



TEACHERS' NOTES

RECOMMENDED FOR

Upper primary and lower secondary (years 5 to 9)

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KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- **Learning areas:** English – Language, Literature and Literacy
- **General capabilities:** Critical and creative thinking, Intercultural understanding, Literacy, Personal and social capability, Ethical understanding
- **Cross-curriculum priorities:** Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia

REASONS FOR STUDYING THIS BOOK

Written by first generation Chinese-Australian author Shirley Marr, *A Glasshouse of Stars* is a story about being a new, young immigrant, based on the real childhood experiences of the author, brushed with a light touch of magic realism. From the stunning imagery and symbolism of the magic in Meixing's world, to its immersive representation of what it feels like to learn a new language and be thrown into a completely different culture, to the unusual second-person point of view, there is so much to discuss and study in this heartwarming and hopeful story.

THEMES AND CONCEPTS

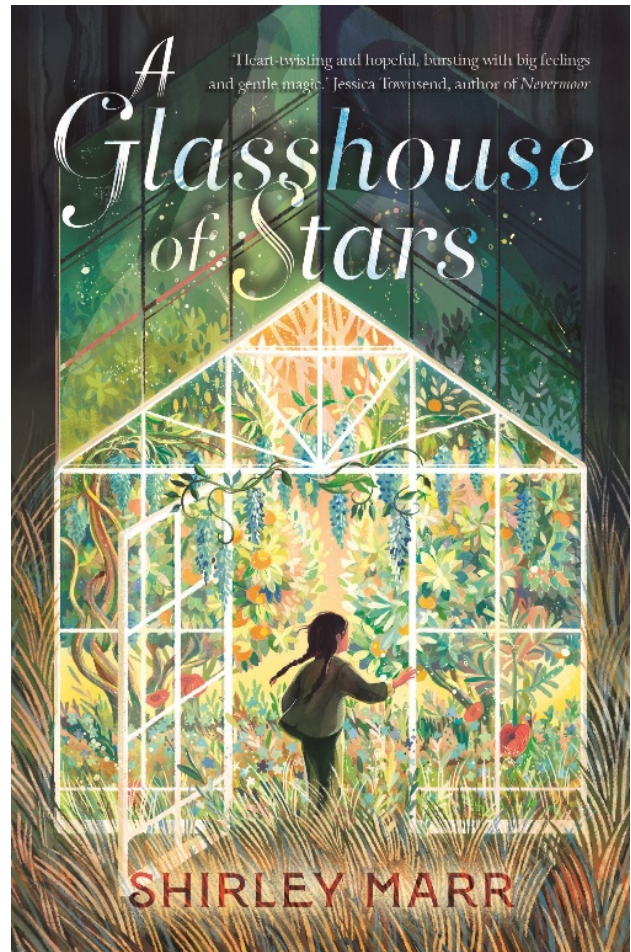
- The immigration experience
- Grief and death; birth and rebirth
- The power of story and imagination
- Magical realism
- Second-person point of view
- Experiences of racism and intolerance
- Mental health, emotions and resilience
- Kindness, tolerance and empathy
- Family and friendships

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A Glasshouse of Stars Shirley Marr

PLOT SUMMARY

Meixing Lim and her family have arrived at the New House in the New Land. Everything is vast and unknown to Meixing – and not in a good way, including the house she names Big Scary. She is embarrassed by her second-hand shoes, has trouble understanding the language at school, and is finding it hard to make friends.

Meixing's only solace is a glasshouse in the garden, which inexplicably holds the sun and the moon and the secrets of her memory and imagination.

When her fragile universe is rocked by tragedy, it will take all of Meixing's resilience and bravery to find her place of belonging in this new world.

An exquisite, heartbreakingly beautiful gem of a novel for anyone who loved *Wonder*, *Lenny's Book of Everything*, *A Monster Calls* or *When You Reach Me*.

PRAISE FOR *A GLASSHOUSE OF STARS*

'A *Glasshouse of Stars* is heart-twisting and hopeful, bursting with big feelings and gentle magic. This is a special book from a powerful, compassionate new voice in children's literature, destined to be read and loved for generations and held close in many hearts (including mine).'

– **Jessica Townsend**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Nevermoor*

'Poignant and beautifully told. I loved this book.'

– **Melina Marchetta**, bestselling author of *Looking for Alibrandi*

'A *Glasshouse of Stars* is a rare and beautiful masterpiece; deeply heartfelt, dreamily magical, and glitteringly hopeful. I adored it!'

– **Sophie Anderson**, award-winning author of *The House with Chicken Legs*

'We share Meixing's journey from loss and displacement, from heartbreak and confusion. *A Glasshouse of Stars* is ultimately, however, a tale of resilience, compassion and hope – with brushstrokes of magic to help illuminate the way. I loved this perfectly balanced book!'

– **Paul Macdonald**, Owner, The Children's Bookshop

'Poignant, authentic and heartbreakingly tender – a touching story of loss and resilience. Shirley Marr gives a face to our deepest fears and proves that even the scariest monsters can keep us company in the dark.'

– **Daria Ostrowska**, Collection Development Specialist, Westbooks

'A *Glasshouse of Stars* is poignant, thoughtful and an absolute joy to read. By turns tragic and hopeful, this breathtaking book joins the small number of titles that I will happily recommend to readers of any age.'

