I closed my eyes and saw my dad tearing through the surf towards me, getting to me as fast as he could. Mum wasn’t there, only Dad. There was room for him. In Nineteen Emu Mum took up all the room. Her streams of love flooded the house; that’s why Dad spent so much time in the shed. It was dry land in there.

Sofie Laguna The Eye of the Sheep

INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXT

The Eye of the Sheep is Sofie Laguna’s second book for adults. Her first, One Foot Wrong, was longlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary Award and shortlisted for the Prime Minister’s Literary Award for fiction in 2009.

Jimmy Flick is unusual. Described as both ‘too fast’ and ‘too slow’, he sees the world differently. The Eye of the Sheep is narrated entirely in Jimmy’s voice, immersing the reader completely in his thoughts and allowing us to see the world as he does. The book follows Jimmy as he ages from six to eleven, and is an intimate portrait of a family pushed to their absolute limits.

In this book, Laguna delicately explores the tensions that make this family of four vulnerable: family violence, poverty and Jimmy’s intellectual disability all play a part. Family violence is a major theme, but there is nothing clichéd or typical in the nuanced way Laguna writes about this fraught topic. Jimmy’s mother, Paula, is both physically and metaphorically large. She is a victim, but also a woman who is passionate about her husband and family. She is reckless with her own health, but dotes on her sons, particularly Jimmy. Laguna wants us to love him – and, despite ourselves, we do. She paints him as a man desperate for redemption, for whom violence is the language of men. Gavin too is more than just an abusive husband. Jimmy is blocked by his own failures and frustrations and, at times, by Paula. In the moments where he is alone with Jimmy he becomes a different man, one who has the capacity to be a good father. It can be difficult to read about these characters, because from the outset it is clear there is no easy way for them all to have a happy ending.

Jimmy is the reader’s conduit into the Flick family’s story, and it is he that the reader becomes most invested in. He is a boy with surprising insight, who we might suspect lies somewhere on the autism spectrum, although this is never specified. Laguna finds comfort in reading his ‘manuals’ – the instructions for pieces of equipment throughout the house: the washing machine, the television and so on. Perhaps this is because he hopes to make sense of the things he doesn’t understand by likening them to things that he does. As a narrator, Jimmy makes perfect sense, describing the world around him with dizzying clarity. As a child, though, Jimmy lacks the ability to articulate himself to those who share his fictional narrative. In the second part of the book, when Paula dies and Gavin is absent, Jimmy becomes almost mute, leaving him even more vulnerable in a world of adults who lack the patience or capacity to understand him.

Sofie Laguna is an extraordinary storyteller, as she demonstrates in both of her novels. Her unique strength lies in creating characters with voices that sing from the page. She is an author who refuses to shy away from (and is perhaps drawn to) the darkness in people, but this is tempered by her ability to articulate other, lighter parts of their characters as well. Although the themes in this book (particularly family violence) might be considered challenging by some school groups, there is great potential for
students to use this text as a way into discussions about issues with real-world relevance in the safe space of the classroom. The activities below include a significant section on understanding characters, as these are key to engaging with this extraordinary text.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SOFIE LAGUNA originally studied to be a lawyer at the University of New South Wales, but after deciding law was not for her, she moved to Melbourne to train as an actor. Sofie worked for a number of years as an actor at the same time as completing a Diploma in Professional Writing and Editing at RMIT. Sofie is now an author and playwright writing for both adults and children.

Her many books for young people have been named Honour Books and Notable Books in the Children’s Book Council of Australia Book of the Year Awards and have been shortlisted in the Queensland Premier’s Literary Awards. She has been published in the US and the UK, and in translation throughout Europe and Asia.

Her picture book, *On Our Way to the Beach*, was included in the White Raven 2005 annual selection of outstanding international children’s books by the International Youth Library (Associated Project of UNESCO).

In 2008 Sofie released her first novel for adults, *One Foot Wrong*, to international acclaim. It was shortlisted for the Prime Minister’s Literary Awards and longlisted for the Miles Franklin Award. Screen rights for the book have been optioned, and Sofie has recently completed the screenplay.

In 2011, Sofie moved back to writing for children with the highly popular and best-selling *Our Australian Girl: Meet Grace* series, published by Penguin Books. She has recently written the equivalent for boys, *Do You Dare: Fighting Bones*.

In 2014, Sofie published her second novel for adults, *The Eye of the Sheep*, which was shortlisted for the Stella Prize and was the winner of the Miles Franklin Literary Award.

Sofie continues to write for a wide readership, from picture books for very young children, to series for older readers, to novels for adults. She lives in Melbourne with her partner and their two young sons.

