

# TEACHERS' NOTES

## BODY AND SOUL: LILBET'S ROMANCE



[Indra Publishing, 2003](#)

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### **“BODY AND SOUL”**

**music by Duke Ellington, as recorded by Billie Holiday in 1945.**

‘My heart is sad and lonely.  
For you I yearn, for you I’m lonely  
I tell you I mean it.  
I’m all for you Body and Soul.  
My days are filled with longing.  
And wondering why you’re wronging.  
I tell you I mean it.  
I’m all for you, Body and Soul.’

*Here is some information that can be used to extend students’ knowledge, explore research skills and gives students the opportunity to express their ideas.*

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## **SYNOPSIS**

Written in the summer and autumn of 1938, this Young Adult novel is eighteen-year-old disabled Lilbet Mark's very biased account of the love affair between Felix Goldfarb, a recent migrant to Melbourne Australia, and Lilbet's twin-sister Ella. Lilbet adores Ella, but at the same time envies her for being beautiful, for not being crippled and for her ability to dazzle men.

Lilbet's father Simon Marks, her eldest sister Julie, and all their friends are entranced by Felix Goldfarb. Never before have they come across such a winning blend of worldly sophistication and boyish charm. Only clever Lilbet suspects Felix might not be all that he seems. Also, it is imperative for her physical and psychological wellbeing that Ella remains in Adeline Terrace.

As Lilbet records the day to day events that take place in Adeline Terrace, her newspaper cuttings and notes explore 1938 attitudes in general, the intolerance once shown towards the disabled, the ambivalence she feels towards her family, her insecurities, fear of loneliness and the double edged sword of love and envy.

But is Lilbet as badly done by as she would have us believe?

## **RATIONALE**

The concept behind *Body and Soul* is to present history in an accessible and interesting format. One way to do this was to imagine what life might have been like at a particularly interesting time in Australian history.

## **RESOURCES AND PREPARATION**

In a fiction based on history, the trend is that it:

- starts with the premise 'what if you were there at the time'
- describes a society which is based on fact
- is set in the past
- has total internal logic

## **RESEARCH**

1. any newspapers of the time. These are too old to be found on the Internet. Rather you can view them in public libraries on microfiche
2. the multiple meanings of the word ROMANCE.
3. pre war restrictions on women's activities
4. pre war attitudes towards the disabled
5. information on EUGENICS
6. pre war belief in the cultural superiority of Europe
7. the late 1930 Japanese advance into Korea, Manchuria and China
8. the Nazi take-over of Germany and Austria
9. Australia's small and predominantly Anglo- Saxon population.

10. AUSTRALIAN CUISINE. Then and now.

11. HOUSEKEEPING: Then and now.

### **TALKING POINTS**

*Imagine that it is the period leading up to World War 2.*

You are living in urban Australia.

- If you are partially disabled, or intellectually handicapped, where might you be sent?
- Describe Australia in 1938. Is it as dull and unsophisticated as Felix would have us believe?
- Explore Felix's accounts of the 'rich and famous'. Where might he have gained his information?

### **DISCUSS**

To any visitor from 1938, 21ST Century Australia would be almost unrecognisable.

### **DEBATE**

- Sixty years later, we are still enthralled by the lifestyles of the rich and famous.
- Australians are still too gullible.
- "Does the end ever deserve the means?"
- Young adults are no longer sexually ignorant.
- No longer do we have to hide our sexual orientation.
- We show the physically and intellectually disadvantaged greater care and understanding.

### **ACTIVITIES**

- Make a story-board or collage to convey ENVY.
- Mock up an interview with Lilbet with you as the interviewer.
- Then change roles.
- Illustrate a cover for this story.
- Write more lyrics for the song called "Body and Soul".
- You are a TV producer who has just bought the rights to this novel. Your budget only allows for three settings. What are they?

### **WRITING EXERCISES**

- Research and write a non-fiction piece called EVENTS LEADING TO WORLD WAR 2.
- Choose a second cover for this story.
- Find another title.
- As Felix, write a letter to your wife in Switzerland describing Australia and your new friends.
- Write a letter to a newspaper pleading that spastics be shown more tolerance.
- Write a letter arguing for more migrants to Australia.
- Write a letter arguing that Australia should take less migrants.