– **Hannah Gardiner**, Children's Book Buyer, Berkelouw Books

'When I finished *A Glasshouse of Stars* I had the same tingles as when I read *The Bone Sparrow*. The grit of reality, juxtaposed with the magic. The chance to step into another culture and learn their customs. To again be reminded of how important these stories are to build empathy and understanding. Marr has articulated a very common new immigrant experience by using powerful metaphors that will engender meaningful conversations with young readers. It will also speak to any reader who similarly embraces their imagination to make better sense of the people and the world around them. This is a book bursting with colour and heart.'

– **Libby Armstrong**, Owner, Beachside Bookshop



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shirley Marr is a first-generation Chinese-Australian living in Perth and an author of young adult and children's fiction, including YA novels *Fury* and *Preloved*, and children's novels *Little Jiang* and *A Glasshouse of Stars*.

She describes herself as having a Western mind and an Eastern heart. She likes to write in the space in the middle where they both collide, basing her stories on her own personal experiences of migration and growing up in Australia, along with the folk and fairy tales from her mother.

Arriving in mainland Australia from Christmas Island as a seven-year-old in the 1980s and experiencing the good, the bad and the wonder that comes with culture shock, Shirley has been in love with reading and writing from that early age.

Shirley is a universe full of stars and stories and hopes to share the many other novels that she has inside her.

AUTHOR'S INSPIRATION

Shirley Marr says:

'When I first immigrated to Australia, there weren't a lot of kids like me. I had thick black hair, tanned skin and could hardly understand English. I guessed the answers to the first activity I did in class and got every question wrong. I felt so ashamed and stupid! Childhood was a difficult time for me and after I grew up, I didn't want to revisit it again!'



'Recently, I've been thinking how important it is to share my story. Families move to new countries all the time and they are not always treated with kindness. I believe if I can make people see what it is like to be an immigrant – how it feels to walk in their shoes – then maybe this is the way I can help change the world.'

TEXTUAL CONCEPTS

Point of view: Second-person

You have arrived for a better life at the New House in the New Land. It has been a long journey, the first time you've ever been on an aeroplane. (p. 1)

A Glasshouse of Stars is quite unusual in that it is written using a second-person point of view. That is, it uses the pronoun 'you' as if it is addressing the reader (rather than 'I/me' for first-person or 'he/she/they' for third-person).

Shirley Marr says: 'I was struggling to find a voice for Meixing's story, especially as it is so closely based on my own experiences growing up. It was only when I decided to change to second-person narration that the story felt right.'

Questions and activities

1. Why do you think the author chose to write the story in second person? Did it help you to empathise with Meixing? As you read, did you feel that events in the story were happening to *you*?
2. Can you think of any other stories written in second-person? Why do you think stories written in second-person are unusual? Why might it be challenging to write and read in this point of view?
3. How would this story have been different if it had been written in first-person or third-person?
4. List some of the pros and cons to writing in first-person, second-person and third-person narration.
5. Write a story using second-person narration, addressing the reader as 'you'.
6. Write a letter to yourself, telling yourself about your hopes for the future.
7. Rewrite a scene from the book using first-person or third-person narration. You could even try writing it from a different character's point of view, such as Josh or Kevin or Ma Ma or Ailing.
8. Research other examples of texts that are written in second-person point of view. Who is being addressed? (Hint: try looking at recipes, instruction booklets or advertising slogans. Or, in books, try reading a 'choose your own adventure' style of book!)

Tense: Present tense

In addition to being written using second-person point of view, *A Glasshouse of Stars* is written in the present tense, so the action seems to be happening right now, in the current time, rather than in the past or future.

Questions and activities

1. Why do you think the author chose to write the story in present tense? Consider how Shirley Marr is setting the scene of the exact moment that Meixing lands in Australia, the 'New Land', her new home. Does present tense help to make the scene, and Meixing's emotions, feel immediate and in the moment, bringing you closer to how she is feeling? Could you empathise with Meixing because you have felt some of those emotions at certain times in your life?
2. Write a story in the present tense.
3. Rewrite a scene from the book using past tense.



Genre: Magical realism

Although the book is set in our real world, Shirley Marr uses a concept from a literary genre called 'magical realism', or 'magic realism', to add a fantastical element to the story.

Unlike a story in the 'fantasy' genre where the world might be completely different to ours, in a story with magical realism elements, the world is *mostly* recognisable as our own, but normal objects could have an aspect that is fantastical, magical or strange.

In *A Glasshouse of Stars*, the elements of magical realism include:

- The house (which Meixing names 'Big Scary')
- The glasshouse
- The black and white cat.

Questions and activities

1. Why has the author included elements of magical realism in the story? Would the story have been as interesting, or effective, without Big Scary, for instance, or without the magic of the glasshouse?
2. Do you think 'magical realism' should be a different genre to 'fantasy' or 'fairytale'? What do you think the differences are between these genres? Have you read any other stories you would describe as 'magical realism' or 'fantasy' or 'fairytale'?
3. Compare with other texts or media that have magical realism elements, such as picture book *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak, middle grade novels *A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness, *The Strange and Beautiful Sorrows of Ava Lavender* by Leslye Walton, *Skellig* by David Almond, *Coraline* by Neil Gaiman or *Abyssinia* by Ursula Dubosarsky, or novels for older students *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak or *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel.
4. What can the author do using magical realism that she couldn't without this aspect of the story? For instance, consider how the magic of the glasshouse allows the reader to see into the past of not only Meixing but also other characters, and how the past has shaped who they are in the present. Consider also how the magic of the glasshouse shows Meixing hints of her future, winning a writing competition. What does the knowledge of these past and future events add to your understanding of the characters?
5. In groups, choose one of the magical realism elements in the story (such as the house, the glasshouse or the cat). Discuss and write down all the things that happen in the story regarding that element that are *not* based in reality. Use **Worksheet: Magical realism** to write your list, including how the element looks in the real world and how it appears to Meixing.
6. Write a story about your own house or bedroom, with certain objects coming to life. What would they say and do?

