

Teachers Notes by Lindsay Williams

Against the Odds

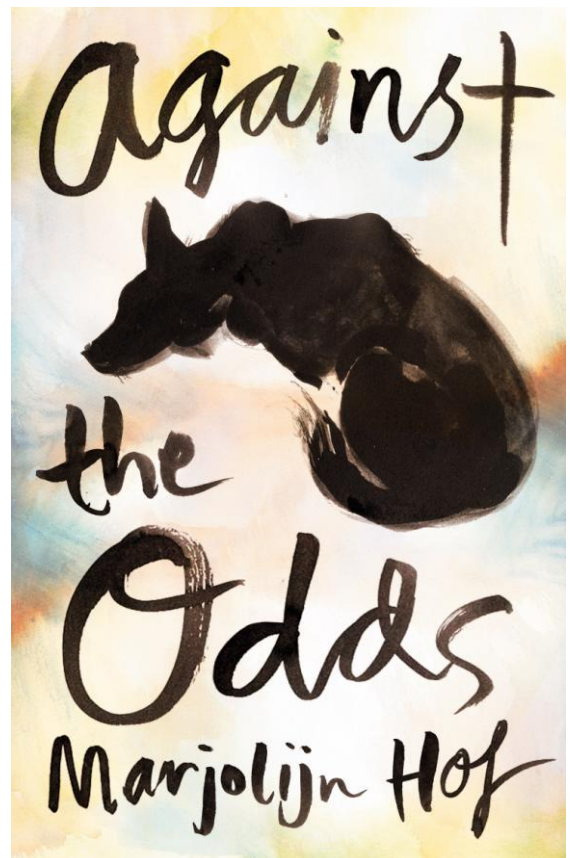
by
Marjolijn Hof

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Recommended for ages 9-12 yrs

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INTRODUCTION

PLOT SUMMARY

In this award-winning novel, Kiki's father heads off on his annual trip to volunteer as a doctor in war zones. Kiki's worst fears are realised when her father goes missing. However, Kiki's mother has explained the concept of odds to her and how 'sometimes' you can make the odds of something happening smaller or bigger. With this knowledge, Kiki decides to reduce the odds of her father being dead - by having a dead pet mouse and dead pet dog. Her youthful logic is that it is against the odds to have a dead mouse, a dead dog *and* a dead father!

This simple, first person narrative told from the point of view of Kiki is humorous, moving and ultimately hopeful. It allows students to explore questions such as:

- Where do our responsibilities to our families begin and end?
- How much are we prepared to sacrifice for strangers in need? How much **should** we be prepared to sacrifice?
- Does the end justify the means?
- How much do we really control our own destinies?

Against the Odds was first published in Dutch as *Een Kleine Kans* (direct translation: *A Small Chance*) and has been widely translated since its first appearance in 2006.

IN THE CLASSROOM

Against the Odds would be a useful addition to English, Social Studies, Personal Development, Philosophy and Religion classes.

The main body of activities listed below relate to the English Curriculum. Suggestions for other subject areas follow. These notes are aimed at upper primary and lower secondary classrooms.

Links to the Australian Curriculum

The English activities have been designed to take account of the three strands of the Australian English curriculum:

- Literature, e.g. the activities focus on developing appreciation of the novel form which has the potential for enriching students' lives and expanding the scope of their experience. Students will come to appreciate the works of an award winning, international writer whose work has been translated into English.
- Language, e.g. many of the activities are designed to develop students' knowledge about how Hof uses language to create fictional worlds and align themselves with particular characters and values. In addition, students will be encouraged explore specialized uses of language, for example the language of persuasion and complaint.
- Literacy, e.g. the Three Level Guide is designed to help students become more effective readers. There are also specific activities that assist students to think more like a writer (especially of novels).

While some activities clearly belong mainly to one strand or another, many of the activities also draw upon these strands in an integrated manner.

ENGLISH

The English-related activities are organised according to the pre-reading, during reading and after reading stages.

PRE-READING

Activity 1: Websearch

Students should find out what they can about the organisation Doctors Without Borders (otherwise known as Médecins Sans Frontières): What does this organisation do? What are its aims? How do people get involved? What sort of people work for them? What are some specific achievements of the organisation? Where do they do their work? What other information can you find out about them? This research can be presented as a chart, a PowerPoint presentation or even as a project in PhotoStory 3.

Here are some good starting points:

- <http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/>
- <http://www.msf.org.au/?gclid=CNHbmtfn5qgCFYqGpAod4SYJDQ>.