***EXTRA NOTES ON THIS NOVEL***

**1. Some newspaper excerpts include:**

**The AGE Newspaper. 7th September, 1938**

***HITLER REPEATS DEMANDS FOR COLONIES.***

Economic distress dictated Germany's claim for colonies,' said Herr Hitler in a proclamation which was read at the opening of the national Socialist Congress at Nuremberg today. Herr Hitler was given a tumultuous reception, both when he arrived by air to Nuremberg and when he mounted the platform at the opening of the congress.

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**The ARGUS Newspaper. 29th December, 1937.**

***GAY END TO 1937. Many Festivities Arranged.***

Melbourne has set the stage for the merriest and brightest New Year in its history. Most of the city and metropolitan theatres and dance halls will hold gala performances. At St. Kilda the foreshore will be brightened by a fireworks display.

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**THE SUN NEWSPAPER: 3rd January, 1938**

***NEW TIVOLI. The Home of Variety***

Frank Neil presents the greatest variety acts EVER SEEN AT THE TIVOLI headed by famous stage and screen star NINA MAE McKINNLEY. Also performing will be ROY RENE MO and the inimitable Jack Ryans and his Dancing Festival.

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*And my favourite:*

**THE ARGUS NEWSPAPER: 28th January, 1938**

***THE WORLD OF WOMEN. Everyday Problems.***

Will you please repeat in your columns the directions for stiffening a crochet basket with sugar. 'Newly Wed.' Camberwell.

To make stiffening for six baskets take one half cupful of icing sugar and enough water to make a thick syrup. Cook this mixture until it is thick, then place the baskets inside. Stir them around with a fork until thoroughly saturated. Then run a string through the handles and hang them in a cool place to dry.

**2. Article: RECREATING PAST LIVES**

*By Goldie Alexander .*

I have always been fascinated by the notion that if Anna Karenina were alive today, that she would have left that dreary husband without a qualm, and taken her son to set up a new household with Count Vronsky. The same goes for other literary figures: Mrs. Bennett would never have been that desperate to marry off five daughters if they had been trained to support themselves. The orphan Jane Eyre would have been adopted by a caring family and given her startling intelligence, possibly moved into an academic career.

Much like those heroines who reflect the women of their times, and the list goes on, most families have stories about members who suffered because they lived into less sympathetic times. My own family tree has a history of profound depression that has debilitated at least one member in every generation. It saddens me to think that if those relatives were here today, they would have been fed Prozac or some chemical equivalent and led happier, more productive lives. Maybe because of this, and because I am naturally inquisitive, I have always made a point of listening to other families 'bad luck' stories. And it was one of those stories that struck the first spark and led me to the character of Lilbet in [BODY AND SOUL: Lilbet's Romance](#)

My husband had four 'maiden' aunts who stayed together until they died. Their lives spanning most of the 20th Century, these sisters loved and squabbled and protected each other with equal determination. One aunt was mildly spastic and deeply resentful of both her affliction and the treatment she received. She often said that she wished that she had never been allowed to survive. Until quite recently many disabled folk were perceived as mentally retarded and institutionalised. Or stranded in a permanent childhood with never any hope of independence. Intimacy with the opposite gender was discouraged, their sexual needs perceived as distasteful. The author Alan Marshall was a pioneer in an area that needed a lot of rethinking.

[Body and Soul's](#) setting is the summer and autumn Melbourne's 1938. In this Young Adult novel Lilbet, my eighteen-year old disabled protagonist, wants little more than to be respected by her father and the outside world, and allowed some autonomy. What makes things extra hard for her is that this is a time when contemporary thinking revolved around the notion of 'Eugenics'. Eugenics was a pseudo-science that advocated improvements of qualities of race by control of inherited characteristics. Like the ancient Spartans, the idea was that only the 'racially pure' and the 'strong and healthy' should breed and survive.

Much like my husband's aunt, Lilbet lives under the constant threat of being sent to a *Home for Spastics and Retards* if she tries to exert 'a little too much independence'. She is constantly supervised 'in case she hurts herself', discouraged from attempting some of the simplest household tasks, given very little education, subjected to some dreadful surgical procedures, and denied any normal intimacy with the opposite sex. These days some of her spasticity would have been resolved. An intelligent and well-read woman, she would have been encouraged into a career and a more normal existence. She might even have married and had children. So it was when this aunt went down in family legend as someone to whom nothing ever happened I took on the challenge of making something happen.