Language: Code and convention

But the New Language confuses you and because you would love Miss Cicely to borrow your eraser, you say yes. And it is the wrong answer. (p. 44)

Ma Ma cannot speak her language and in turn Mrs Huynh cannot speak yours. But they have become friends through gestures and smiles and bump gazing. (p. 63)

'Look, if someone took me to a completely foreign country today and threw me out onto the street, how do you think I'd go trying to speak the language and understanding the customs? . . . I reckon I'd starve to death!' (Ms Jardine, pp. 190–191)

Meixing is learning a new language and the cultural and social conventions of the new land she is living in, and it sometimes causes confusion and misunderstandings for her.

A Glasshouse of Stars is therefore an excellent novel to study for its presentation of how we learn and recognise code and convention – that is, the complex interplay of language, speech and visual language that we use to convey and understand meaning. (See the [English Textual Concepts](#) website for more information on code and convention.)



Questions

1. The author uses terms such as New Land, New Language and Old Language in the story rather than being specific about where Meixing came from and which country she has moved to. Why do you think the author chose to not name the countries and languages? Are Meixing's feelings of not fitting in and her frustration with not understanding others universal, i.e. common to all of us at one time or another in our lives?
2. Can you work out what the 'New' and 'Old' countries and languages are in Meixing's story? What clues can you find? (Hint: read the 'About the Author' section on p. 284 to learn more about Shirley Marr's background that informed the story.)
3. Find examples in the story of characters not understanding each other, or learning how to best communicate with each other.
4. What are some non-verbal ways that messages are conveyed in the story? (Examples: Think of the cat pointing her tail like an arrow on p. 199, or Big Scary's tapped or lit-up messages, or Josh's thumbs up to the Lollipop Man, or the way Ma Ma and Mrs Huynh communicate without words.)



Make a list of non-verbal gestures that you use in your own life, and what they mean.

5. What non-verbal actions and gestures do you think might be universal? Make a list of actions that you think might be easily understood in other countries – for instance, how could you convey simple words such as eat, drink, baby, tree, money, drive, fly, etc, without using words? You could play a class game of charades to see if others can understand or interpret your gestures.
6. Stage 4 students could find and discuss examples in the story of how different groups use code and convention as markers of their identity.
7. Stage 5 students could discuss how the story reflects society and culture in the way code and convention can be used to shape or wield power. Find examples in the story of where characters are treated unfairly because they do not understand someone else’s speech or action.



IMAGERY AND SYMBOL

The symbolism of colour

You touch the dark brown wood, and underneath your fingers glows a neon pink. (p. 61)

The pink serpent slithers up the trunk and tangles itself in the flowers. It hisses at you; makes you think of the girls at school. Although you are concerned it might be venomous, it is also candy pink, so you are not afraid of it. (p. 103)

The seedlings mature into plants and they bud and flower. As far as your eye can see are blue forget-me-nots. You kneel down among the paper-thin petals and you feel your heart become unbearably sad. The sky is blue. The ground below you is blue. Everything is blue, including you. (p. 71)

[Ms Jardine] turns to the last page and sees the drawing that you did completely in blue pencil. She points to the blue girl. You pat the spot over your heart. (p. 117)

'Are you scared of the darkness?' Kevin asks you.

'No,' you say.

With your answer, the black sky is suddenly filled with a million galaxies.

It is the most beautiful thing you have ever seen.

'No,' you repeat. 'Because you can only see the stars when it is dark.' (p. 225)

[Ma Ma] wears a red scarf around her neck to protect the life inside of her because no ghost or bad spirit can get through such a powerful, happy colour. (p. 160)

After the ceremony is over, a red packet is shoved into your hand. When you look inside, there is a coin for good luck and a wrapped sweet to take away the bitter taste of death. (p. 163)

As soon as you connect, a new colour sweeps through both of your fields at the same time and they are no longer blue and red. All the flowers have become asters; all the flowers are purple. (p. 224)

'I'm sorry,' you whisper into Kevin's ear.

