

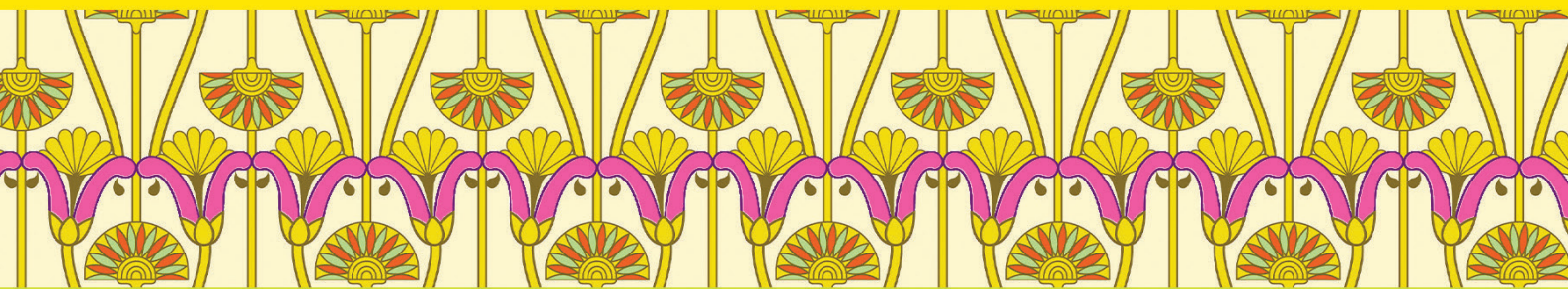
MUDDY

'Enchanting and refreshing'
MAXINE BENEBA CLARKE

A MEMOIR

'Vibrant and dynamic'
MICHAEL MOHAMMED AHMAD

PEOPLE



SARA EL SAYED

Teaching Notes by Amra Pajalic

Teaching notes

BY AMRA PAJALIC

Themes

- ◆ Assimilation
- ◆ Migration
- ◆ Stereotypes
- ◆ Religion
- ◆ Body Image
- ◆ Islamophobia
- ◆ Marriage
- ◆ Muddy People

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Part A

Synopsis and author biography

A hilarious, heartwarming memoir of growing up and becoming yourself in an Egyptian Muslim family.

At the turn of the millennium, Soos is growing up in an eccentric household with a lot of rules. No bikinis, despite the Queensland heat. No boys, unless he's Muslim. And no life insurance, not even when her father gets cancer.

Soos is trying to discover how to balance her parents' strict decrees with having friendships, crushes and the freedom to develop her own values. With each rule Soos comes up against, she is forced to choose between doing what her parents say is right and following her instincts. When her family collapses, she comes to see her parents as flawed, their morals based on a muddy logic. But she will also learn that they are her strongest defenders.

For readers of Benjamin Law's *The Family Law* and Alice Pung's *Unpolished Gem*, this quick, clever, warm-hearted book introduces a talented new Australian voice.

Sara El Sayed was born in Alexandria, Egypt. She teaches at Queensland University of Technology, where she is completing a Master of Fine Arts. Her work features in the anthologies *Growing Up African in Australia* and *Arab, Australian, Other*, among other places. She is a recipient of a Queensland Writers Fellowship and was shortlisted for the 2020 Queensland Premier's Young Writers and Publishers Award.

Part B

Pre-reading tasks

Before reading, it might be helpful to understand some of the following:

- ◆ Muslims abstain from alcohol and don't eat pork. They pray five times a day in Arabic facing Mecca, which is a holy city.
- ◆ Halal food – food that has been slaughtered and manufactured according to *halal* methods and with an Islamic prayer.
- ◆ Haram – a prohibited food or act.
- ◆ Hijab – a head scarf that Muslim women wear if they choose to.
- ◆ Cultural distinctions – there are fifty countries with a Muslim majority, and while there are tenets of Islam that are expected of all Muslims, there are also distinct cultural mores and subtleties within each community.
- ◆ The issue of photoshopping of minorities to alter their features and skin colour to look more Caucasian.
- ◆ Racial pejoratives – 'muzzie', 'mud skin', 'slave', 'sand n*gger'.
- ◆ Racial vilification – the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* makes it unlawful to insult, humiliate, offend or intimidate another person or group in public on the basis of their race.

