, indeed' (p 242)?
- In the role of Anna, write a journal entry upon discovering that Fientje is your half-sister.
- Discuss the description of Fientje being 'made up of water and oil, irreconcilable yet still conjoined in a murky mess. Nothing more than a greasy shimmer on the surface of society' (p 239). In what ways does Anna feel likewise?
- How is the Ramayana tale an allegory of Fientje's life?
- Discuss the symbolism of Fientje's story being 'reduced to a headline in a newspaper destined to be grubby within a day, wrapped around freshly gutted fish or vegetable waste' (p 264)
- Discuss whether Sigit and his friends are 'really at the bottom, or are the women?' (p 265)
- How does Mattijs's desire to 'find that tomato stain to stare at again' (p 270) share his true feelings for Diah?
- Why, when Theodor won't let Anna become a nurse so as not to put her at risk, does she reply, 'Women are always at risk . . . What does it matter where I am?' (p 274)?
- When parachuting into the ocean, why does Mattijs think 'perhaps he needs to dive deeper, as far as he can go. To reach what he wants. To find the treasure that is his.' (p 292)?
- How did you feel upon learning that Mattijs's letter to Diah had been intercepted by Theodor (see p 296)? What is meant by Diah when she says, 'even if, like most other things in her life, it is handed down from Anna, it remains something of real value' (p 297)?
- In the role of Diah, explain why you agree to give the letter to Anna.
- Why has the story of Braam's not guilty verdict been included in *Sunbirds* (p 301)? Why does his servant get imprisoned for three years instead? What comment does this make about imperialism and racial inequality?
- What is the significance of Anna freeing Hermine's beo (p 303)?
- What does Anna mean when she says, 'she has realised that she will always hanker for what is not hers, that her

picture of the alternative will always be flawed' (p 309)?

- Is Anna more like her father or mother? Or neither? Justify your thinking using supporting evidence from the text.
- With reference to sunbirds throughout the text, explain the symbolism of these birds to the story. In what ways are Hermine, Anna, Diah and Fientje sunbirds?
- How is the beo like Hermine?
- When in the sanatorium, why does Hermine feel more trapped by Theodor than the bars on her windows?
- Why does Hermine try 'to pinpoint the bird's chirping again, but it's now merely a back note to the garden's cacophony of birdsong, gardeners calling out to each other, the burring of crickets, the underlying grind of the factory machinery' (p 112)?
 - How does this reflect her life?

AUTHOR OF NOTES

CHRISTINA WHEELER