'It's okay. When I get angry and I see red, I try to think of that field of purple,' he says softly back. (p. 235)

Colour is used in various ways to symbolise and convey meaning in *A Glasshouse of Stars*. Here are some of the ways colour is explored:

- **Pink:** Big Scary's messages to Meixing are often written or glowing in pink; the serpent in the glasshouse is pink; the caterpillar and its cocoon are pink; and Meixing wants the pink toy horse and the pink and white shoes like the girl at school, and dreams of having a pink fluffy robe; Ailing gives Meixing a pink backpack as a gift.
- **Black:** Meixing feels self-conscious about her coarse black hair that seems different to the other kids at school; she meets the black and white cat, who is the gatekeeper to the magic of the glasshouse; her father wears capsicum plasters that turn black when they have sucked out the aches; Meixing selects a tiny black seed to grow in the glasshouse; Meixing says you can only see the stars when it is dark; the teenage bullies wear black combat boots.
- **Blue:** Blue is particularly significant in representing Meixing's emotions in the story, from the field of forget-me-nots and blue Chinese wisteria tree in the glasshouse to her completely blue drawing including a blue girl.
- **Red:** the worship table is covered in a red cloth at Ba Ba's funeral; Ma Ma wears a red scarf for protection; money is given in red packets; Kevin's field of flowers in the glasshouse is red (poppies); Kevin and Mr Jones both like red lolly frogs.



Questions and activities

1. Compare the different uses and meanings of the colour pink in the story. For instance, do you think the pale and neon pink offered by Big Scary represent something scary, or is Big Scary choosing pink to try to comfort Meixing? Why is the serpent pink? What does pink represent in the toy horse, girls' shoes and fluffy robe that Meixing dreams of owning?
2. Discuss Meixing's quote that 'you can only see the stars when it is dark' (p. 225). What does this line imply about Meixing's journey and personal growth in this story?
3. The teenage bullies who have racist views wear black combat boots. Discuss how certain pieces of clothing or shoes can be markers of identity, and find examples through history of what meanings different items of clothing might convey, such as particular colours associated with political groups or protest movements advocating for change.
4. Why does Meixing feel that blue is the colour that represents her? How does this colour reflect her emotions?
5. What does it symbolise when Meixing's blue flowers and Kevin's red ones merge to become purple? How does remembering the purple flowers help Kevin when he feels angry?
6. Colours can have different symbolism in different cultures. In particular, research what colours symbolise in Chinese culture. Can you find examples of how that symbolism can be seen in *A Glasshouse of Stars*?

Big Scary

As if sensing that you need a distraction, a door creaks somewhere beyond your bedroom. This prompts you to go out and investigate. The house appears to watch you as you wander down the hall and find a pale pink door you swear you didn't pass before. You stick your head inside.

The ceiling in this room is not in line with the height of the other ceilings. It is three times as tall, to fit what you discover is an entire playground complete with a rocket, a slide and a spinning wheel. It is too much.

You run away in fright and bolt back down the hallway. You stop at your bedroom door, your hand over your heart. It is beating like mad. How big is this house?

How scary?

Big Scary. (p. 9)

You try to keep your eyes shut and to not look at Big Scary. But you awake at one point to find she has drawn you a picture in pink light. It is a crude, lopsided heart. (p. 83)

With your mind, you reach out to Big Scary and you rebuild her brick by brick and put her back together again. All her mismatched scales and her patchy fur and her funny moods and her inexact feelings, exactly how she is. Her perfectly imperfect self. . . Your imagination will always be there for you when you need it, to provide you solace and comfort, but now it is time for you to step back into reality. (p. 273)

From the moment she arrives at the New House in the New Land, Meixing feels that the house is communicating with her and trying to give her messages. She names the house Big Scary. She finds that the house expands and contracts at different times, with rooms appearing and disappearing. Sometimes it is scary; sometimes comforting.



Questions and activities

1. What does the house, Big Scary, represent to Meixing? How does that change over the course of the story? Map out each time Meixing interacts with Big Scary and what is happening for her emotionally in that scene. What might Big Scary be trying to say to her, or how might Big Scary's action be reflecting Meixing's own feelings? Use **Worksheet: Big Scary** to map out Big Scary's actions against Meixing's feelings.
2. How does Big Scary help Meixing and her family?
3. Read the quote on p. 273 about Meixing's imagination. Does this change what you think about whether Big Scary is real or imaginary? Does it matter? What does this quote tell you about the power of imagination?
4. What is *pareidolia*? Research this concept and find examples of seeing faces in things. Why are human brains primed to easily perceive faces?





The glasshouse

The glasshouse is a broken-down thing on the outside. Smashed and rusted, the remaining glass panels are milky and opaque. One entire wall is missing and has been mended with mismatched doors and windows. But like people, sometimes things aren't the same on the inside as they are on the outside.

The first thing you think is that it is much bigger in here than you thought it would be.

The second thing is that you finally understand where First Uncle kept all his orange trees.

Spread out before you is an entire orchard. (p. 66)

You greet your broken glasshouse as though it is your greatest friend. Maybe it understands what it's like to look damaged on the outside but to be brimming with the hopes and dreams of an entire universe inside. (p. 100)

You want to show him how the glasshouse will help, heal and protect him. That he is worth more than he considers himself. But you don't quite have the words to say it, so you think you will let the glasshouse tell it to him. (p. 147–148)

Had it been a dream? Your imagination? Something worse? But you know it's real because you still remember the feel of your blue wisteria, the knotted wood of the trunk against your back. The smell of orange blossoms and fresh soil in the air. The sun's magical rays on your skin. You stare back at the glasshouse with a sense of embarrassment. And disappointment, but mostly betrayal. You greeted the gatekeeper. You did everything right. (p. 150)

But you know that if you call on the glasshouse in your hour of need, the glasshouse – suspended somewhere between reality and imagination – will never let you down. (p. 200)

Exploring the broken, run-down glasshouse in the backyard, Meixing discovers a magical world inside where the ghost of First Uncle continues to tend to his beloved orange trees, where seeds bloom into flowers and trees in the space of a moment, where the past

and future can be glimpsed – and where healing can begin.