Activity 2: Tapping into Prior Knowledge

Students can talk and then write about a time when they didn't have control over a situation - they may have been frightened or didn't know what was happening in a stressful situation. How did they cope? What help did they seek? What was the outcome of the situation? Share and discuss stories.

DURING READING

Activity 3: Reading Journal

As you read, stop occasionally (say every two or three chapters) and record your thoughts about the novel:

- Briefly, what's been happening in the story? What characters have been introduced?
- What do you think about the actions of the various characters - do you agree or disagree? Would you have done anything differently?
- What predictions do you make about what will happen next?

Activity 4: Thinking Like a Writer - The importance of a good beginning

The first chapter of any novel is important for:

- Grabbing the reader's attention
- Introducing the main characters and the storyline
- Introducing the major issues (even themes) of the novel.

After reading pp.1-3 of *Against the Odds*, what does the reader discover about:

- Characters
- Possible complications and story lines
- Issues to be addressed in the novel

Discuss why the story begins with the lines: 'My father was on his way to a war. His suitcase was packed. He just had to say goodbye.' In many ways, the novel could have started on page 4 (read pp.4-5 to 'The taxi drove away'). In groups, discuss why Hof begins the story the way she does. Why are Mona and the mother not introduced until Chapter 2? How effective and appropriate is the beginning of Hof's novel?

Extension: Return to the first chapter of other novels you have read. Evaluate how effective those beginnings are.

After finishing *Against the Odds*, write a new first chapter focusing, perhaps, on some of the more dramatic aspects of the story and using different techniques. For example, start with a flash-forward to the father in hospital after his return or with Kiki trying to kill Mona by dropping her from the bridge. Try out various ways of starting the story and discuss what is gained and lost in the different versions of the opening chapter.

Activity 5: Mapping the story

Re-read pp.19-21 and 47-48 paying particular attention to the clues about where the father is travelling. In groups, use an atlas and the clues in the text to make an educated guess about the father's approximate location - in terms of continent and country. Compare guesses and discuss each group's reasoning.

Activity 6: Thinking like a Writer - building sympathy for Kiki

Marjolijn Hof must be very careful with the character of Kiki - it would be easy for readers to feel disgust at some of Kiki's actions (such as purchasing half dead mice and trying to kill Mona, the family dog). In fact, it would be easy to perceive Kiki as somewhat crazy, even unlikable. However, Hof manages to incorporate her stranger behaviours into the story without losing the sympathy of the reader. In groups and as a class, identify the writing tricks used by Hof to maintain this sympathy. Here are a few ideas:

- Kiki is quite young and naive - to some extent she can be excused for her actions, especially as she is doing them for what she perceives as the right reasons.
- The story is told in first person from Kiki's perspective, so the story unfolds through her eyes and we gain insight to the rationale for some of her arguably crazy ideas. In other words, we can see the logic (however flawed) of her decisions.
- Quite early in the book (pp.4-5), readers are provided with fairly negative descriptions of Mona - students should see if they can find other negative representations, e.g. p.17. Because Mona is not described in highly sympathetic and positive terms, it may be easier for the reader to accept - or at least understand - Kiki's actions.
- Initially, Kiki's mother gives her very little information and, so, Kiki must work things out for herself.

Activity 7: The development of Kiki's relationship with her mother

As students read the novel, they should take note of how the relationship between Kiki and her mother changes. For example, at the start of the novel her mother treats Kiki very much as a child who should not worry about adult concerns. This is illustrated on p.7 when Kiki asks 'Do you know about stray bullets?' and her mother

replies, 'Don't think about that'. On p.44, her mother tells her that: 'Maybe it's just like the movies. Some movies are only for eighteen-year olds and you're not allowed in. That's to protect you. Maybe I need to protect you. Maybe I need to protect you a little bit too and only tell you news when I'm sure of it.' When does this really start to change - perhaps pp.77-80 when Kiki finally confesses to her about the 'Mice and dogs'? Or, is it earlier on p.47 when Mother shows Kiki the map of where her father was when he disappeared? What difference does the changing relationship make to both Kiki and her mother? Is this development for the better? If so, how?

POST-READING

Activity 8: Responding to the story

Using the Think-pair-share strategy, share students' favourite aspects of the book—it could be a scene, an exchange of dialogue, characters. Discuss why these were favourite scenes, encouraging students to move beyond superficial responses (e.g. 'It was cool').

