

Teacher Notes

Title:	<i>The Truth about Peacock Blue</i>
Author:	Roseanne Hawke
Publisher:	Allen & Unwin
Price:	A\$15.99/NZ \$17.99
ISBN:	9781743319949
Publication Date:	September 2015
Audience:	13-16
Reader:	Carolyn Walsh, Allen & Unwin

Synopsis:

The novel opens as thirteen-year-old schoolgirl Aster Suleiman Masih is coming to terms with the death of her older brother and finds her parents want her to go to a government school. But Aster is the only Christian girl in the Muslim school and soon discovers how hard it is to fit in with her fellow students and keep up with her mandatory Arabic and Islamic studies.

To make matters worse her Islamic teacher wants her to convert, but Aster resists as respectfully as she can. When exam time arrives, Aster accidentally makes a spelling mistake when writing from memory a passage about the holy prophet. Her teacher is incensed and accuses her of blasphemy for writing a derogatory word about the prophet. Soon the police arrive to hear her accusation and a mob forms outside the school's gates. Confused and frightened, Aster is taken to the local police station where she is ill-treated. Later she is taken to the district jail where she is incarcerated in a cell with six other women.

As Aster gets to know some of the other women she realises she is not the only innocent person in jail: one has been raped but was unable to find four male witnesses to testify on her behalf and has her four-year-old daughter with her.

Aster's Australian cousin, Maryam decides to write a blog and sets about organising a petition to have her released. Many people leave comments, some quite extreme, but Maryam keeps the blog going to help Aster.

Also coming to Aster's defence is a young social justice lawyer called Mrs Jamal Khan who is determined to have Aster found not guilty. As she waits for her case to be heard Aster keeps strong by praying and singing songs and thinking about the example set by Malala Yousafzai, the young Pakistani who was shot by the Taliban for supporting girls' rights to an education.

Aster's day in court proves to be disastrous as the cleric judges are determined to find her guilty and sentence her to death. Like Asia Bibi, another Christian woman found guilty of blasphemy, she could be on death row indefinitely. Matters become even worse when Mrs Jamal is murdered outside her home.

Later a journalist visits the prison and convinces Aster to write about her story and promises to get it published. Aster begins to write, hoping that whether she lives or dies, her words will move the heart of someone who can help solve the injustice in her land.

Style:

In a smart update of the epistolary novel, Rosanne Hawke packs a variety of voices into *The Truth about Peacock Blue*, starting with the first person narrative that carries the story, and augmented by voices from videos, instant messaging, blog posts, online responses and old-fashioned letters.

Hawke takes the reader into a very unfamiliar world for most Australian readers - Pakistan - but makes it accessible by capturing universal emotions, including the desire for fairness, common interests that cross cultures (social media and cricket), and by rooting the story partly in the world of cyberspace, bringing in a variety of points-of-view - and an Australian voice that helps bridge the two worlds.

Author motivation:

‘I lived in Pakistan for seven years under Sharia law. We kept a low profile, so did minority groups. So when I saw news items about girls being accused of blasphemy my interest was aroused and used this idea when I was asked to write a short story for the UNICEF anthology edited by young UNICEF Ambassador, Mariah Kennedy....I wrote the novel to give a voice to young people like Aster whose human rights have not been recognised. My memories of living in the culture, visiting rural villages and attending marriages inform the book as well as an incident that is amusing now but wasn't at the time. Once my husband let off firecrackers for the students of the school where I worked. Within minutes twenty police descended on the school grounds with long rifles in jeeps to arrest him. Since it was the elections, volatile at the best of times, they thought it was a political uprising. Our landlord, a retired army colonel, managed to get him out that night. What struck me most about the incident was the reaction of the teachers. It was a Christian school for girls and they cried and prayed and looked so sad for my husband. Later one explained to me that when a Christian goes to jail in Pakistan they rarely return.’