Meixing plants a seed, which grows into an ornamental wisteria tree, reflecting her Chinese heritage as well as her blue feelings. Josh's seed becomes an olive tree, commonly grown in Lebanon, where he was born, and reminding him of his family as his mother grows and bottles olives. Kevin's seed becomes a field of poppies, reflecting his experiences coming to Australia as a refugee on a boat and, as a sickly child, fed medicine to keep him quiet, almost dying on the journey.



Questions and activities

1. What does Meixing find, and grow, in the glasshouse? What do you think the different things in the glasshouse represent, such as the moon and sun, the stars, the plants and the pink serpent?
2. Who does Meixing take to the glasshouse? Who is allowed in, and who isn't? Why or why not?
3. How does the magic of the glasshouse work, and why doesn't it always allow people to see its magical side? (Hint: Meixing realises the logic of the glasshouse's magic on pages 199–200.)
4. What does each character's choice of seed or plant reveal about them – Meixing's forget-me-not flowers and wisteria tree; Josh's olive tree; and Kevin's poppies?
5. Research the positive effects of nature on our wellbeing. Is there scientific evidence that being immersed outside in nature or forests or green places can reduce stress and help us feel better emotionally?
6. Choose a flower or plant that you think represents who you are. Draw, paint or photograph it.
7. First Uncle has fond memories of oranges as they were 'a rare and special treat for Chinese New Year and other occasions' (p. 69). Interview an older person about the plants or fruits and vegetables that they remember from their childhood. Are there any fruits or vegetables that are significant to them, or evoke memories for them?



8. Spend some time outside in nature, quietly observing the plants, animals and weather around you. Write a story, poem or personal reflection describing how you felt and what you noticed.
9. Use **Worksheet: A tree of me** to create a mind map of people, places and things that have made you who you are – the kind of things the glasshouse might show you!
3. Research prominent Australians who were born in another country, and write a report of their achievements.
4. What negative experiences (such as racism or intolerance) do Meixing and her Ma Ma and Ba Ba have when they move to Australia? What positive experiences (such as people helping them) do they have?

THEMES

The immigration experience

Since 1945 . . . over 7.5 million people have settled [in Australia] and Australia's overseas-born resident population – estimated to be 28.2 per cent of the population in June 2015 – is considered high compared to most other OECD countries. Permanent migrants enter Australia via one of two distinct programs – the Migration Program for skilled and family migrants or the Humanitarian Program for refugees and those in refugee-like situations. (Source: aph.gov.au)

You must do well at school here so that everything, all the sacrifices and hardships your parents have made, will be worth it. Instead of lifting you up and making you feel lucky, it makes you feel leaden, as though the world is on your shoulders. (p. 24)

You think of how you've met some not-so-very-nice people since coming to the New Land, but you've also met wonderful, just and kind people, because there will always be good people everywhere. (pp. 234–235)

A Glasshouse of Stars is a story about what it feels like to move to a different country or new place, where you don't necessarily speak the language, where everything seems unfamiliar and you feel that you don't fit in.

Questions and activities

1. Like the Lim family, the Huynh family have also come to Australia to make a new home. Even though they speak a different language and eat different foods to Meixing's family, what are some of the things that they do to make Meixing's family feel welcome? What do the two families have in common?
2. Do you know anyone who has migrated to Australia? Write about your own experiences, or interview a family member, friend or someone in your community about their experience of migrating to a new country. Where is the person from? Why did they choose to migrate to Australia? What did they find different – or the same – when they arrived?

5. Research programs and services that are available to new immigrants in your community, such as programs to help with learning English, charities who help refugees find work or provide food or other resources, or school programs like the one Ms Jardine runs at Meixing's school.
6. Do you think there is more help available now than in the 1980s when this book is set? What else do you think would help new immigrants feel safe, happy and welcome in Australia?
7. Meixing feels a strong pressure to succeed in the New Land since her parents have sacrificed so much to move here, as does Kevin. Do you think this is a common experience for the children of immigrants? Read the scene on pages 206 to 211 and discuss what this scene reveals about Ma Ma's motivations, and Meixing's understanding of her place in the family. How does Meixing feel later, e.g. on p. 258, about the expectations she is trying to live up to?
8. Food can bring people together and show how much we care, as we see in the story when Mrs Huynh brings food to her new neighbours; when Ma Ma's sisters cook food from the Old Land for her; when Ailing makes pancakes and scrambled eggs with Meixing; when Josh gives Meixing a jar of olives; and when Mr Jones gives Kevin red lolly frogs. Have you seen food bringing people together? Does your school celebrate Australia's cultural diversity in Harmony Week? Perhaps you could ask students and their families to bring a plate of food to share that represents their culture and their family, or talk about a favourite dish.



The cycle of life – birth and rebirth, death and grieving

He insisted on a funeral as per the local customs of this land – one that possibly didn't include the ritual of telling him he was now dead, so he might have come home unaware. (p. 2)

*'I also thought I was supposed to be scared of you, now that you're a ghost,' you say.
'Maybe you are confusing ghosts with the cruel people of this world,' Uncle says. (p. 69)*

Ever since Biaojie told you that large brown moth was your father, you have been looking for him not only in your waking life, but also while you sleep. He always eludes you, always just beyond reach, hiding in the fuzzy corners of your dreams and imagination. (p. 170)

Meixing is not only trying to cope with the life-changing move to a new country, but she also experiences a death in her family and must find a way through her grief – with the help of Big Scary, the glasshouse, her teacher, her new friends and her family.