Authors have a lot of fun creating disagreeable people. Perhaps this is one way they rid themselves of their less pleasant feelings towards the world. In Lilbet, I created a

character who, because she exists in a frighteningly constricted environment, must manipulate her family to suit herself – a task she accomplishes altogether too successfully. In this novel I am aware of being ‘politically incorrect’. I tried to create a more fully rounded character by stepping aside from the conventional view that anyone disadvantaged will always be ‘nice’. And because Lilbet’s family are altogether too trusting and innocent - much like many Australians were in the first part of the 20th century- they are totally charmed by the sophisticated and worldly wise Felix.

I already had some experience in recreating history. *Mavis Road Medley (1991)* is set in 1933. [My Story: Surviving Sydney Cove \(2000\)](#) set in 1790 is one of the My Story series published by Scholastics UK. 2000. This fictional diary describes the trials and tribulations our First Fleet suffered.

In [Body and Soul](#) I wanted to lead my readers into a different world, yet make that world utterly convincing. Sixty-five years later, some of our moral dilemmas appear to have changed, though some are universal. But syntax and vocabulary have altered. My problem was how to achieve a thirties ‘voice’ without becoming too wordy. And I needed to use historical facts without letting those facts intrude into the fictional flow. All this meant lots of reading of the literature of the time. And much rewriting. I also took certain liberties in that that the true ‘Lilbet’ would have been far older than eighteen in 1938, but then this was such an interesting year.

1938 was when everything pointed to the beginning of World War 2. Australia was still recovering from the worst of the Great Depression. Swaggies who had lost their families through extreme poverty, and often their self-respect, still knocked on suburban doors looking for a cup of tea and a slice of bread and jam. In Europe, there were two conflicting ideologies; Fascism as espoused by Mussolini in Spain and Hitler in Germany. Communism, as espoused by Stalin in Russia. Having suffered huge losses in World War 1, the Americans preferred to stay out of world affairs. And in Asia, the Japanese had invaded Korea and Manchuria and were gradually gaining control of China.

It was those Japanese invasions that mostly bothered the newspapers of the time. Perhaps Europe was still too far away, though folk still referred to England as ‘Home’. But Australia with its small population of mostly Anglo Saxons had a strong White Australia policy. Back then we were either deeply suspicious of ‘foreigners’ or stupidly subservient before ‘European sophistication’. And what was most relevant to my novel, a woman’s place was in the home. A respectable middle-class girl had only four career paths open to her - she could teach, nurse or become a secretary. But mostly she was encouraged to marry and marry well. Once she did, running a household became her full time activity. And then as George Eliot says in *Middlemarch* “A woman... has got to put up with the life her husband makes for her”

The Marks girls’ lives - Julie, Ella and Lilbet - pivot around domestic tasks in a motherless household. Though Ella, Lilbet’s twin, insists that ‘nothing interesting ever happens’, I wanted to record that domestic existence where even managing the weekly wash becomes a formidably muscular achievement; the buying of an electric refrigerator, an unnecessary extravagance; pre-prepared food, a complete unknown.

What complicates things even more is that the Mark's family, again based on my husband's, were transported to Australia in the 18th Century. After serving their terms, these convicts became respectable citizens. Their descendants saw themselves as totally Anglo-Saxon whilst still retaining their ancient religion. There were very few of these families before 1945, and they blended into the general population. But by 1938 things were very bad for European Jewry. Only four hundred were accepted in Australia as migrants and Anti-Semitism was running deep. Thus Lilbet feels estranged from everyday society both by her religion, her disabilities and her dour father. And though she is most sympathetic to any new arrival, she distrusts the smooth talking Felix, and does everything in her power to keep the 'status quo'.

Australian writers are often chastised for writing about the past instead of the immediate present - as if only 21st Century problems are relevant. Nevertheless I agree with those who argue that 'those who are ignorant of history are destined to repeat it'. The number of emigrants this country should accept is still a hot issue, and many of us reject other cultures and religions. As each wave of migrant has come into this country, they have had to face hate and bias until time sorted things out and they were eventually absorbed. Australia is one of the few countries to do so successfully. There seems no good reason why this shouldn't continue.