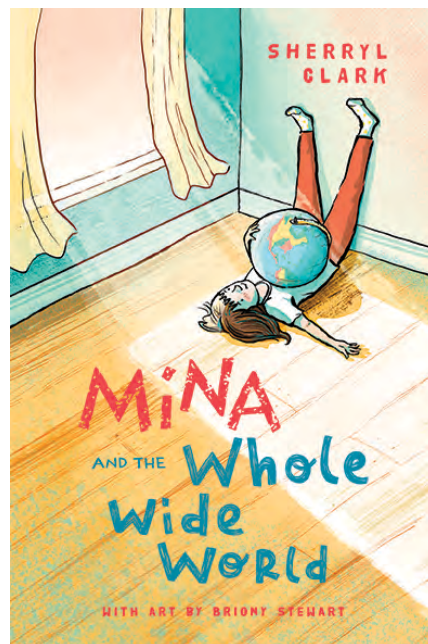


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# MINA AND THE WHOLE WIDE WORLD

Sherryl Clark



## Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian  
in context with the Australian curriculum  
(English)

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**SYNOPSIS**

Having always shared a room with her younger brother, Mina is excited to be moving into her own bedroom soon. But when her parents offer her room to a young refugee whose mother is in hospital, Mina is lost for words. Even worse, she is expected to take Azzami under her wing and help him adjust to school as well. Frustrated by his silence and reluctance to defend himself against schoolyard taunts, Mina finds her attitude quickly softens when she discovers his drawings. It seems Azzami has a great deal to say, just not through words.

*Mina and the Whole Wide World* is a tender verse novel for middle readers that explores themes of friendship, humanity, and courage. Its gentle but important message about acceptance, compassion and respect is cleverly symbolised through Mina having to share her space with Azzami. In seeing the world through his eyes, Mina discovers what truly matters.

**THEMES**

- Refugees
- Acceptance
- Friendship
- Humanity
- Courage
- Belonging
- Poetry

**WRITING STYLE**

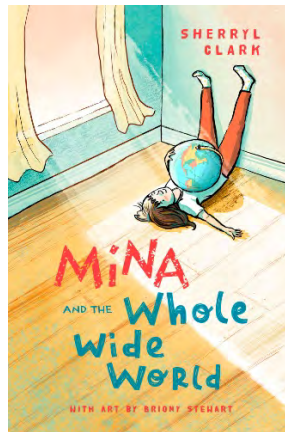
*Mina and the Whole Wide World* is a verse novel told in first person, present tense. It is an endearing story of Mina's growing friendship with Azzami, a refugee whose mother is hospitalised, leaving him alone. Sherryl Clark has beautifully reflected Mina's burgeoning maturity and her revelation that there is ample space in this 'whole wide world' to share. Through her use of perfectly nuanced poetic devices and language choices, the narrative is tangible, realistic and accessible to middle readers, being extremely powerful in identifying issues

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and attitudes towards refugees in Australia. She does this through a clever, yet subtle metaphor of Mina and her family making space in their world for Azzami.

## STUDY NOTES

- Before reading, use the front cover to make predictions about the text. In what situations have you heard the phrase ‘the whole wide world’ used? What do you notice about the room she is lying in? What are you wondering?



- What can we tell about Mina, Georgie and their dad from the opening verse ‘Garage Sale’ (pp. 1–2)? Once you have finished reading *Mina and the Whole Wide World*, come back to this poem. What is the significance of Georgie choosing a ‘brown bear with/tattered ears and no eyes’ (p. 1)?
- Although the ‘whole wide world’ is enormous in dimension, Mina can still hold it ‘in [her] arms’ as she carries the globe home (p. 5). What comment is the author making about the importance of human agency in instigating positive action for all humankind? How are the verses ‘Fixing’ (p. 6) and ‘Safe’ (p. 7) used as metaphors for our capacity to both protect human lives and destroy them unless we are considerate and open-minded?
- Mina has a box of special things that she wants to keep nice for her new bedroom. If you were moving to a new room, what would you take with you? Discuss that in verse novels, what is *not* said is often as important as what *is* said, giving the reader space to make their own connections. Imagine, for instance, the precious belongings Azzami would have left behind when fleeing to Australia. Discuss how such seemingly simple verses such as ‘Box’ say much more than initially meets the eye.