Questions and activities

1. Read the chapters 'Moth' and 'Cocoon' (pp. 155–176).
2. Different cultures and religions have differing traditions, beliefs and rituals around death and mourning. Research some different cultural practices and beliefs around the world.
3. What are some of the things that help Meixing and Ma Ma find a way through their grief to new hope for the future?
4. Meixing encounters the ghost of First Uncle in the glasshouse. How does she feel on seeing him? Why isn't Meixing afraid?
5. What does the cocoon in her bedroom window and the butterfly that emerges represent to Meixing? What does she initially think the cocoon is, and what does she think when the butterfly emerges? (See p. 267.)
6. What does the birth of Meixing's sister represent to her and Ma Ma (see pp. 270–271)? Why does Ma Ma call Meixing's sister Xinxing, or New Star?

The power of story and imagination

Josh goes first. He says that he likes stories, but because no one in his family can read and as he himself did not start to speak the New Language until last year, he can't read very well. That's why he likes comics, because anyone can understand pictures. (p. 115)

You reach out your hand and close your eyes, and you compel your mind to take you where you want to go and need to be. Everything goes silent . . . It all goes quiet, and you are floating around in the space where your stories and your drawings come to life. That special place that is yours and yours alone, where nothing is denied and everything is possible. You feel yourself propel forward and away you go, free. (p. 68)

There is so much swirling inside your head. You can feel that wisteria tree twisting inside your soul. One day all the words in your head will connect with the pen in your fingers, and it will come spilling out like flowers from their buds. You will become a writer. (p. 120)

'I was too scared before to draw anything from my old home. I didn't think anyone would be interested anyway. But now I think it's important. Thank you.' (Josh, p. 191)

With so much of the magical realism of Big Scary and the glasshouse interwoven with Meixing's imagination and her feelings, the power of imagination to help us tell our own stories and make sense of what is happening in our lives is an important overarching theme of *A Glasshouse of Stars*.

It's a subject that is close to author Shirley Marr's heart – the writing contest win that the glasshouse shows Meixing from her future is based on a real prize that Shirley won for her writing, and *A Glasshouse of Stars* is also the result of Shirley deciding to write a book based on her own experiences.

Shirley says: 'I remember school being really hard because of the language barrier and also because of the race barrier. Some people were really embracing but some people were also quite cruel. I had quite a difficult, mixed childhood and the last thing I wanted to do when I grew up was to write about it. It's only been the last few years that have got me thinking how important it is to tell my story. The immigration experience is still much the same in that there continues to be a lot of hostility in this world. I really hope that *A Glasshouse of Stars* connects with and touches people with its big important themes of resilience and survival and love that are universally applicable to everyone.'

Questions and activities

1. Why is it so important to Meixing that she learn to read and write in the New Language? What doors will open for her if she can read and write?
2. Why do Meixing, Josh and Kevin enjoy drawing and illustrating as a way of telling their stories?
3. How does imagination help us to explore our emotions? Find examples in the story.
4. Meixing feels like she has so many words inside her but she's unable to speak. What are the things in the story that help her to find her voice?
5. At first author Shirley Marr didn't want to write about her own experiences, but she realised it was important to tell her story. Why is it important to read books written by people who have had different experiences to our own?
6. Find more #ownvoices stories to read – stories whose author is from an under-represented or marginalised group writing about their own experiences or from their own perspective.
7. *You understand that he is only being mean because you were mean. That now you are locked in this spiral and it's hard to get out. You understand what it's like to be in his shoes.* (p. 146) A strong message of this story is that it's important to be able to walk in someone else's shoes to understand them and empathise with them. How does reading fiction help us to do that?
8. Research the links between reading fiction and positive traits such as empathy and compassion for others. What are the benefits of reading?
9. Write a story about your own life – what is the story only you can tell?

Mental health, emotions and resilience

You don't want to worry Ms Jardine because you want to see her smile and her sunshine come back. But you don't know what name to put on the invisible monster that seems to be wrapping itself around Ma Ma and making her shoulders, body and entire being sag; sitting so heavy on top of her in bed and keeping her there. (p. 236)

Josh taps you on the shoulder and asks what is wrong. You feel as though your heart is beating a million miles per minute and you can't seem to slow it down. It's as though you are nervous or scared about something even though you are safe inside Ms Jardine's rickety little classroom. You are powerless to control the feeling and it threatens to turn you into a sad blue girl again. (p. 237)