- ◆ Homophobia encompasses a range of negative attitudes and feelings toward homosexuality or people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBTQIA+).
- ◆ Freedom of Speech – Australia does not have explicit freedom of speech in any constitutional or statutory declaration of rights with the exception of political speech, which is protected from criminal prosecution at common law as per *Australian Capital Television Pty Ltd v Commonwealth*.
- ◆ Islamophobia is the fear of, hatred of, or prejudice against the religion of Islam or Muslims in general, especially when seen as a geopolitical force or the source of terrorism.

Part C

Questions to provoke discussion and thinking while reading

AUTHOR'S NOTE

- ◆ What does the author's anecdote about her promotional photo reveal about the media's portrayal of people of colour?
- ◆ What do the racial pejoratives that students use reveal about El Sayed's experiences at school?
- ◆ What does El Sayed mean when she talks about how some people react to 'muddy skin'?
- ◆ Why does her father fear her having a white boyfriend? What are his fears about?
- ◆ What does the author mean about the rules her parents expect her to live by being 'a little muddy'?
- ◆ What does El Sayed reveal about her parents' relationship when she states that 'they are good people' but 'they were just not good together'?

THESE ARE THE RULES

- ◆ What is El Sayed demonstrating about the contrast between herself and her brother?
- ◆ El Sayed writes, 'When our grass isn't as green as we want, we concrete over it.' What does this reveal about the way El Sayed's family deals with problems?
- ◆ What does the metaphor of belonging in the 'cloak room' reveal about class in Egyptian society?
- ◆ What does the author's desire to sit on the piano stool reveal about how she feels about her family?
- ◆ What is life like for many people in Alexandria?
- ◆ Why did El Sayed's grandmother leave Australia and return to Alexandria with her children?
- ◆ Why did her parents decide to migrate to Australia?
- ◆ What was the purpose of the salon and why was nothing taken from there when they left for Australia?

BABA

- ♦ Why is El Sayed's father in hospital?
- ♦ He has come from Katherine in the Northern Territory to Queensland for treatment. What does this suggest about his relationship with El Sayed's mother?

RULE #1: DON'T TOUCH ALCOHOL

- ♦ What are some of the cultural differences that El Sayed's family experience upon arrival in Australia?
- ♦ What is a bidet and how did El Sayed's family deal with hygiene without one in Colmslie?
- ♦ What jobs did her father have in Egypt and what jobs does he have in Australia?
- ♦ How do Baba's religious beliefs and abstinence from alcohol affect his work life?
- ♦ Why did the woman on the fifth-floor apartment get angry with Baba when he went to deliver an envelope?
- ♦ What did the time capsule represent to El Sayed?
- ♦ How did the neighbour see the time capsule?
- ♦ How does the time capsule symbolise the family's acceptance in Australia?

BABA

- ♦ Why does only one nurse return to Baba?
- ♦ What does her father's reaction to Mohamed's tattoo reveal about their father-son relationship?
- ♦ How does El Sayed view the drip of chemotherapy that is being administered to Baba?

RULE #2: GOOD GIRLS DON'T WEAR BIKINIS

- ♦ Why don't El Sayed or her mother wear a hijab? What does this reveal about Islamic practices?
- ♦ How does this impact Baba within the community?
- ♦ Why did Mama not marry the dentist?
- ♦ What are some difficulties El Sayed faces the first day at school?
- ♦ In what ways are El Sayed and her brother different at the swimming carnival?
- ♦ When Lily peers at the author through the gap in the toilet stall and sees her naked she comments on her nipples. How does this normalisation of white skin and bodies affect El Sayed's perception of herself? How does this relate to the incident in the author's note and the promotional photo being digitally altered?

- ◆ When El Sayed uses a towel to cover her head like a hijab and to cover her body she thinks ‘This girl would not be dirty’. What does this reveal about the struggle she is experiencing between her Muslim identity and wanting to dress like other teenage girls in her school?