Taken from the author’s website http://sofielaguna.com

THEMES

Family
Family violence
Privilege
Class
Redemption
Identity

READING QUESTIONS

✦ What are your first indications as a reader that Jimmy is different?
✦ What is Jimmy’s relationship with Robby?
✦ Why doesn’t Jimmy want to go to school?
✦ How does the author show that there is violence in Jimmy’s family without him saying it explicitly?
✦ Why doesn’t Paula leave Gav?
✦ Are Jimmy and Robby in danger?
✦ Who is Merle? What is the relevance of Merle and the Cutty Sark?
✦ What is different when Gavin and Jimmy go away together? How does this shift your perspective about the characters?
✦ How does Jimmy feel about Ned? How does this help him?
✦ How is Gavin’s own history reflected in his actions towards his family?
✦ What relationships are possible between the men in this story? What prevents them from achieving this?
✦ How do each of the characters find redemption?
✦ How are adults shown as the outsiders in the book?
✦ How do the characters fail themselves and each other?
✦ Who is responsible for Paula’s death?
✦ What is the impact of Paula’s death on Jimmy?
✦ How does Gavin view his position in the family?
✦ Who fails Jimmy, and how do they fail him? Consider both specific characters in the book, as well as institutions, or people you might expect to help him in reality.
✦ Besides Jimmy, who are the victims in this novel? Why? Do they overcome their situations, and if so how?
✦ Why does Jimmy end up with a foster family?
✦ Who becomes Jimmy’s unlikely ally once he is living with this family?
✦ Why does his foster mother give up?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. *The Eye of the Sheep* is driven by its characters. As you read, keep a character journal for the following characters: Gavin, Robby, Jimmy and Paula. In it, write at least three examples from the text that answer the following:
   ✦ How is the character described by others?
   ✦ How does the character describe themselves?
   ✦ How do they describe their relationships with each of the other characters?
   ✦ What factors influence their decisions or actions?
   ✦ Who else is involved in the outcome of their story?
   ✦ Who are they responsible to and why?
   ✦ How is the character disadvantaged?
   Based on your observations, write detailed responses to the following. Back each of your answers up with examples from the text.
   ✦ Is Gavin capable of being a good father?
   ✦ How does the author use descriptions of each character’s physicality to mirror their emotional state?
   ✦ How does the way each character views his or herself differ from the way others view them? Give examples.
   ✦ What does Jimmy want for each of his parents? What does he want for himself?
   ✦ What does Robby’s absence do to each of the characters?
   ✦ How are Gavin and Jimmy different when they are with Paula, when they are alone, and when they are with each other?
   ✦ In what ways do Jimmy and Robby fulfil Paula’s needs?

Drawing both on your character journals, and your responses above, choose one of Jimmy, Gavin or Paula and write a letter from them to someone else. It can be to any other character mentioned in the book, no matter how minor, but you need to consider why they would write a letter to this person, what it would be about, how their voice would change, and the things they would discuss.

2. In her article ‘Mayhem and Mercy on the Margins’ (see FURTHER READING) Louise Swinn praises Laguna for ‘the way her characters are the sum of all of the parts that make them – not just the one or two elements that are most notable: the alcoholic, the browbeaten wife, the wacky kid. These characters are multidimensional. It is much easier to dismiss an alcoholic than it is to understand why they act the way they do, or to notice the other things about them, the good that they do. It is quite a feat to write characters with such nuance.’

✦ How does Laguna make each of her characters multidimensional?
✦ What are the most notable or unusual elements of each character?

✦ What does Adichie mean by a ‘single story’?
✦ How is the single story relevant to the way we might view Gavin, Paula or Jimmy?
✦ What might their single stories be? How would this affect the way we see them?
✦ What techniques does the author use to show us that these characters are more than their single story?
✦ In what way does creating multidimensional characters open up more options for them? Choose one of the characters (Gavin, Paula or Jimmy) and decide on a ‘single story’ narrative for them. What would this mean for their outcome? Imagine what might happen if they were limited in this way and write an ending for your character. Compare this to Laguna’s outcome for each of the characters. How is it different? Is it more hopeful? Less? What does it give the character that your single story ending does not?

4. In her review (see FURTHER READING), Anna Spargo-Ryan describes The Eye of the Sheep as ‘part graceful and considered storytelling, but also brutal social realness’ and says that, for Jimmy, Laguna has almost created a brand new language. In the Radio National interview (see FURTHER READING), the interviewer quotes David Malouf as saying that writing from the voice of a child is a great gift for a writer because you’re ‘perched between innocence and experience’. Sofie herself says that Jimmy’s voice give her an opportunity to be completely honest about how he’s feeling.
✦ How does Jimmy use language differently?
✦ How does this shape the way he views the world and articulates his experiences?
✦ Do you agree that Jimmy’s voice gives a more honest portrait of his feelings than if the book was narrated by someone else? Why? How would it change if the story was told by, say, Gavin or Paula?
✦ In what way does Sofie Laguna use language differently from other authors you’ve read? How does this allow her to get closer to her characters?
✦ What problems do you think writing in the voice of Jimmy might have presented? In what ways would it have been liberating for the author?
✦ Write a short piece (either fictional or based on a memory) in the voice of a child narrator. In class, reflect on the process of writing your piece, and discuss the challenges and freedoms of writing in the voice of a younger person.

FURTHER READING

On Sofie Laguna and The Eye of the Sheep
Sofie Laguna’s The Eye of the Sheep: Books and Arts Daily: Radio National
http://www.abc.net.au/radioplaces/programs/booksandarts/sofie-laguna/5755318

Digital Writers’ Festival 2015: Presenting the Stella Prize Longlist (Sofie reading from The Eye of the Sheep) 3:28–10:05
http://digitalwritersfestival.com/2015/event/stella-longlist/

‘Mayhem and Mercy on the Margins’ by Louise Swinn: The Australian

Review by Anna Spargo-Ryan

Review by Ruth Starke: Transnational Literature

The Stella Interview: Sofie Laguna

‘Stella Prize 2015: the shortlisted authors on the stories behind their books’: The Guardian

On Family Violence in Australia
http://au.reachout.com/what-is-domestic-violence
http://dvcs.org.au
On family violence and dealing with challenging themes in YA literature
‘Developing a love of reading: why young adult literature is important’

‘Family Violence: A Recurring Theme in YA’