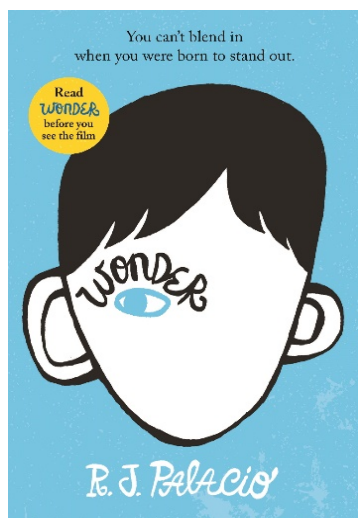
Questions and activities

1. Which characters do you think may be struggling with their mental health during the course of the

- story? What are they feeling? What are some of the signs other people notice about how they are feeling?
2. Why does Meixing find it hard to talk about what she is experiencing? What happens when she does talk about her feelings?
3. What are some of the things in the story that help characters to understand their emotions and to feel more positive about their situation or feel more resilient? For example, what are some of the things that help Kevin to feel less angry? What helps Meixing to process her feelings of grief and of not fitting in? What helps Ma Ma when she can't get out of bed? Here are some possible answers – discuss why each of these might have contributed to changes in the way each character felt:
 - Making a friend or talking to a friend
 - Sharing food with friends or family
 - Talking to a trusted teacher
 - Speaking up for fairness
 - Being in nature
 - Gardening
 - Achieving something, such as learning new words
 - Thinking through a problem, and coming up with possible solutions
 - Making art or writing stories
 - Helping others
4. Research services that may be available to help someone who is going through a tough situation, such as Beyond Blue, Lifeline or Kids Helpline, or local services in your community.
5. Draw or paint or take a photo of your own version of the 'glasshouse of stars' – the place that makes you feel happy and calm, where you can go to think and contemplate and dream . . .



FURTHER READING FROM PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

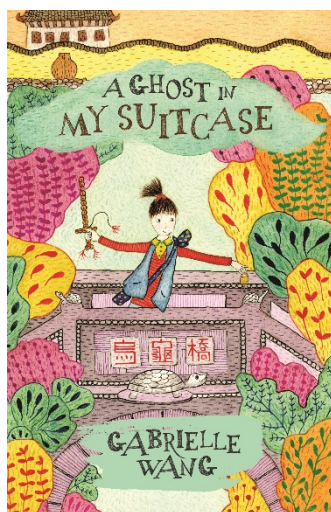


Wonder
by R.J. Palacio

'My name is August. I won't describe what I look like. Whatever you're thinking, it's probably worse.' Auggie wants to be an ordinary ten-year-old. He does ordinary things - eating ice cream, playing on his Xbox. He *feels* ordinary – inside. But ordinary kids don't make other ordinary kids run away screaming in playgrounds. Ordinary kids aren't stared at wherever they go. Born with a terrible facial abnormality, Auggie has been home-schooled by his parents his whole life. Now, for the first time, he's being sent to a real school – and he's dreading it. All he wants is to be accepted – but can he convince his new classmates that he's just like them, underneath it all?

WONDER is a funny, frank, astonishingly moving debut to read in one sitting, pass on to others, and remember long after the final page.

[Teachers' notes available.](#)



A Ghost in My Suitcase
by Gabrielle Wang

An award-winning magic realism story for 10+ readers about finding yourself, ghost-hunting, Chinese mythology and culture.

The flute music stops, and my breath catches in my throat. Silence falls like a veil. Then I hear something – no, I feel it in my chest. 'Steady yourself,' Por Por whispers. 'It's here . . .'

When thirteen-year-old Celeste travels to China to visit her grandmother, she uncovers an incredible family secret. And with this secret comes danger and adventure. If Celeste is to save her family and friends, she must learn to harness her rare and powerful gift . . . From the award-winning author of *The Wishbird*.

[Teachers' notes available.](#)



You Must Be Layla
by Yassmin Abdel-Magied

With her long skirt and headscarf Layla certainly stands out at her new high school. Everyone thinks they know her, just from a glance. But do they? And does Layla really know herself?

Layla's mind goes a million miles a minute, so does her mouth – unfortunately her better judgement can take a while to catch up! Although she believes she was justified for doing what she did, a suspension certainly isn't the way she would have wished to begin her time at her fancy new high school. Despite the setback, Layla's determined to show everyone that she does deserve her scholarship and sets her sights on winning a big invention competition. But where to begin?

Looking outside and in, Layla will need to come to terms with who she is and who she wants to be if she has any chance of succeeding.

[Teachers' notes available.](#)



WORKSHEET: Magical realism

Find examples of magical realism in the story, where something in the real world takes on a magical or unusual aspect when Meixing interacts with it. Note how the element would look in the real world (which is sometimes described in the story too), and how it appears to Meixing.



Element	Page	How it looks in the real world	How it appears to Meixing
<i>Example: the third-floor window</i>	3	<i>The house is only two storeys tall.</i>	<i>The house is three storeys tall, and the top floor has a window that looks like an eye and winks at Meixing.</i>



WORKSHEET: Big Scary

Meixing calls the new house Big Scary, and feels that Big Scary is communicating with her in secret messages, from pulsing colours to winking eyes to appearing and disappearing rooms. Write down below each time Meixing communicates with Big Scary, or Big Scary does something a house shouldn't be able to do.

Note how you think Meixing is feeling in that scene – whether it's directly related to Big Scary's action or her general emotions at that point of the story.

