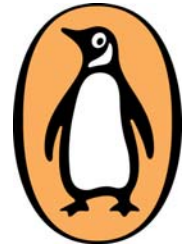


GIRL UNDERGROUND

Written by Morris Gleitzman

Teachers' Notes written by Judith Ridge



OVERVIEW OF THE NOVEL

*At home I saw people who hurt children and they weren't sad.
They put their arms in the air like a winning team.
I think there are people like this in Australia too. I am sad
because I thought Australia was a kind place.
You are kind Menzies.
You give me wings.
I wish they were real.*

Girl Underground p. 116

Girl Underground is the companion novel to Morris Gleitzman's *Boy Overboard*. It is the story of Bridget White, whose parents run an illegal imports business, and whose older brother Gavin is in jail on a shoplifting charge. Bridget's parents have sent her to an exclusive boarding school in the belief that it will give her opportunities they didn't have, and so she will not 'end up like them' – but as Bridget makes clear, she *wants* to end up like them: 'kind and generous and good'.

Bridget is terrified that the other students at her new school will learn the truth about her parents, and so she vows not to make any friends. Yet against her better judgement she does form a friendship with another outsider, Menzies, the son of the (fictitious) Federal Minister for National Development. Menzies is a 'refugee sympathiser', as one teacher sneeringly calls him, and he and Jamal (whose family's adventures in escaping the Taliban and seeking asylum in Australia we followed in *Boy Overboard*) are pen pals. Menzies is greatly distressed by the circumstances of refugees – especially children – in detention, and is in conflict with his father over the issue. Prior to meeting Menzies, Bridget wasn't aware that children were held in detention, and she's shocked. Bridget and Menzies go to Canberra, where they confront the Parliament and the Prime Minister over the issue of children in detention. They do not get a sympathetic hearing, but Bridget's family secret is outed when the media track down 'Parliament House Girl'. Later, Bridget discovers from Menzies that Jamal's father has been released from detention, but that it has been determined that Jamal, his sister Bibi and his mother are not genuine refugees and must stay behind the razor wires. Bridget and Menzies hatch a plan to tunnel into the detention centre and break them out.

Girl Underground is a book that wears its political position proudly on its sleeve. It is steadfastly and overtly against the current Australian government's policies on asylum seekers, particularly in relation to children. *Girl Underground* asks its readers to consider what makes a person a good person and a good citizen. It challenges conventional ideas about lawfulness. It promotes the idea that children can be active participants in the political process even if they can't vote. It is also, as we have come to expect from Gleitzman, a highly entertaining novel that balances humour and pathos, and assumes that young people are interested in serious issues and big ideas.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF THE BOOK

Mandatory detention of asylum seekers has been an Australian federal government policy since 1992. While many countries around the world include different forms of detention in their management of asylum seekers, Australia is the only country where detention is

mandatory for the entire duration of their processing by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs. This policy has become increasingly contentious in recent years, particularly in terms of its application to children and the numerous reports of serious physical and mental illnesses suffered by long-term detainees. Several independent reports, such as that delivered in May 2004 by the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), have concluded that Australia is in breach of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Australia is a signatory. The HREOC report called for all children to be released by June 10 2004. At the time these notes were prepared, in early June 2004, 164 children remained in detention in Australia and its off-shore detention centres.

A web search of Australian sites using the phrase 'children in detention' finds over 57 000 entries. A list of some of these sites is provided elsewhere in these notes.

An interview with Morris Gleitzman about the writing of *Girl Underground* was published in *Viewpoint: On Books for Young Adults*, Vol. 12 N° 2, Winter 2004, published by Department of Language, Literacy and Arts Education, University of Melbourne <http://go.to/viewpoint>

USING THIS BOOK IN THE CLASSROOM

Girl Underground was inspired by Morris Gleitzman's conversations with children after the publication of *Boy Overboard*. Gleitzman was struck by the passionate opinions children have about the issue of children in detention, and it was for this reason that he chose to tell the story from Bridget's point of view, rather than reprising Jamal as narrator. *Girl Underground* will appeal to young people's sense of natural justice, and they will find the humour and adventure in the story compelling and engaging.