MAMA

- ◆ What do the break-ins reveal about the neighbourhood they live in?
- ◆ What do the letters that Mama wrote to her father, Pa, reveal about their relationship?
- ◆ What are the three conditions that have to be met before Pa will agree to visit?
- ◆ How does Nana react to the third condition and what does this reveal about why her marriage ended?

RULE #3: ALWAYS TELL THE TRUTH

- ◆ What does the anecdote about her writing in her diary reveal about how her maternal grandmother influenced her to become a writer? What does this reveal about her grandmother’s view of the world?
- ◆ Why does El Sayed buy a bacon and cheese roll even though pork is forbidden for Muslims? What does this reveal about the pressure she experiences to assimilate at her school?
- ◆ What does her father’s rule that ‘Muslim girls marry Muslim boys’ reveal about his expectations for her?
- ◆ What does El Sayed’s response that she doesn’t know any Muslim boys tell us about her access to her community?
- ◆ How does her father’s response to her diary reveal his concerns about El Sayed growing up and being influenced by Australian values?

MAMA

- ◆ Why is El Sayed dwelling on the question ‘Where are you from’?
- ◆ Is El Sayed correct when she writes her mother’s voice has ‘no story’?
- ◆ What does she mean that her mother’s accent is ‘neutral’?
- ◆ Her mother tells her that ‘We just didn’t fit together’ as a reason for her parents’ divorce. What does El Sayed suggest by contrasting the description of her mother and father?

BABA

- ◆ How does her father’s swearing demonstrate the changing relationship between El Sayed and her father since the divorce?
- ◆ What does their conversation at the petrol pump reveal about how her father views her mother?
- ◆ El Sayed writes that the chemotherapy chemicals ‘muddy his blood and muddle his mind’. What is she suggesting with this description?

RULE #4: NO MOVING OUT WITHOUT A HUSBAND

- ◆ How does Nana moving out while her mother was interning in a hospital impact on El Sayed and her siblings?
- ◆ What is Nana's heritage?
- ◆ Nana says, 'Of course there was none of this backward "no alcohol" business back then.' What does this reveal about Egyptian practices of Islam at the time when her grandmother was a young woman?
- ◆ El Sayed states that it's a good thing her grandmother doesn't drive because she wouldn't follow road rules. What does this tell us about her grandmother and her life?
- ◆ How does the anecdote about her grandmother waiting for a man to pick her and Aisha up from the park in the rain reinforce Nana's views about men?
- ◆ What were the tensions in the household while Nana lived with her family? How did El Sayed's father view Nana's influence on Mama?

BABA

- ◆ How does El Sayed characterise her father when she describes how he packed his fragiles?
- ◆ What does her father throwing the broken mug away reveal about her culture?

RULE #5: DON'T PLAY ALLAH

- ◆ Why does El Sayed think that Fatima is a better Muslim than her?
- ◆ What is the conflict between Fatima and El Sayed about playing *The Sims* computer game?
- ◆ What does the way Fatima is treated by El Sayed's family members reveal about the importance of hospitality?
- ◆ El Sayed writes, 'So, there I was playing God, trying to bump uglies with Satan, while good girls like Fatima were at the mosque. And that thought made me hate myself.' What does this reveal about El Sayed's internal conflict?

MAMA

- ◆ How is her mother characterised in this chapter?
- ◆ How does El Sayed learn about her mother's life?
- ◆ What do we learn about the interrelationships of El Sayed, her mother and her grandmother?

BABA

- ◆ El Sayed believes that there has been an expiration on her Muslim identity. What does this tell us about her belief?
- ◆ Why does her father tell her stories about when she was hurt as a child?

RULE #6: NEVER LOCK YOUR DOOR

- ◆ What is the purpose of juxtaposing the two stories about El Sayed and her father being stuck in the shower? How is her mother characterised as the rescuer in these stories?
- ◆ What does her parents' househunting reveal about their relationship?
- ◆ How does the author use the possible choice of house her parents could have bought to symbolise their relationship ending?

BABA

- ◆ What does the conversation between El Sayed and her father reveal about their relationship?
- ◆ What insight do we gain about the memoir through the advice she is given by her lecturer to 'write about characters with inner conflicts'? Does this apply to the characters in *Muddy People*? How?