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- After reading the verses ‘Occupy’ (p. 12) and ‘Talking’ (pp. 13–14), discuss the use of foreshadowing to create tension. What predictions can you make at this stage of the narrative?
- In ‘Promise’ (pp. 15–16), Mina ‘can tell/something’s wrong’. Has this ever happened to you? Share in a reflection. Why do the words, ‘but you promised’ come out as a whisper, rather than as a shout? Why is this more powerful?
- Mina finds it difficult to take in her parents’ explanation, saying ‘I see their mouths/opening and closing/but their words are like stones/dropping into my stomach’ (p. 17). What does she mean? Discuss how the formatting of the words helps readers to visualise this scene.
- Write a reflection based on the verse and illustration in ‘Hiding’ on pp. 18–19. How do the words and drawings complement each other? Why is Mina’s voice so ‘very, very small’?
- Compare Mina’s feelings about her broken unicorn and the loss of her bedroom with how Azzami might be feeling. How does the author elicit empathy in readers by connecting feelings of loss and heartache with objects such as the unicorn?
- When Cara gives Mina a present for her new room, Mina is unable to speak. How is this like Azzami’s difficulty in talking about his experiences in Afghanistan?
- How would you describe Mina’s dad? Use evidence from the text to support your ideas.
- Mina repeats the words ‘suck it up’ to help her come to terms with the loss of her room (p. 24). Why, then, does she ‘nearly shatter’ when she gets home to see a new doona and blue owl lamp in Azzami’s room?
- What is the significance of Mina being unable to remember Azzami’s name? How does her attitude start to change when she notices that his face shows fear rather than gratitude?
- Mina says that she is ‘not speaking to any of them/ever again’ (p. 30). Have you ever felt like this? Did it help with your situation, or only make it more difficult? What else could Mina have done?
- Why does Mina smile to herself when she discovers that Azzami means ‘one who is fierce like a lion’ (p. 33)? Would she behave differently if she found this out later in the story? Discuss.
- Why does it take some time before Mina can listen to her parents properly about Azzami’s situation?
- Create a character profile of Azzami using evidence from *Mina and the Whole Wide World* to support your ideas.
- Explore the language choices and poetic devices used throughout the text, discussing how they contribute to the narrative. Examples include:
  - Dad said one more lick of paint p. 8

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- I don't like how her voice/sounds/it's not a happy moving-day voice/it's almost/a 'you're in trouble' voice p. 14
- Their words are like stones/dropping into my stomach p. 17
- He's wearing his kind face/and using his gentle voice/for when things go wrong p. 18
- My voice/is very, very small p. 19
- My voice has gone away/to somewhere deep inside p. 20
- All of me hurts so much/I think I'm broken too p. 21
- The words/stick in my throat p. 24
- Words start to change inside/from shaky jelly/to hard and brittle p. 24
- I nearly shatter p. 25
- All I see in his face/is fear p. 27
- He ... sits on the edge of the bed/like it's dangerous p. 29
- I zip up my lips/super tight p. 30
- This boy/is as scared and small/as a kitten p. 33
- She gives him a smile/as wide as a toothpaste ad p. 42
- Azzami ... curls up in silence/like a snail into his house p. 46
- Their words keep bouncing/off my back/like rocks p. 47
- Azzami keep his pencil/ moving moving moving p. 52
- Slowly slowly/he uncurls his arm p. 55
- There are a hundred questions/bursting out of me p. 58
- Azzami just sits there ... like he's deaf p. 60
- I think of Azzami/inside his snail house/curled up small/not speaking p. 65
- His eyes fill with shadows p. 69
- His smile is like/the sun coming out p. 69
- Azzami seems to grow/smaller and smaller p. 70
- Oliver starts again/like his nasty words are stuck/on a never-ending loop p. 76
- She's got a face/like a big, angry storm/and I feel like/a very small tree/about to be blown over p. 78
- He comes out/quiet as a mouse p. 84
- When she sees Azzami/her face lights up/just like his//two beaming suns p. 87
- We listen/to Azzami's voice/lilting like a song p. 94
- Our thumbs/touch in the middle/like an arch p. 105
- Discuss the illustration on p. 39. Taking on the role of Azzami, write a journal entry about this day.
- Why has a character such as Oliver been included in *Mina and the Whole Wide World*? How does he represent some of the broader community's sentiments about refugees?