Teachers should be prepared for a wide variety of opinions on the questions of Australia's treatment of asylum seekers and on the policy of mandatory detention. The novel offers an excellent opportunity to explore these issues, through discussion, formal and informal debate and through writing activities. Students should at all times be encouraged to listen carefully to and respect each other's opinions, even when they may hold very different opinions themselves.

THEMES TO EXPLORE

Family

Despite their illegal business and the fact that son Gavin is in jail for shoplifting, the White family exemplify the sorts of family values politicians frequently extol. They are close-knit and concerned for each other's welfare. They dislike liars, cheats, theft and swearing. They help each other out when in need, but they also hold each other responsible for their actions; note Dad's comments that Gavin's stint in jail is a 'fair cop' (p148).

So what are 'family values'? What makes for a good strong family? Think of other unconventional families in books, television and film that are, nevertheless, strong and loving families: *The Simpsons*; the families depicted in Bob Graham's picture books are frequently working-class and sometimes a bit rough around the edges, but consider the family values expressed in books like *Let's Get a Pup!*

When Bridget first brings up the subject of children in detention with her parents, her mother says, 'There are some awful things happening in the world, and it's very sad, but there's not a lot we can do. We've got our own families to worry about.' (p 71) Later, however, when Jamal and Bibi's father asks Bridget's father to help him get his family out of detention, Bridget narrates:

'I can see Dad is feeling moved as well. I can also see what he's thinking. *I've got a son in jail too. I can't even help my own son.* Dad looks at Mum. I know what she's thinking as well. *Our family. We have to look after our family first.* But I'm wrong because Mum does an amazing thing. She nods at Dad.' (p143)

- Families do not exist in isolation, but are part of the wider community and have obligations to the wider community.
- Bridget's parents are shocked when they meet the 'upstanding' parents of her new classmates in chapter 7. What did they expect, and how were their expectations overturned? What does this tell us about Bridget's family?
- Menzies' relationship with his father offers an opportunity to explore family conflict and how parents and children can manage their differences and learn from each other; note Menzies' father's weary pride that he was successful in raising his son to think for himself (p91), and his change of heart about his political position after seeing Menzies' absolute commitment to his own beliefs about children in detention. See also pages 112–113 for Menzies' father's reaction to his son and Bridget confronting the Parliament and the Prime Minister.

Right and Wrong

Does being involved with criminal activity automatically make a person bad? Of her family, Bridget says,

'I'm sad because they're going, but I'm even sadder because I know the real reason Mum and Dad are paying a fortune to send me to a boarding school that's only an hour by car or school bus from our place. They think if they keep me out of the house I won't end up like them. Crims. Which is hard for me because they're kind and generous and good and I love them and I do want to end up like them.' (p8)

Later, she says that at least her parent's illegal import business provides affordable appliances to 'people who can't afford expensive ones'. (p11)

Contrast this with the actions and speech of the Prime Minister in Chapter 21: 'Even though the things he's saying are angry things, he's still smiling. That is so dishonest.' (p110)

Girl Underground challenges our conventional ideas of right and wrong.

- Criminals can be good people.

School

'Wish I'd gone to a school like this,' says Dad. 'Be a different person if I had.' (p3)

Bridget's parents believe that the boarding school they send her to will provide her with opportunities they never had, and will prevent her from falling into a life of crime. What does Bridget think about this? How does she feel about her new school? What values does the boarding school claim to have, and what values does it end up demonstrating?

- Bridget compares her old school to her new one (pp 4-5)
- The boarding school's motto is 'Our Minds Are Open and our hearts are Strong.' Does the school live up to its motto? Chapter 27 exposes the school's true values, in sharp contrast to those of Menzies, Bridget and her family.

Friendship

Bridget is initially fearful of making friends at her new school, because she is fearful that if she gets close to anyone they will find out that her parents are criminals. She also says of her previous school 'Nobody tries to push you into being their friend' (p5), so it's evident that Bridget has never really had any friends because of her desire to protect her family.

- How and why do she and Menzies become friends?
- What other unexpected friendships does Bridget form?
- What does she learn about friendship?

