



OMNIBUS BOOKS

Category	Junior Fiction
Title	Sing a Rebel Song
Author	Pamela Rushby
Publication date	October 2015
Format	198 x 128 mm
Age	10+
Extent	240 pp
Binding	Paperback
Printing	Mono
ISBN	978 1 74299 134 4

Teachers' Notes

Sing a Rebel Song

Pamela Rushby

Teachers' Notes by Rae Carlyle

Contents

Introduction.....	2
About the Author	2
Activities	3

Introduction

In 1890 times are tough all over Australia, but in twelve-year-old Maggie's house, the talk is of the Union, and how if the workers stick together then there is hope for a better future for everyone. Maggie's father has worked as a shearer her whole life, but now he is also working for the Union, and is determined to help make changes. But in life nothing is ever simple, or one-sided. Maggie's best friend is the daughter of a local pastoralist, a wealthy land holder who employs many of the shearers. Costs have been rising for pastoralists, and their answer is to ask all workers to sign an agreement indicating their acceptance of lower wages and reduced benefits, or to forego employment. The Union's requirements for employers and the pastoralists' agreement are in direct conflict with each other, and so the shearers' strike of 1891 begins.

The shearers' strike was a pivotal moment in Australian history and labour relations, and in *Sing a Rebel Song*, we see events unfolding from the perspective of an intelligent and thoughtful child. Maggie knows that the way that many shearers and workers have been treated is wrong, but she is also perceptive enough to realise that there can be no perfect solution. As tensions increase, and the government starts sending in armed forces, Maggie struggles to make sense of the whole situation.

Determined to help in any way she can, Maggie has been writing notices for the union, helping spread information that the mainstream newspapers aren't publishing. She is also delighted to find her notices being published in *The Worker*, and resolves to be a reporter when she grows up.

The final outcome of the strike, and the story of a time when Australia came terrifyingly close to civil war, makes a gripping narrative. How Maggie resolves matters in her own head, and how she deals with conflicting emotions and ideals and struggles with maintaining loyalty to a cause without succumbing to unthinking partisanship, brings the dilemma faced by the country as a whole to life.

About the Author

Pamela Rushby was born in Queensland. She has worked as a copywriter, publicity officer and a pre-school teacher. She has studied ancient history, journalism and art history and has written and produced for television. Read about Pamela and her books at www.pamelarushby.com.

Activities

English

Sing a Rebel Song features a fictional protagonist and main characters – but the Shearers' Strike of 1891 and the surrounding events described in the story are historical fact, and are an important part of Australian history.

- 1) As a class, discuss the nature of historical fiction as a genre. Some points to consider include:
 - What is the difference between historical fiction, and fiction that is simply set in a previous era?
 - What defines historical fiction as a genre?
 - What would have to change in the way the story is written for it to be classified as a non-fiction history?
 - What would have to change in the way the story is written for it to be categorised as fiction set in the past?
 - Why might an author choose to insert fictional characters when narrating a sequence of historical events?
 - What are some of the challenges faced by an author when fictionalising history?

On pages 216–218, the poem by Henry Lawson from which the novel takes its title appears.* In the story, Maggie is sent a copy of the poem, and she sticks it in her diary. Maggie notes that the poem is very different from the poems she has learnt at school, and that it uses Australian slang and bush expressions. Since 1891 Australian English has undergone considerable change, and some parts of the poem are no longer easily comprehensible to a modern reader. For instance *on the wallaby/on the wallaby track* means to be travelling from place to place looking for work, while *humping bluey* means to carry a swag.

- 2) As a class read 'Freedom on the Wallaby'. One stanza at a time, discuss what you think Henry Lawson means, and what he is describing.
- 3) Individually, or in small groups, choose one stanza of the poem, and paraphrase it, rewriting it using modern language or slang.
- 4) As a class, discuss the various expressions and slang terms found in the poem, and what they mean.

- 5) Why might this poem have been viewed as inflammatory at the time? Write a brief piece outlining the message that Henry Lawson was trying to convey in his poetry, and how you think it might have been received by the different parties involved in the strike.
- 6) 'Freedom on the Wallaby' has been set to music, and is still sung as a union and activist song today. Another famous Australian poem from the era that has been set to music and which describes the relationship between the wealthy landholders and itinerant labour, is 'Waltzing Matilda' by AB 'Banjo' Paterson.
- Compare the sentiments expressed in the two different poems. How do the actions of the squatter and troopers in 'Waltzing Matilda' align with the actions of the army and police as Maggie describes them happening in the story?
 - In your opinion, how much effect did the social divide likely have on most people at the time?
 - The language used in 'Waltzing Matilda' is also representative of Australian slang and idiom of the time. What slang phrases and words can you identify in the poem, and what is their meaning?

