

Classroom Resources



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Half My Luck

Samera Kamaledine

BOOK SUMMARY

From the winner of the inaugural Matilda Prize comes a heartwarming coming-of-age story about growing up in Australia when you're caught between two cultures.

Layla Karimi has been cursed by the evil eye.

Well, that's what Layla's superstitious grandmother tells her. And Layla reckons it makes sense as she's sort of Australian and sort of Lebanese: a 'halfie' who doesn't really fit into either world.

And when all hell breaks loose at the first beach party of the summer, Layla finds herself caught between her friends and the Lebanese kids who call themselves 'the Cedar Army' (of which her cousin Sufia is the Queen Bee). One group has been wrongfully accused and Layla knows the truth that would clear their name.

But will she speak up?

KEY LEARNING OUTCOMES

- ACELA1551
- ACELA1641
- ACELT1639

THEMES

- Family
- Belonging
- Identity
- Resilience
- Humour

Recommended Ages: 12+

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Classroom Resources

Before Reading

Stories and storytelling

Discuss as a class the importance of storytelling and the importance of telling different types of stories.

1. What can a story do for an audience?
2. Discuss what types of stories get to be told.
3. Why is it important to study stories by storytellers from a range of different sorts of backgrounds?
4. Examine and analyse these two quotes. Why are they relevant in Australia?
Arnold Zable noted: 'Whether we are young or old, stories connect us and add meaning to our lives.'

'I've always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person. The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar ... The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.' Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Cultural identity

1. What is culture and identity? Read the poem 'Capital Letters' by Omar Musa:
<https://medium.com/poem-of-the-day/omar-musa-capital-letters-d2169a3cee0f>
 - o What is Musa saying about Australia, language, culture and identity?
2. What is the relationship between language, culture and identity in Australia? As a class discuss this idea: Language has the power to both reflect and shape individual and collective identity.
3. Are you or anyone you know caught between two cultures?
 - o What do you think it is like/what is it like to be caught between two cultures?
 - o What would you want people to know what it is like?
4. As a class discuss: How do texts affirm, ignore, reveal, challenge or disrupt prevailing assumptions and beliefs about themselves, individuals and cultural groups?
5. List some key events or moments in your life that you think influenced who you are.
 - o Are any of these events culturally specific?
 - o How have they influenced your sense of self/identity?
 - o Explain how and why these events made you think differently.
 - o Write a story about one of the events and how you changed and why.

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6. What is the relationship between the self and the collective; between culture and identity?
 - o How much control do we exercise over ourselves as individuals?
 - o How influential is culture?
 - o What can be the benefits and disadvantages of being influenced by more than one culture?

During Reading

1. While reading the text, ask the class to consider in what ways does this text affirm, ignore, reveal, challenge or disrupt prevailing assumptions and beliefs about themselves, individuals, cultural groups and life in Australia?
2. Who is the audience for this text?
 - o What choices has the author made to appeal to the audience?
3. Does the text make you think about anything in your own life? Why?
4. What do the characters learn about themselves, their friends and family, and society as a consequence of the events of the novel?
5. What do you learn about society/individuals as a consequence of this text?
 - o How much are individual lives shaped by context?
 - o How important are families and community in shaping an individual?
6. Why do you think the author wrote this book?
 - o What have you learned about life as a consequence of reading this novel?

After Reading

Analysing a text

Consider each of the areas listed below.

Context. Culture. Ideas.

How does the author present the cultural paradigm?
Author purpose and why.

Form, narrative voice,
characterisation, setting, motifs, language.

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Point of view & voice

To write well, we all need to combine elements of reportage, poetry and narrative. To create prose that connects the writer, the reader and the larger world, we need to research and reflect and to:

- write with accuracy, vivid detail, lyricism and musicality
 - create imagery
 - understand narrative structure – problem/solution – dramatic tension – conflict – dilemma
 - master dialogue
1. Analyse F. Scott Fitzgerald's description of Daisy from his novel *The Great Gatsby*. He doesn't say, 'Daisy was rich and didn't care about the poor.' Rather he says, 'Gatsby was overwhelmingly aware of the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves, of the freshness of many clothes, and of Daisy, gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor.'
 - There is a very clear point of view. Fitzgerald writes with vivid detail and accuracy, and creates powerful images. Kamaledine also writes with great clarity, spirit and point of view and with a clear understanding of her audience. For each of the main characters, find an example from the novel that gives us an insight into their character.
 2. Analyse the following passage in detail:
She's right ... it's next-level sweltering. While Sufia rants about 'stupid forced duties' and 'being a good Lebanese girl' (which, for the record, no one has ever called her), my sweat mo is building. I look around at the day's remaining beachgoers and catch sunburnt faces (girls from school who reckon foundation is legit sun protection), a couple of wannabe fishermen (trying to also catch the attention of the sunburnt faces) and a whole sandbank of people who probably didn't spend half the day scrubbing their grandmother's house. (p. 6)
 - What kind of tone and language does Kamaledine use? Why?
 - What images can you identify?
 - What did the author do to create this vivid portrait of the main character and the setting?
 3. Write 300 words or a 20-line poem about a time you saw one of your parents cry, have a difficult conversation, apologise – even if they didn't want to – lose their temper, laugh or show courage.
 - How did it make you feel?
 - How can you communicate those feelings so your reader feels what you felt?
 - Write with zest and passion – write in your own voice.

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Relationships

An important figure in the book is Tayta. She is a source of love, humour and cultural history, and she loves cleaning products!

Tayta is still spraying her nozzle at her lavender-blue hydrangea shrubs. *'Inshallah, God willing,* she says, with her non-hose-holding hand in the air for full effect, 'rain will come and the farms they will be good. Very good!' ... Tayta shakes her head and starts singing an Arabic ballad to her hydrangeas. (p. 62)

'Im-per-fec-tion, it is beauty,' Tayta replies, dropping her sponge in the container and cupping my face with her wet hands. She kisses my forehead and then gets back to this Tuesday's cleaning task. (p. 94)

1. Ask students to think about an important person in their life who has loved them deeply, scolded them and taught them something.
 - o On a large sheet of butcher's paper write down:
 - a) What words and objects represent that experience or relationship?
 - b) What images and colours?
 - c) What sounds – natural and unnatural?
 - d) What facial expressions and gestures?
 - o Create a multimodal presentation that symbolises that relationship. Try to convey your feelings. Use colours, images and sounds.

Crossing cultures

This novel explores questions of identity, belonging, diaspora, separation from culture of origin, gender, assimilation, resistance and linguistics. Cultural and religious background and experience create intense webs of emotions, invisible loyalties, meaning and symbols.

1. What are some of Layla's webs of emotions?
2. Who is she invisibly loyal to?
3. Ask students to think about their own invisible loyalties and an object that symbolises that loyalty.
 - o Write a 15-line poem about the object and the loyalty.

4. Analyse these two quotes:

'I would not have a clue. But if you want my advice, which you will because, you know, I'm an expert and all ...' The light isn't great in here, but I can see him pause to wink. 'Everyone is probably living a double life when you think about it. But nobody likes to be called out on it.' (p. 205)

... I'm glancing over at the other side of the beach. Sufia has a tasselled sarong tied around her waist and she's clapping to a sing-along the Cedars are having. The Queen Bee of the Cedar Army, but a disgrace to her parents. The life of the party, but the fake star of it. A bossy cousin, who is full of heart when she's willing to show it. Maybe she's also living a double life. Maybe she's not really the same Sufia everywhere she goes after all. (p. 206)

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- What does Layla come to understand about herself and Sufia?
 - What are the differences between the physical, individual and social self for Layla and Sufia?
 - How do they bridge all these different worlds?
5. For different groups of people to understand each other, it is important that we try to see the world through their eyes. In *Half My Luck*, Kamaledine does through showing us events through the eyes of both Layla and Imogen.
- Find an example in the novel where the two different perspectives help to demonstrate the way they see the same event in very different ways.
 - a) Which techniques has the author used to convey these differing points of view?

About the Author

Samera Kamaledine is a Sydney-based journalist who spent the early part of her career writing about boys, annoying parents and friendship dramas in teen magazines including *Dolly* and *Girlfriend*. When she's not writing (and sometimes when she is), you can find her lolling about on the beach. *Half My Luck* is her first novel.

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