RULE #7: COVER YOUR EYES

- ◆ How does El Sayed's father forbidding his children from watching *The Simpsons* reveal his devotion to Islam?
- ◆ El Sayed finds that the reality of playing the saxophone does not match the image she has of 'playing on the beach in a bikini and a bandana like the woman on the *Sax on the Beach* album cover'. How does this reveal how popular culture is shaping her perceptions of herself?
- ◆ How could Ms C's advice to 'stick with it' apply to other facets of El Sayed's life?
- ◆ El Sayed writes, 'It worried me that she was an adult and still had these feelings. It worried me, because it meant I wouldn't forget for a long time to come.' What does this moment of empathy for Ms C reveal about the author's body image struggle?

MAMA

- ◆ What do the tea leaves symbolise to her mother and what insight does this give into her inner world?
- ◆ How is her mother characterised in this chapter?
- ◆ What does the discussion about who is whose favourite child reveal about family dynamics?

BABA

- ◆ What does the conversation about the Egyptian president taking mobile phones and putting people in jail reveal about the political situation in Egypt?
- ◆ What insight does it give as to why her parents sought to migrate to Australia?
- ◆ How does it support her mother's views that Australia has more freedom?

RULE #8: IT IS HARAM TO WASTE FOOD

- ♦ How is a Muslim burial at odds with the burial services of other denominations?
- ♦ How does El Sayed feel about losing her ability to speak Arabic?
- ♦ When the author goes to Supre with friends she describes herself as feigning ‘interest in buying a boob tube’. How does this demonstrate her struggle between mainstream Australia and her parents’ expectations?
- ♦ What does Carly crying at the table because she didn’t finish her meal demonstrate about the cultural differences between her and El Sayed?

MAMA

- ♦ How is her mother characterised in this chapter?
- ♦ What does her mother’s views about children being a woman’s legacy reveal about the expectations of women in Arab culture?

RULE #9: LIFE IS NOT A FAIRYTALE

- ♦ What does the description of Allah making people from fetid mud reveal about how she feels about herself at the beginning of this chapter?
- ♦ Who actually made the casting decisions for the school play?
- ♦ How does the emphasis on the whiteness of Carly’s house reveal the author’s inner turmoil at this point?
- ♦ How does the urinating accident reinforce her perception of her body image?

BABA

- ♦ How do her father’s matchmaking attempts demonstrate the tension between her wishes and his expectations?
- ♦ Why isn’t it funny anymore that her father wants a grandchild before he dies?

RULE #10: NO FIGHTING WITH YOUR BROTHER

- ♦ How is her brother characterised in this chapter?
- ♦ What does Carly not understanding the difference between Muslim and terrorist reveal about Islamophobia in society?
- ♦ How does Carly’s ghoulis curiosity about Mohamed fighting after being called a terrorist reinforce the stereotypes of Arabs?
- ♦ How does the author deal with Carly’s curiosity and what does this reveal about their friendship?

BABA

- ♦ Who does her father think is to blame for the divorce?
- ♦ What does El Sayed’s response when he asks her to talk to Mama reveal about what she believes is the reason?

RULE #11: NO ONE LIKES SURPRISES

- ♦ How does she feel about her friendship with Carly as they transition into high school?
- ♦ When her mother has to move to a regional area to complete her studies and become a doctor, the question is whether she will go with or without the children. What does this reveal about Baba's support of her studies?
- ♦ What does the fan shattering as dinner ends symbolise about their family?

RULE #12: PETS ARE NOT PERMITTED

- ♦ Why can't Baba visit them in Hervey Bay and what does this tell us about her parents' relationship?
- ♦ What does this chapter reveal about the pressures that Mama is dealing with?
- ♦ What do we learn about El Sayed's new school during assembly?
- ♦ How does El Sayed feel about her new school?
- ♦ What is the reason that the family returns to Victoria Woods every fortnight?

BABA

- ♦ What does Baba's fear the cat will rely on him reveal about his state of mind?
- ♦ El Sayed writes that she feels more of an obligation to her father and is 'making up pre-emptively for all the ways I will disappoint him in the future'. What do you think are some of the ways she fears she will disappoint him?
- ♦ What do the expectations of behaviour Baba has for his son Mohamed and for his daughters reveal about gender roles in Arab society?
- ♦ What does the sunset and Baba's heart opening hint at?