*Note: Henry Lawson wrote 'Freedom on the Wallaby' as a direct comment on the Shearers' Strike/Great Strike, and it was published on page 8 of the Saturday, May 16, 1891 edition of *The Worker* in Brisbane. The last two stanzas were read by Frederick Brentnall MP in July of that year in the Queensland Legislative Assembly, and he presented them as evidence of the seditious ways of the striking union members, whilst addressing a 'Vote of Thanks' to the armed police who had broken the strike.

As a story that features shearers, and shearing, there are times when shearing jargon and terms appear are used by various characters.

- 7) In pairs or small groups, identify as many examples of shearing-specific language or terms as you can.
- Provide definitions for all the terms that you already know.
 - Research, and try to find the meaning of the terms that you don't know.
 - Locate an article, story, or encyclopaedia entry about modern shearing in Australia. How many shearing-specific terms can you identify that are the same as those used by shearers in the late 1800s?

The story is told in the first person, from Maggie's perspective, and with excerpts from the diary she kept at the time an integral part of the text. Maggie has a unique perspective of events, being the daughter of a shearers, and involved with the union, yet also having connections through James and Clara to the pastoralists. Maggie's friend Tom finds it much harder to see events from any perspective other than his own, and Clara is self-absorbed and often oblivious to much that is happening around her.

- 8) As a class discuss the author's choice of Maggie as the protagonist, and the impact of telling it from her comparatively unbiased point of view. Some points to consider are:
- How would the story differ if told from the point of view of a pastoralist's daughter like Clara?
 - How does Tom's perspective differ from Maggie's, and why?
 - What is the benefit of having a protagonist who is interested in representing events truthfully and accurately in her writing?
 - How do Maggie's friendships with the Avery children, and with Tom, affect her understanding of the overall situation?
- 9) Rewrite a scene or passage in the book from the perspective of Clara or Tom. Use the first person format, and try to remember that their interpretation of events and of Maggie's role in them will be different from how Maggie sees things happening. You may want to use a letter or diary format for your work.

History and Geography

Maggie lives in Barcaldine, Queensland, and the main strike camp is established just outside the town. Several other strike camps spring up in other parts of the state, and she mentions soldiers and police being sent to a variety of different places.

- 10) On a map of Australia, mark as many of the places Maggie mentions in the story as possible. Some (such as Brisbane) will be relatively easy to locate, but others are the names of large stations or properties, and you will have to research their location online or in the library – and expect that you will be unable to locate at least one. Create a key on your map to show where striking workers camped, and where soldiers were sent. Where possible, indicate numbers and dates.
- 11) At the end of the story Maggie is setting sail with her family to South America, to take part in the founding of a new colony in Paraguay. In the Authors' Notes at the end of the novel, Pamela Rushby discusses the eventual fate of William Lane's colony. Using the information in the notes, locate on a map of South America the places where the colonists attempted to found their new society.

In the 1890s the wool industry was vital to Australia's economic survival, and it is still important today.

- 12) Research the Australian wool industry in the 1890s, and compare it to the Australian wool industry today. Some points to consider are:
- Where did Australian wool go in the 1890s? Where does it go now?

- What is Australian wool used for? Has this changed since Maggie's time, and if so, how?
- What percentage of Australia's national economy was based on wool and the income from it, and how has this changed since 1890?

Science and Technology

While the basic process of shearing hasn't changed since the late 1800s – the aim still being to remove the wool from the sheep as quickly as possible and without injuring the sheep – the technology surrounding the process has undergone a variety of major changes.

- 13) In pairs or small groups, research the history of the shearing industry in Australia, focusing on the equipment and tools used. Some things to consider are:
- What are the innovations that have occurred in shearing since 1890, and what has their impact on the industry been?
 - How labour intensive is shearing – has this changed since 1890, and if so, in what way?
 - What is the difference between a wide-toothed and a narrow-toothed comb, and why is it important?
 - What happens to the wool after the shearer removes it from the sheep?
 - Who, other than the shearer, is involved in the process of shearing, and what is their role?

Maggie and her mother spend a lot of time helping out the union. They copy notices by hand, so that the news can be read by as many people as possible.

- 14) Time how long it takes you to write several lines in one of your school exercise books, and calculate how long it would take you to write a full page.
- How long would it take to write ten copies of a page by hand?
 - How long would it take to write out one page, and make ten photocopies of it?
 - How long would it take to type the same text on a computer, and print out ten copies?
 - As a class discuss the impact of technology on the news industry and on people's ability to access accurate information about current events easily.

Creative Activities

- 15) Visit a working sheep station, farm, or woolshed. Watch a sheep being shorn, and observe a fleece being thrown.