Power and powerlessness

Girl Underground explores the uses and abuses of power, and the sense children frequently have of being powerless. This theme is also explored through characters other than Bridget and Menzies; it applies to Jamal and his family. We see it in heartbreaking close-up as Jamal's father desperately tries to free his family from detention, first by legal means, and then with his bare hands.

As in many classics of children's literature, Bridget and Menzies gain empowerment through the course of the novel. Gleitzman is proposing that children need not be powerless, and can change the world they live in by taking action on issues that matter to them. This is one of the most uplifting aspects of the book, along with the 'people power' scenes at the end of the novel which will have many readers cheering and crying at the same time!

Look at the question of power and powerlessness of both children and adults in the following contexts:

- School (teachers, bullies, rules, values)
- The family (children v parents, any other examples?)
- The political system (children are disenfranchised yet are affected by political decisions, the position of asylum seekers)

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Bridget

Like many of Morris Gleitzman's protagonists, and despite her knowledge and experience of the 'other side of the law', Bridget remains something of an ingénue. She is naïve about many of the ways in which the world works; she does not, for example, know that children are held in detention in Australia. Despite her parents' criminal associates, she believes that people are fundamentally kind (chapter 15) – largely because her own family are. As a result, she genuinely believes that if she and Menzies have the opportunity to talk to his father and the Prime Minister about the issue of children in detention, they will change their policy and release the children. Bridget's journey in *Girl Underground* is one from naivety to a more mature understanding of the world without losing her ideals.

- Have your students find quotes that demonstrate how Bridget matures in her understanding of the world around her.
- Does Bridget change over the course of the novel? How? What aspects of her character do not change? Have your students look for quotes that demonstrate how Bridget changes as well as ones that demonstrate how she remains true to the values and ideals she starts out with.

Menzies

Students are unlikely to know that this character is named after former liberal Prime Minister Robert Menzies. The name is meant to be ironic: Robert Menzies was involved in writing the

1954 UN Refugee Convention, of which Australia is a signatory, which created and enshrined in an international treaty the human right to seek asylum. This right was recognised in the 1958 Migration Act, also a work of the Menzies government. Many critics of the current Australian liberal government believe their policies are a betrayal of the Menzies legacy. It is young Menzies in *Girl Underground* who challenges his politician father time and again to use his influence as Minister for National Development to free child detainees.

- Is Menzies in the book just to make political points, or does he have another role to play?
- How would the book have been different if Menzies father had been a used TV producer or cosmetics manufacturer, like some of his classmates?

Chantelle, Antoinette and Veuve

Look at the scene where Bridget meets her three room-mates (pp. 11–14). What expectations do we have about these characters from their physical description, the way they talk and their obsession with horses? Are they the kinds of girls Bridget expects to meet at her boarding school? How does Gleitzman overturn our attitudes towards these girls, as he develops them away from the initial (deliberate) stereotype? (see chapter 24 for the girls' unexpected acts of sympathy and compassion after Bridget's family's criminal activities are revealed in the press.)

Gavin

Bridget's brother Gavin is an important character in the story, yet we never meet him; he is 'off-stage' and in jail for the entire the novel.

- Why did Gleitzman create the character of Gavin?
- What purpose does he play in the action and theme of the novel?
- How would the novel be different without this character?

Adult characters

Girl Underground has an array of adult characters that all fulfil different functions in the novel. One of the novel's key themes is right and wrong, and the novel explores and challenges our conventional beliefs about right and wrong, good and bad.

Ask your students to decide which of the adult characters are good, which are bad, and which may be both. Have them justify their decisions with quotes from the book as well as their own opinion:

- Bridget's father
- Bridget's mother
- Dave the bodyguard
- Menzies' father
- Mr Lamb (classroom teacher)
- Mr Galbraith (school principal)
- Jamal's father
- The Prime Minister

Choices and action

Look also at the choices characters make throughout the course of the novel.

- What ethical dilemmas do they face?
- How do they make their decisions about why and when to act?
- When is breaking the rules (or even the law) OK and when is it not?

NOTES ON THE NOVEL'S STRUCTURE, STYLE AND SYMBOL

Structure

Girl Underground mimics that of *Boy Overboard*. It is told in the present progressive tense. Action unfolds rapidly and with numerous cliffhangers that compel the reader along. It even shares the same number of chapters; a comparison of the action would make an interesting exercise for students interested in a compare and contrast approach to the companion texts.