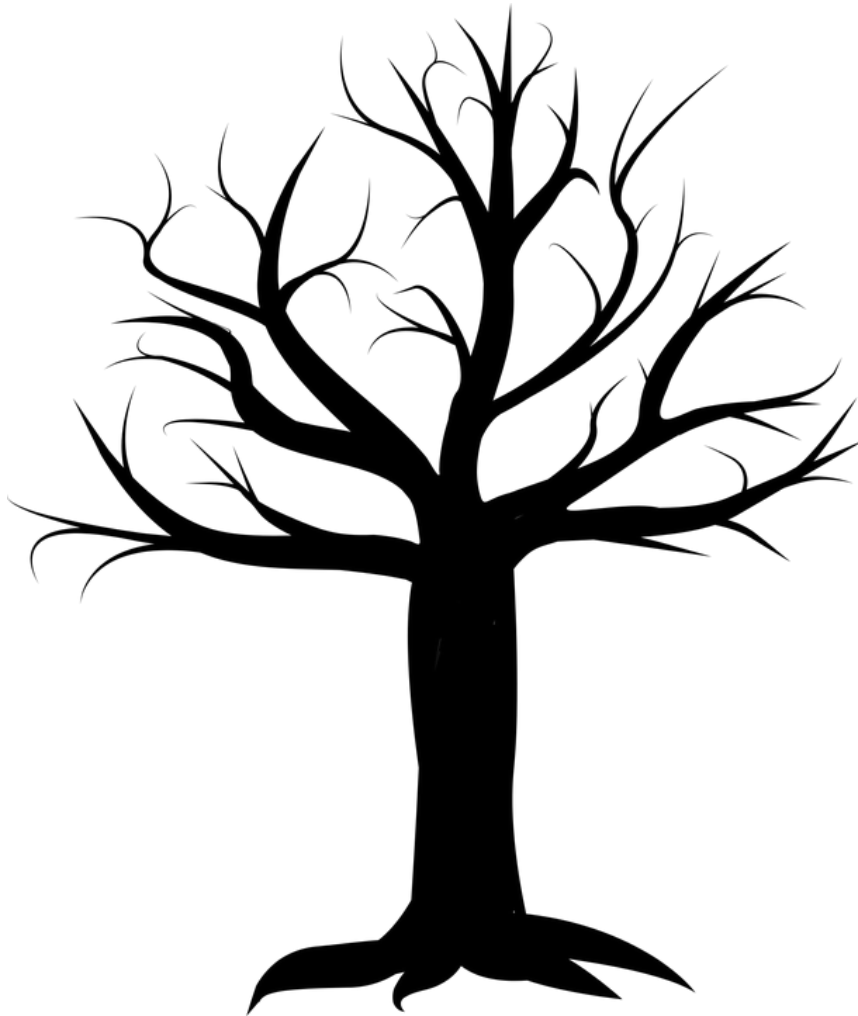


Page	What is Big Scary's action?	What are Meixing's feelings in this scene? What is Big Scary trying to tell her, or how does Big Scary's action reflect Meixing's feelings?
<i>Example: 3</i>	<i>Winks at Meixing with the third-floor window that is like an eye</i>	<i>Meixing is anxious and afraid because everything here is new to her. Big Scary could be trying to say hello, to make her feel comfortable and safe.</i>

WORKSHEET: The tree of me

The magic of the glasshouse can show you who you are, both reflecting your past and looking into your future. Plant a seed and watch your tree grow!

Using the tree below, add a leaf next to each branch to say something about what makes you *YOU*. Add leaves for your family, friends, teachers, pets, favourite foods, favourite stories, and aspects of your culture that you appreciate. Make sure you add a leaf with a dream for your future!



A Glasshouse of Stars

READING GROUP QUESTIONS



1. This book is written with an unusual second-person point of view, addressing the reader as 'you'. Did this affect how you read the story?
2. Did you have a favourite quote or scene?
3. Which scenes did you find most moving?
4. Were you worried for Meixing and her Ma Ma? What most worried you? Was that worry resolved in the story?
5. Which characters would you most like to meet in real life?
6. Based on Shirley Marr's own experiences of coming to Australia as a young child, *A Glasshouse of Stars* is a novel depicting the immigration experience – but it is also a universal story about not fitting in. Were there moments you could relate to, or that reminded you of a time when you had similar feelings of not fitting in to a group or place?
7. If you were in the magical glasshouse, and you could plant a seed that would grow and blossom into a flower, plant or tree, what would your plant be, and why?
8. Shirley Marr says, 'Families move to new countries all the time and they are not always treated with kindness. I believe if I can make people see what it is like to be an immigrant – how it feels to walk in their shoes – then maybe this is the way I can help change the world.' What other stories have you read, seen or listened to that helped you to walk in someone else's shoes? What did you learn?
9. If you could ask author Shirley Marr a question about the story, what would it be?
10. Have you read any other stories with elements of magical realism? How did the glasshouse, Big Scary and the cat take you further into Meixing's world? Do you think they were real, or did Meixing imagine them?
11. *A Glasshouse of Stars* is a book 'bursting with big feelings', as *Nevermoor* author Jessica Townsend said about it. What are some of those big feelings? What are some of the things that helped characters to understand their emotions and to feel more positive about their situation or feel more resilient?
12. What is *your* version of Meixing's 'glasshouse of stars' – the place that makes you feel happy and calm, where you can go to think and contemplate and dream?

ORDER FORM

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A Ghost in My Suitcase	Gabrielle Wang	9780143303794	4-7	\$16.99		
Wonder	R.J. Palacio	9780552565974	4-6	\$19.99		
You Must Be Layla	Yassmin Abdel-Magied	9780143788515	5-9	\$16.99		
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