RULE #13: KEEP YOURSELF INTACT

- ♦ What does the storyline about tampons reveal about expectations of women's virtue in Arab society?
- ♦ Why does El Sayed believe Allah is punishing her when she gets her period while wearing a bikini?
- ♦ What does Tamara's response about using a tampon being nothing like sex reveal about her?
- ♦ How is Tamara characterised in this chapter?
- ♦ How does El Sayed feel about leaving Tamara?

RULE #14: USE YOUR WORDS

- ♦ What is the image of family life in the opening of this chapter?
- ♦ How does the mosque being opened only for prayers because of vandalism reveal the anti-Islamic sentiment that Muslims face?

- ♦ What is El Sayed's relationship with her community?
- ♦ Why is El Sayed torn between conflicting feelings of being jealous and sorry for the girl who brought in a non-Muslim boyfriend who was converting for marriage?
- ♦ What does the imam's explanation of the hadiths reveal about Islam?
- ♦ How does she view the work her father did for the mosque and what does this reveal about the difference of devotion between father and daughter?
- ♦ How does she feel when she doesn't recognise the word on the necklace that she receives from her father?
- ♦ What did she imagine Victoria Woods High School would be like and what was the reality like?
- ♦ Her mother's feelings toward her father transition toward hatred. Are there clues in the text up to this point that explain her feelings?
- ♦ What role does El Sayed play in the end of her parents' marriage? Why does she take on this role?
- ♦ What does the cat's death at the end of the chapter reveal about Baba's views of a woman's legacy?

RULE #15: AVOID ABORTIONS

- ♦ What does El Sayed's conflict about the topic of her persuasive speech reveal about the relationship between her father and grandmother?
- ♦ What is her grandmother's advice about upsetting her father?
- ♦ During the persuasive presentations students are told they can present a point of view that they don't believe. Carly and Jason deliver speeches that promote racial vilification and homophobia. Do you think people should be able to deliver such speeches? Why? Why not?

BABA

- ♦ How is her father's cancer treatment progressing?
- ♦ Why do they all laugh when Jimmy tells them his brother died? What does this reveal about dealing with tragedy?

RULE #16: TRUST TOYOTA

- ♦ When El Sayed begins driving lessons her father abandons teaching her after one lesson, while Mohamed already had his own car when he learned to drive. What does this reveal about the preferential treatment of males in the household?
- ♦ How did her mother support her?
- ♦ Why did El Sayed persist with learning manual?

MAMA

- ♦ Why do you think Mama loves Australia and sees it as her home more than Egypt?

- ♦ What were the struggles Nana faced in obtaining a divorce that Mama did not because she is in Australia?

RULE #17: WAIT FOR A RING

- ♦ What happened when she invited a boy to the movies for her eleventh birthday?
- ♦ Why is she frustrated by her father's old-fashioned attitude that dictates she can't spend time with a boy unless she is engaged?
- ♦ What is Jason implying when he accuses her of having bombs in her music case?
- ♦ What are the clues in the text that suggest the teacher confiscates her necklace because of Islamophobia?

MAMA

- ♦ What do Baba and Pa share in common in the expectations they have about who their daughters will marry?
- ♦ How do you think Nana's story about Charlie impacts El Sayed?

RULE #18: DON'T STAY OUT LATE

- ♦ What does her school captain speech demonstrate about the steps she has to take to fit in?
- ♦ Do you think her fear about why she and Phil are chosen as school captains is founded?
- ♦ What does it reveal about the different cultural expectations for young people between mainstream Australian and migrant parents when Phil says, 'White people never understand'?

BABA

- ♦ How is Baba's cancer a test of his faith?
- ♦ How does she feel about Baba only using the Qur'an with English translations when she's there?

RULE #19: KEEP QUIET AT THE TABLE

- ♦ How was her last year of high school a distraction from her parents' deteriorating relationship?
- ♦ What does the differing views of her parents about following Sharia or Australian law during their divorce reveal about each of them?
- ♦ How do each of her parents view the repayment of the dowry? Who do you agree with and why?
- ♦ How does her mother's view that if it weren't for money, marriage wouldn't exist echo Nana's experience of marriage?
- ♦ What made it possible for Mama to leave the marriage when she did?