Both novels are open-ended, but where *Boy Overboard* ended on a note of uncertainty and anxiety, *Girl Underground* ends joyfully and hopefully. There is still uncertainty about Jamal and his family's future, as there is about Bridget's family's future, but the final scenes of ordinary Australian citizens breaking *into* detention are triumphant and uplifting.

Have students keep a diary as they read the novel.

- Ask them to describe how they feel at the end of each chapter.
- Have them identify high and low emotional points.
- Ask them to record responses such as a compulsion to keep reading. What kept them going? What made them stop and consider new ideas?
- What purpose do narrative devices such as the letters between Jamal and Menzies and between Bridget and her brother Gavin have?

Style

The story is told in the first person, using the present progressive tense; that is, Bridget is telling the story *as it happens*.

- Why does Gleitzman choose this style of telling the story?
- How would the story be different if Bridget were telling it in past tense?
- How might the story be different if another character were telling the story? For example, what information might Menzies have to tell the reader that Bridget does not have? What if an adult character had told the story instead?
- Bridget frequently uses phrases such as 'The time is 2:17 pm and I am proceeding in an easterly direction...' Why does Gleitzman have her use this kind of language?

Humour

Humour is a characteristic of Gleitzman's fiction. Humour lies in running jokes, in situations and in characters actions and observations.

- Why does Gleitzman use humour in telling a story that is about very serious issues?
- There's a running joke where Bridget's father constantly gives gifts of imported goods from unlikely countries of origin. Why does Gleitzman include this? Is it just for laughs or does it reveal something about the character and about the novel's themes?
- Gleitzman often creates scenes that stretch believability for both humorous and dramatic effect. Identify some such scenes and talk about how and why they work in the context of the novel.
- A common feature of Gleitzman's novels is having young characters that don't have all the information, knowledge and experience that they need. Humour frequently lies in their inexperience and naivety, yet the humour is not at the character's expense. Find some examples of this, and discuss this particular use of humour and how it reveals both character and plot.

Symbol

The key symbol in this novel is that of crime and the law. Gleitzman uses them to explore concepts that are more difficult and less tangible; ethics, values and right and wrong.

- Bridget's family is involved in an illegal imports business. Despite this, what are their ethical positions on crime (eg violence, theft, lying)?
- How does Gleitzman use the criminal background of Bridget's family to contrast the legal yet unethical behaviour of other characters, eg the people they meet at the

school's parent's night, Menzies' father, Dave the bodyguard, and most controversially, the unnamed Prime Minister?

ISSUES FOR EXPLORATION— USING AND GOING BEYOND THE TEXT

Asylum seekers and children in detention

We learn in chapter 5 that Menzies has been writing to a refugee in detention; we later discover that the refugee is Jamal from *Boy Overboard*. The teacher Mr Lamb calls Menzies a 'refugee sympathiser' in a way that infers that this is not a good thing to be (p31).

- Look for letters to the editor and other newspaper and magazine articles on hotly debated political issues such as Australia's treatment of asylum seekers.
- Look for examples of how people on both sides of the argument manipulate language to denigrate the other's position: phrases such as 'bleeding-heart liberal', comparisons to Nazi Germany and so on. How did compassion become an undesirable trait? Do exaggerated comparisons to the Holocaust assist refugee supporters' position? This is an excellent opportunity for students to investigate the power of language in the discourse of politics.

A web search of Australian sites finds over 57 000 web pages on the issue of children in detention. Some of these sites are listed here. When exploring the sites, encourage your students to consider how they might assess the information within them by asking the following questions. (You might wish to discuss ideas such as *vested interest* and *propaganda* with your students beforehand.)

- Who does the site belong to?
- Who has written the information within?
- Why was the website set up? What does the owner/author of the website hope to achieve?
- Did you find conflicting opinions and information (such as statistics) on the websites you visit? How do you establish which facts are true? How can you work out what is fact and what is opinion?

