

The Battle For Victoria Street

AUTHOR

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RECOMMENDED FOR: Upper Primary

SYNOPSIS

Victoria Street is a crossroads, like in those old stories of bushrangers and highwaymen. It's a place where everyone and everything crosses paths . . . A street right out of a fairytale, I reckon.

It's 1973, and 11-year-old Billie is living in the best street in the whole world: Victoria Street in Darlinghurst, Sydney. Billie can't imagine being anywhere else. But things are changing. Billie's neighbours are being forced out of their homes, and scary people are patrolling the street, trying to get everyone to leave.

Without realising it, Billie, her family and her neighbours find themselves caught up in one of the most important public protests in Sydney's history. The battle for Victoria Street is their fight to save their homes and their way of life from destruction.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gabiann Marin is an award-winning author, screenwriter, editor, academic and lover of all things supernatural. Her very first stage play won the Australian Bicentennial Premier's prize and her book, *A True Person* won the international White Raven Literary award for work of outstanding merit and importance.

She has written eight original works of fiction and nonfiction, many of which regularly appear on the Premier's reading lists across Australia. When not writing, Gabiann runs a successful script and story development agency through which she has edited or helped develop over 200 books, screenplays, multimedia projects and stage plays.

She also teaches writing and media courses at Macquarie University and the Australian Film Television and Radio School. Gabiann is currently completing her PhD on the role of the goddess in contemporary literature and working on her next novel featuring the goddess Hera.

STUDY NOTES

- Before reading the story, as a class, discuss the book cover and title. Some things to include in your discussion could be:
 - What can you see happening in the cover artwork of this novel?
 - Where do you think the 'Victoria Street' in the title is likely to be located?
 - What type of battle do you think the title refers to?

- Who do you predict the protagonist of this story is likely to be? How old do you think they are and what personal characteristics do you hypothesise that they have based on the cover artwork and title?
- After reading the text on the back cover of the novel, do you want to change any of your hypotheses? Why/why not?
- *The Battle for Victoria Street* is based on real events that occurred in Sydney 50 odd years ago. As a class, discuss how much society has changed since the early 1970s, and what remains the same. Think about social, technological, and urban infrastructure and development changes. Consider over the course of your discussion, how one aspect affects the others, eg. how technological change can lead to social change, which in turn can lead to changes in how urban environments are constructed, maintained and further developed. What examples can you find in the book of one type of change leading into others?
- How does Billie feel about her father, and why? Does her attitude towards him change at all over the course of the novel? What impact does her father's behaviour have on her life both in terms of the emotional impact, and the practical impact on daily living?
- Reread Billie's speech to the residents where she compares them to Ned Kelly. Why is it so important that we all have heroes who inspire us to be our best selves, and how does Ned Kelly's story inspire Billie? What are the parallels and differences between Billie's life and that of Ned Kelly?
- What was the role of the BLF in NSW and in Australian Environmental Activism and Heritage Conservation? What might Sydney (and the rest of the state) look like today, were it not for all the people who fought against widespread unhindered development of both urban and natural environments?
 - In small groups, create a research-based opinion piece that details the impact that Jack Munday and the BLF had on Sydney and environs, and describe the legacy of this type of activism that endures today. For helpful links to get you started on your research, look in the Author's Notes at the back of the book. Collate your research findings, and use them to help you create a referenced slideshow sharing your work with the class.
- Locate the places described in the book on a modern map of Sydney. How accurate to today's Sydney are Billie's descriptions of where Victoria Street runs, and what surrounds it?
 - Draw a map of Billie's neighbourhood based on a combination of her descriptions of places, and modern maps of the area. Mark on your map the places where key events happened, and places which were important to Billie.
- Locate modern images of Victoria Street today. Do you think that the residents were overall successful in their attempts to prevent the street they loved from being destroyed? Why/why not and in what ways? Consider Billie's statement at the end of the book that 'a place isn't just about buildings and streets and shops, it's about the people who live there.' (p181) when forming your answer.
- Billie mentions the establishment of the Aboriginal Embassy. In small groups, research and report on the establishment of the Aboriginal Embassy, the impact it has had on Australian society over the last half century, and its current situation.
- Write at least one verse of a song you would like to be the new Australian National Anthem.
- What did Sydney Harbour look like before the Opera House was built? Research online, and compare and contrast images from before it was built, with images from soon after completion of its construction and from today.
- When did Australia finally get free public healthcare, and who was Prime Minister? What form does this public healthcare take today?
- Billie starts to keep a journal because her neighbour told her how important social histories can be to future generations understanding of what life was like. If you had kept a journal over the last four or five years, what important events could you have documented for future generations to learn about? Choose five distinct events that have been important in your life over the last five years, and write one paragraph describing each one. Include in your description a brief explanation of why that specific event was important to you, and the impact it had on you.
- Life in Australia has changed in a lot of ways since Billie's day. Based on the descriptions of daily life in the book, identify at least five differences between the world Billie lives in and modern-day Australian life.
- Billie reported, that the newspapers who were printing reports of the events on Victoria Street, were reframing what was happening to make the residents appear to be troublemakers, and casting the aggressors, thugs, and slumlords as the victims. Why do you think that the newspapers were doing this, when it would have taken very

little investigation to discover the truth of the matter? Who do you think owned the newspapers, and who stood to benefit from a shift in public sympathy away from the residents?

- As a class, discuss the importance of unbiased news sources, and why it is vital that we are all taught to assess both the accuracy of news reports, and whether they are credible sources. Brainstorm some techniques that we can all use to help us judge the veracity of any news we read or hear, and what some important questions are that we should ask about the source of that news.
- Read the Author's Notes at the end of the story to learn more about the historical context of the novel, and follow the recommended links. As a class, discuss what you have learnt from reading this extra material, and how it affects your understanding of the events in the book.

AUTHOR OF NOTES
RAE CARLYLE