BABA

- ◆ How do each of the family members react to Aisha's near-death experience?
- ◆ Do you think Baba is correct in excusing Mohamed's behaviour because he doesn't have a role model?

RULE #20: NO SHOES IN THE HOUSE

- ◆ How is El Sayed's consideration about how she exercises in the gym influenced by her body image?
- ◆ How does Baba's acceptance of Mohamed's white girlfriend demonstrate the differing standards he has for females and males?
- ◆ How is Mohamed's privilege invisible to him? What would happen if Baba found out she had a white boyfriend?

MAMA

- ◆ What was the reason for Pa disinheriting Mama?
- ◆ Sara states that 'There is nothing worse than puncturing your father's pride, no matter how wrong he is.' How do you think this is influencing El Sayed's behaviour with her father?
- ◆ How does El Sayed view her mother's search for an inheritance after Pa dies?

RULE #21: NEVER TALK TO STRANGERS

- ◆ What does her mother helping Justin demonstrate about her?
- ◆ What is Mama's reaction when El Sayed tells Mohamed that they almost had a home invasion?
- ◆ How is Mama characterised in this chapter?

RULE #22 TAKE OUT LIFE INSURANCE

- ◆ What does the way each of her parents view life insurance tell us about the differences between them?
- ◆ How does the division of Baba's inheritance between his children according to Sharia law make women dependent on men? Do you think this is a fair way to divide his inheritance?
- ◆ Why is El Sayed despondent that Baba's only standard for her husband is that he is Muslim?
- ◆ What compromise do they reach about her future husband and why?

BABA

- ◆ How has her father's cancer given them an opportunity to reconnect?
- ◆ How does her father's maintenance of his cancer treatment also allow them to maintain their relationship?

RULE #23: PAY YOUR RENT

- ♦ What are examples in the text so far of El Sayed being made to feel like a visitor in the country?
- ♦ What does she mean about migrants' experience in Australia with the metaphor that 'We are careful not to track in mud'?
- ♦ What does it signify that Aaron becomes Haroon?
- ♦ What sort of a wedding did they have and why?
- ♦ What does the ending signify when El Sayed sees the weather outside as muddy while he sees it as sunny?

Part D

Learning activities for after reading

After reading, the following themes and text features can be further explored:

ASSIMILATION

There is an expectation that El Sayed and her family must assimilate to mainstream Australia by giving up their religious and cultural beliefs. At school, El Sayed struggles with the expectations of her peers about what she can eat and how she can dress and her father struggles at work due to his abstinence of alcohol. This is also demonstrated when El Sayed's promotional photos are modified. With her skin lightened and her lips thinned, this is an example of 'beauty bias' whereby Caucasian appearance is viewed as the norm and people of colour must be modified and altered.

MIGRATION

We see the pressures that young people in Australia are placed under by their migrant parents to maintain their culture and beliefs. Her mother's and grandmother's migration stories demonstrate the complicated migration journeys of many Australians. While we see El Sayed has found a way to mediate between her Arab and Australian identities by the end of the memoir, she is still battling with the feeling of whether she belongs to either.

STEREOTYPES

Through the experiences of the women in El Sayed's family we see the stereotype that all Muslim women wear a hijab being challenged. Many migrant families can stereotype male and female gender roles and this is demonstrated through her father's differing expectations of his son and daughters. Mohamed and Baba both battle the stereotype of the angry Arab whenever they get angry.

RELIGION

Throughout the book, El Sayed is in conflict with religion and being a good Muslim. When her family first arrive in Australia we learn about the reliance on bidets because prayers five times a day rely on cleanliness. While there are the five pillars of Islam that all Muslims must practice, her parents' interpretations and appliance of religious beliefs demonstrate the way each Muslim person mediates their own spirituality.

BODY IMAGE

El Sayed develops body image issues at a young age due to racist discrimination and bullying. This is reinforced as an adult when her image is photoshopped and is an example of the way that white skin and body type is viewed as the norm because of popular culture. These issues affect her into adulthood and demonstrate the way that these issues undermine her self-confidence.