Roseanne Hawke

About the Author:

Rosanne Hawke lives in rural South Australia. Many of her books have been shortlisted or notable in Australian awards; *Taj and the Great Camel Trek* won the 2012 Adelaide Festival Award for Children's Literature and *The Messenger Bird* won the 2013 Cornish Holyer an Gof Award for YA literature. For ten years Rosanne was an aid worker and teacher in Pakistan and the Middle East. She is a Carclew, Asialink, Varuna, and May Gibbs Fellow, and a Bard of Cornwall. In her books she explores culture, history, social issues and relationships. She also teaches Creative Writing at Tabor Adelaide. *The Truth about Peacock Blue* is her twenty-fourth book.

Suggestions for classroom discussion and application:

Themes include religion, persecution and justice.

The Truth about Peacock Blue is suitable for study within the context of the Australian Curriculum's requirement for students to attain General Capabilities of Intercultural Understanding, Ethical Behaviour, and Critical/Creative thinking.

The Truth about Peacock Blue would be a useful tool in the teaching areas of: English, History, Geography Religious Studies and Global Education.

Pre-Reading Exercise

Encourage students to find out more about the following:

- Pakistan's blasphemy law and why it is has been so controversial since 1980
- Shabaz Bhatti's assassination
- Asia Bibi's case
- Religions existing in Pakistan today
- Malala Yousefzai and her campaign for girls to receive an education
- Social media campaigns that have changed the world for the better

Cover Analysis

Before reading *The Truth about Peacock Blue* ask students to consider the title and cover design. What visual techniques has the designer used? (Consider font, colour, composition, framing, etc.) Look closely at the letter 't' in the word 'Truth'. What does this letter look like? Now look at the silhouetted image below and talk about what it shows. Do these elements—the cross in the word 'truth' and the mosque—make you think the story might be about religion? How would you describe the mood of this cover? Do you think something good or bad will happen to the girl during the course of the novel? Why.

Comprehension Questions: Chapters 2-7

- Why does Aster's father think the police won't help Hadassah and her family after the assault? (Chapter 2)
- Why is Aster surprised when it is suggested she attend the high school? (Chapter 2)
- Why is Aster worried when her teacher introduces her to her class by her full name? (Chapter 3)
- How do girls like Saleema view Christians? (Chapter 3)
- Why does Aster find her Islamiyat class difficult? (Chapter 3)
- What does Rabia suggest Aster do to make Mrs Abdul like her and what is Aster's response? (Chapter 4)
- Why does Aster use Ijaz's Facebook profile? (Chapter 5)
- What does the Colonel mean when he says, 'Educate a girl like you and you educate a whole village'? (Chapter 6)
- What family secret does Rabia share with Aster? (Chapter 7)
- Why does Maryam call her blog 'Step by Step'? (Chapter 7)

Character Analysis

On finishing *The Truth about Peacock Blue* ask students to divide a page into four quarters. Next, ask them to come up with four different adjectives to describe Aster. Put each adjective at the top of each quarter page. Under this heading list incidents or quotes from the book that reflect this aspect of Aster's personality.

Examining the Narrative Structure

Discuss the concept of narrative structure in terms of orientation, complication and resolution. A simple and clear demonstration of this is found at <http://www.slideshare.net/nataliearthur/powerpoint-on-narrative>. Does *The Truth about Peacock Blue* follow this usual structure? In what way does it differ?

Examining Text Types

In a whole group discussion identify the different types of text that appear in this novel. (first person narrative, blog posts, Facebook group conversations, letters) Discuss why students think the author chose to approach the story in this way? What are the benefits and weaknesses of doing this in a novel?

Debate

It would have been better for everyone if Aster had just said the Kalima in the first place and continued her studies at the high school without incident.

Writing/Presentation Task

Aster is still in prison by the end of the novel. Ask students to write their own blog about the injustice Aster has faced and what ordinary Australians might be able to do to help her. Once complete, encourage students to make a video blog version. Play all vlogs back to the class at the end of the unit.

Further Research

In Chapter 16 Maryam writes a blog about children incarcerated in Pakistani jails. In the group discussion that follows Rashid talks about refugee children arriving in Australia only to be sent to detention centres. Find out more about this policy and the similarities and differences between what happens here and in Pakistan.