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- Why is Azzami so reluctant to stand up to Oliver and his friends? Why does this annoy Mina? How does her attitude change as the story progresses?
- Although she is a minor character, Ms Smart plays a very important role in *Mina and the Whole Wide World*. Discuss how she helps both Azzami and Mina.
- How do we know that Azzami has a lot to express by the lines 'Azzami keeps his pencil/moving moving moving' (p. 52)?
- Why, after seeing his drawing, does Mina have 'a hundred questions/bursting out' of her (p. 58)? Why doesn't she ask them?
- What is the significance of Mina giving Azzami a gift of pencils and a sketchbook? How does this show readers that she now understands Azzami?
- What does Mina mean when she says of Oliver: 'he can't see/Azzami/he can't see what's in/Azzami's eyes' (p. 60)? What is in Azzami's eyes?
- Why is Mina angry that Azzami won't stick up for himself? Why does she feel that she has to do it for him (pp. 60–61)?
- Why does Mina find herself 'on the outside' at school (p. 63)? Why does she 'feel worse' for wanting things to return to the way they were before Azzami arrived? What does this tell us about Mina's character development?
- Compare 'Snail' (p. 65) with 'Hiding' (pp. 18–19). How does her realisation in 'Snail' help Mina to better understand Azzami? As an extension, discuss the importance of making text-to-self connections to make meaning from fiction: Mina can empathise with Azzami as she can relate to his feelings.
- Why, even though he knows his mother is 'really sick', does the prospect of visiting her make his smile appear like the 'sun coming out' (p. 69)?
- Why is the verse 'Home' (p. 75) such a powerful verse?
- After Mina hits Oliver, she says: 'I want to take it back/and I don't want to' (p. 77). Knowing she is in 'really big trouble', why does Mina say that the 'awfullest thing is/Azzami is crying/worse than Oliver' (p. 77).
- Why do you think Mina's mother apologises five times to the principal for Mina's behaviour, but only once to Oliver's mother? Why does Mina only want to apologise to Azzami?
- Discuss the comment by Mina's mother that 'violence/is never the answer ... I'm ashamed of you' (p. 81)?
- Why does Azzami draw Mina a picture of 'Ninja Mina' (p. 84)? What does this mean to Mina? How does this help Azzami to finally start speaking?
- Why, when Mina is told that she will get her bedroom back soon, does she say 'I'm not quite as happy/as I thought I'd be' (p. 88)?

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- Look carefully at the illustrations on p. 90, in which Mina discovers the walls of her bedroom covered with Azzami's drawings. How do these illustrations capture *Mina and the Whole Wide World*?
- Azzami uses drawings to tell his story. Retell an event from your life through drawings.
- What is it that finally encourages Azzami to talk about his experiences?
- Why does Mina apologise to Oliver for hitting him? Why does she feel 'warm and/a bit strange and/kind of free' (p. 103) by doing so?
- Discuss the symbolism of Mina and Azzami placing their hands on the globe: 'our thumbs/touch in the middle/like an arch' (p. 105). How does this capture the ultimate message of *Mina and the Whole Wide World*?
- Earlier in the text, Mina wonders what her name means. Once you have finished reading *Mina and the Whole Wide World*, create your own definition for the name Mina.
- How has Mina's character developed throughout the novel? Why is such growth important to successful stories?
- In what ways is *Mina and the Whole Wide World* a book about acceptance and understanding?
- Write the next verse that would appear in *Mina and the Whole Wide World*.
- With older students, use a text such as Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* to explore the theme of displacement through illustrations.
- Use companion texts such as *My Two Blankets* by Irena Kobald, *My Name Is Not Refugee* by Kate Milner, *Room on Our Rock* by Kate Temple and *Stepping Stones: A refugee family's journey* by Margriet Ruurs to better understand the themes of *Mina and the Whole Wide World*.

**AUTHOR MOTIVATION**

There were two images that affected me deeply – one of the tiny Syrian boy, Alan Kurdi, dead on the beach, and then the small boy in Syria in the back of the ambulance after his house was bombed. I kept thinking about how children are the ones who are affected, whose lives are destroyed, and about refugees and countries and power and corruption and powerlessness and desperation. It all kept rolling around inside me, until I wanted to write something for children about it. But I didn't know what or how.

I had written some poems for adults about these things, and I started to think about a verse novel. The globe of the world kept coming up as an image – with all the countries marked out on it. I didn't even think they still used them in schools (I did find one school that did). The title came then – *Mina and the Whole Wide World*, thinking of the globe in her arms. So I wrote three or four

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poems about a girl who finds a globe in a garage sale, and then I stalled. The issues of appropriation loomed so large that I couldn't work out how to tell the story.

I had completed a PhD on fairy tales, and one of the key elements was the use of fairy tales in child therapy. While I focused a lot on Bruno Bettelheim and his book, *The Uses of Enchantment*, I also found several recent studies where fairy tales had been used with children suffering trauma from war or abuse, or who were terminally ill. And then there have been studies on how reading fiction can help children to learn empathy, to walk in other people's shoes. So I felt that telling this story was important, and I really wanted it to be about learning how to understand and feel the experiences of someone not from your small, enclosed, media-driven world. To not only see and understand for yourself what they have endured, but for that 'seeing' to change you. So those were the initial ideas.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Sherryl Clark is a writer, editor and writing teacher with an MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults and a PhD in Creative Writing. She has been writing poems and stories for children for over twenty years. Her verse novel *Farm Kid* won the NSW Premier's Literary Award for Children's Books in 2005 and *Sixth Grade Style Queen (Not!)* was an Honour Book in the 2008 Children's Book Council of Australia Awards. Sherryl worked in community writing for many years and taught professional writing and editing at Victoria University TAFE for over two decades. She now writes full-time.