ISLAMOPHOBIA

In *Muddy People*, El Sayed depicts her struggles as an Arab Muslim being subjected to racist taunts and being discriminated against due to Islamophobia. On 11 September 2001, two hijacked aeroplanes hit the Twin Towers in New York and nearly 3000 people were killed. The hijackers were affiliated with an Islamic terrorist group and as a result of this terrorist act, a wave of anti-Islamic sentiment swept the Western world. Women wearing hijabs were attacked and Arabic people were subjected to abuse. This also led to the conflation of Muslim and terrorist.

MARRIAGE

Marriage is a fraught issue within her family. Both her mother and grandmother were financially dependent and trapped in marriages that they didn't want to be in. Her relationship with her father is tension-filled as he will only approve of a marriage to a Muslim and she can't have a boyfriend, only a husband. In the end El Sayed compromises when her white boyfriend converts, and they marry in a Muslim ceremony before moving in together.

MUDDY PEOPLE

El Sayed states that some people view her muddy skin as something to wash while others make jokes about it. She describes the rules that her parents expect her to live by as muddy, meaning that they are shifting and not clear-cut. She compares her body to how Allah made people from fetid mud to demonstrate how her views of her body are shaped by the perception of her white peers. When her father is undergoing cancer treatment and expressing negative views about her mother, she excuses his mind as being muddy. The memoir ends with her viewing the weather outside as muddy, while her husband views it as sunny to contrast the melding of their two cultures, as well as to foreshadow her concerns about their life together.

STRUCTURE

The memoir is written in present tense with the chapters alternating between the present and the past. The past is revealed through the rules imposed by her parents that govern their expectations on her, interspersed with vignettes in the present as El Sayed learns about each of her parents. The chapters in the present alternate between Mama and Baba, dwelling on two mysteries that El Sayed is attempting to uncover: the first is the reason her grandfather disowned her mother, and the second is the reasons behind her parents' divorce. The past follows a chronological timeline charting her growing up and coming of age using the device of the parental rules and how they shape her life.

These chapters are also structured with an opening that begins in an action moment and then transitions into a flashback to show how this moment arrived.

EXTENDED RESPONSE TO TEXT

Students may be asked to respond analytically to *Muddy People*. Some possible essay questions include the following:

- ◆ Consider the structure of the text: the way that the past is revealed through her parents' rules and the present is alternating between her parents' perspectives. How does each section build upon the meaning offered in the last?
- ◆ Discuss the way that the title *Muddy People* is used as a metaphor throughout the text.
- ◆ **'If it weren't for money, marriage wouldn't exist.'** To what extent do you agree?
- ◆ **'There is no such thing as a Bad Muslim, really, because if you are not a Good Muslim, you are not a Muslim at all. For me there has been an expiration.'** Do you agree?
- ◆ Australia should have freedom of speech. Discuss.
- ◆ Photoshopping impacts on young people's body image. Discuss.
- ◆ **'But the only rule that matters when it comes to my husband is that he is Muslim. The standard is so low. That's not fair.'** How are the different standards placed on males and females in Arab society gendered?
- ◆ **'We are often made to feel like visitors in this country.'** How does *Muddy People* demonstrate the pressure on migrants to assimilate in Australia?
- ◆ **'There is nothing worse than puncturing your father's pride, no matter how wrong he is.'** Sara El Sayed's *Muddy People* explores the barriers women face when attempting to assert their independence. Discuss.
- ◆ How do El Sayed and her father compromise at the end of the text? Discuss.

Teaching Notes by Amra Pajalic

Amra Pajalic is an English, English as an Additional Language and Humanities teacher at a government school. She is the author of award-winning young-adult novel *The Good Daughter* (Text Publishing, 2009) and her memoir *Things Nobody Knows But Me* (Transit Lounge, 2019) was shortlisted for the 2020 National Biography Award. She co-edited the anthology *Growing Up Muslim in Australia* (Allen and Unwin, 2019) and wrote the teaching notes. She is completing a PhD in Creative Writing at La Trobe University. amrapajalic.com