- 16) Knit, crochet, or weave a garment or item out of Australian wool.
- 17) As a class, make a patchwork blanket using Australian wool. Individual students knit or crochet a small square, and more experienced members sew them together to make a blanket. You can donate your blanket to a hospital or charity, or you can hold a raffle with it as the prize and donate the money to your school, or to a charity that your school supports.
- 18) Paint a picture themed around rural Australia at shearing time. You might want to look at Tom Roberts' 1890 painting *Shearing the Rams* for inspiration.
- 19) Learn all the words to 'Click go the Shears' and perform it as a class at a school assembly.
- 20) On page 92 Mr Taylor tells Maggie that he wants her and Clara to start keeping a diary. He says *Write what you do, describe things you see, write about how you feel about things ... It's just for you. But I want you to get used to writing every day.* Start keeping a diary or journal of your own, and follow Mr Taylor's advice on what to put in it.
- 21) Before Maggie received her notebook from Mr Taylor, she kept her diary on any scraps of paper that she could lay her hands on. Look in your classroom recycling bin, and collect all the usable paper that is in there. Make notepads from the paper you have collected. How many notepads can you make? Can you think of any other uses for paper that is blank on one side?
- 22) Maggie writes reports of events, and has them published in a Brisbane newspaper. Write a report of your own about a recent event at your local school, or in your local area. Remember, as Maggie says on page 177, *Reporters have to write the truth, even if they don't like it.*
- 23) Compare a newspaper article from the 1890s or early 1900s to one printed today. What differences can you see between them – how has the language used in reporting changed in the last 100 or so years?
- 24) Research the Great Strike of 1891 online or in the library. How accurate, in your opinion, is Maggie's recounting of events? Write a short factual article summarising the events of the strike and how they impacted Australians at the time. Write a companion article, expressing your opinion of the various groups who contributed to events, and your personal judgement of who (if anyone) was in the wrong, who was in the right, and why.
- 25) Have a class history quiz, with teams of students competing, based on the events in the book. You can include questions about the language used, shearing terminology, places, famous people, and events!

- 26) When Maggie's mother was washing white shirts, she added 'blueing' to the wash water. Research blueing. What was it made of, why was it added, and how did it work? Is there a modern-day equivalent to blueing?
- 27) Search online for photographs taken of the strike camps at the time. Choose one photograph and use it as the inspiration for a charcoal drawing.
- 28) Write and perform a short play that shows the main events of late 1890 and early 1891 which led up to the strike, the arrests, and the strike being broken.

Extension Activities: Points for Further Discussion

- 29) What role have unions played in social change in Australia?
- 30) Name some workers' rights that are taken as a given today, but which were unheard of, or merely dreamt of, in 1891?
- 31) What were some genuine objections that the pastoralists and other employers had to the growing union movements?
- 32) What other famous union, or workers' rights, movements have there been in Australian history, and how are they connected to the Great Strike of 1891?
- 33) What was the Eureka Stockade, who was involved, and what happened?
- 34) What was the government of Australia like at the time when *Sing a Rebel Song* is set? (What was its structure, and what were the prevailing political opinions amongst those in power?)
- 35) What role does a free and unbiased press have in society? Why is it so important that journalism and reporting be accurate, accessible and unbiased? What social and political consequences can a lack of impartial reporting have?
- 36) What else was happening in Australia in 1891? What were the global social and political trends, and the major global events during the decade?
- 37) Had the strike continued, or civil war broken out, what might some of the long-term repercussions for Australia as a whole have been? Speculate about how our society and nation might look like today.

- 38) In *Sing a Rebel Song*, neither the shearers nor the squatters mention the Indigenous inhabitants of the area. Maggie does not mention interacting with any Indigenous people either. Why would there have been no Indigenous people noticeably participating in the strike events in Barcaldine in 1891? What had happened to them, and why would their needs and concerns not be considered by the European settlers? The pastoralists controlled all the land – where had the traditional Indigenous custodians gone, and why?
- 39) On pages 38 to 40 James and Maggie argue with each other about the conflicting needs of the shearers and the squatters. Who do you think is right, and why? Is it possible for them both to be right – or for neither?
- 40) Should union membership be compulsory or optional? Why is the existence of non-union labour considered to be so important a factor in any negotiations between workers and employers?
- 41) In *Sing a Rebel Song*, it is the wealthy landowners who have power over the lives and conditions of the workers. At other times and places throughout history, union movements have been so strong that it is the unions and other workers' associations that have the power to dictate terms to both employers and workers. Is it better for one of these two groups to have the power to dictate terms? If so, which group? Are there any alternatives, and what do you think they are?
- 42) Why is it considered to be a problem when workers have to buy all their food and supplies from the station store? Why might they not want that to be their only option? What are some solutions you can think of that would solve this problem?
- 43) What are conditions like in Australia today for itinerant labourers?