<http://www.aph.gov.au/library/intguide/SP/Childrendetention.htm>

This page is from the website of the Parliamentary Library of the federal Parliament. Much of the material on it is dense legal information, but it does contain useful information and statistics and many links to other websites. It states that the site *is intended as an overview and a guide to the internet resources, research and comment on the issue of the detention of children in Australia. It includes current numbers of children in detention, an outline of the services provided in each Immigration Detention Centre (IDC), relevant court cases and legislation, and links to key international documents.*

http://www.hreoc.gov.au/human_rights/children_detention_report/

This is the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's report of the National Inquiry into Children in Immigrant Detention, titled *A Last Resort?* The title is a quote taken from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: 'The arrest, detention or imprisonment of a child shall be... used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time.' The site includes teaching resources.

<http://www.chilout.org/>

This is the website of ChilOut, which is a group of parents and citizens opposed to the mandatory detention of children in Australian immigration detention centres.

Politics and the Law

The novel provides students with ample opportunities to explore their opinions and knowledge of politics and politicians. Use the following quotes as discussion starters:

'Dad's face darkens. "But I'm gonna write to those politicians," he says. "...Tell them what I think about them locking up kids.'" (p77)

'The children in detentions centres,' I say. 'We'd like you to set them free, please.' ... Menzies' dad gives a sigh. 'I wish I could, Bridget,' he says. 'But I'm just one member of a team. A team called the government. And it was a decision by the whole team that people who try to get into Australia without permission must be locked up.' (p90)

'It's OK, Menzies, I understand' [Jamal's father] says softly. 'Your father is a politician, and politicians must do what is right for politics. It is the same in my country.' 'In Australia,' mutters Dad, 'we prefer them just to do what's right.' (p141)

'Leave it to us,' says an old bloke with medals on his bowling club shirt. 'My mates didn't die fighting for an Australia that locks up kiddies.' (p181)

Look also at chapter 21, and the conversation between the children and the Prime Minister. This is an excellent opportunity to investigate the language politicians employ, and the difference between words and meaning.

ACTIVITIES

WRITING

Letters

Gleitzman uses Jamal's letters to Menzies to tell part of the story of *Girl Underground*. Gavin's letters to Bridget help expand on the themes of crime, detention, and right and wrong.

- Write a letter to a newspaper expressing your opinions on the one or more of the issues raised in the novel.
- Write a letter to a politician, local member, relevant Minister, etc, about these issues.
- Write a letter to a friend or family member explaining how you feel about the chosen issue.
- How do these letters differ from each other? Talk about tone, language choice, techniques such as persuasion and exposition.
- Challenge the students to write a story using only letters. They may be between two or more characters. A more difficult challenge would be to write a story with letters from only one character to person or persons known or unknown.

Information Report

- Have students select a theme or issue in the book that interests them. Research and write an informative article about the topic. Find examples of this kind of writing to model to students. Talk about the difference between impartial reporting of facts and opinion pieces (argumentative writing). *Girl Underground* lends itself to both kinds of approaches, but be sure to remind students that opinion pieces must also be well-researched and their opinions must be supported by facts. The articles can become

the basis for class discussions. Encourage students to become well informed about the major issues facing the world they live in.

- Re-write a scene from the book as if it were a newspaper report, such as Bridget and Menzies in Parliament House, the final scene where a large number of protesters break-in to the detention centre, or others.

Topics for discussion and debate

Girl Underground is a rich source of material for debate and discussion. Many of the issues in it are potentially very contentious, so remind students of the need to be respectful of each other's ideas and opinions.

- Information and news articles about issues such as children in detention are usually expected to be even-handed and unbiased. Do these rules apply to fiction? Does Morris Gleitzman show both sides of the debate about asylum seekers and children in detention? Is he even-handed and fair? Should he be, or is fiction different?
- Bridget's family are shown to be criminals, yet highly ethical and moral people. Other characters who we assume are law-abiding are shown to be ethically ambiguous or even immoral and dishonest. Talk about these ethical ambiguities and the question of how we know what is right and wrong. Who teaches us? What if the people we trust to teach us right and wrong (eg, schools, the state) turn out to be immoral themselves?
- The novel is open-ended (see Gleitzman's comments on this in the *Viewpoint* interview, mentioned above). Talk about what the students think might happen to the various characters next, and what they would *like* to happen next.
- Can a novel change the world? Can children change the world? If so, what would they change and how would they go about it?