Activity 9: Theme – Three Level Guide

Students re-read p.113 (from 'One afternoon I was sitting next to my father's bed') to the bottom of p.115. Then, use the Three Level Guide in Blackline Master 1 to think about the story at literal, interpretive and applied levels. After students complete the Three Level Guide independently, they work in groups (small groups or whole class) to discuss and justify their answers.

For more information on Three Level Guides, see http://www.myread.org/guide_three.htm.

Activity 10: Reconstructing the father's story

Re-read pp.47-48 and 93-96. Based on this information and further research as required, write a detailed account of the father's story from when he leaves home to when he returns, injured.

Activity 11: Writing from another perspective

Currently, the story is told from the point of view of Kiki, but we know that Kiki's mother and grandmother (Oma) are both very upset and worried about what's happening. For example, on pp.13-14, Kiki comes home from school and her 'mother was just sitting on the couch holding the telephone' and then, on p.17, her mother's knee 'was propped on a dresser. The dresser was on its side and had only two legs left.' In the case of Oma, we discover that she has been calling the house a lot (p.26) and she becomes angry on pp.57-59, saying that her son (Kiki's father) 'is not a hero. He is too self-centred to be a hero.'

Re-write (part of) the story – in first person – from either the mother's or Oma's point of view. Use clues that are in the book to help you imagine what is going on in their minds during this time, what they are doing to cope and, perhaps, even the dreams they are having. This could be in the form of diary entries or a series of letters to a friend.

Activity 12: Thinking like a Writer - Third or First Person?

Against the Odds is written in first person from the point of view of a child. In this way, readers have the opportunity to reflect on the effect of adult decisions and behaviours (however well intended) on the innocent. Students might like to locate

other stories written in first person and discuss why other authors have chosen this narrative point of view (for example, its immediacy and the opportunity it gives to get right inside a character's head).

Having discussed the advantages of first person, students could now take sections of the book and re-write them in second and then third person. Compare the three versions and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each. **Note:** Teachers may want to advise students that the use of third person is often more highly valued in 'on-demand' writing tasks. If students choose to use first person, they should take on more sophisticated roles (i.e. not a child) and avoid colloquial language and slang.

Activity 13: Constructing a new cover

Students should examine and evaluate the cover of *Against the Odds*: How effective is the simple design? Is the use of black and white effective? What do you think of the handwritten look of the title and author? What about the choice of the curled up dog as the central image? In groups, design a different cover for the book. Share with other students and vote on the favourite. Discuss whether any of these covers preferred over the original.

[Covers of overseas editions of the book can be viewed on the author's website at: <http://www.marjolijnhof.nl/en/translations.>]

Activity 14: Writing persuasively

Part A: On pp.43-46, Kiki is trying to persuade her mother to tell her what's happening with her father. For her part, the mother is arguing that Kiki is too young to know everything. Identify some of the specific, persuasive language techniques that they draw on to try to win their argument, e.g.:

- Kiki's use of high modality in 'You **have to** tell me everything' (as opposed to something like '**I think** you **might** tell me everything'). Her mother also uses high modality when she says 'In fact I know almost as little as you do'.
- The mother's use of disclaiming in 'I do hear you, Kiki, but I have to think for a second.' (Put simply, disclaiming is when a speaker acknowledges another point of view in order to then reject, downplay or challenge it.) Kiki also uses this technique on p.44 when she says 'Margie's brother rented a DVD...It was for eighteen-year-olds and up, **but** I saw it anyway...'.
Note: There are many more examples of disclaiming as their argument continues.
- The mother's use of analogy on p.44: 'Maybe it's just like the movies' through to '...and only tell you news when I'm sure of it'.
- The use of bare assertion by Kiki on p.45: 'It wasn't at all scary'. Here she is making a straight statement of fact that she asserts in a way that she believes is unchallengeable.
- The mother's use of emotive language in 'That's to **protect** you. Maybe I need to **protect** you...' (p.44; notice, also, the use of repetition) or 'What's happening with Daddy is **real**. It's giving you **bad** dreams' (p.45). There are plenty more examples of this type of language spread across these few pages.

Students could then find other examples of spoken and written arguments and identify further persuasive techniques. When students write their own persuasive piece, they can try using some of the techniques they've learnt about. For more information on the grammar of persuasion and rhetoric, see Humphrey, S., Love, K.

and Droga, L. (2011). *Working Grammar: An Introduction for Secondary English Teachers*. Melbourne: Pearson. [ISBN 978-1-4425-3944-0]

Part B: *Against the Odds* has won three major awards: the Golden Owl Juvenile Literature Prize, the Golden Owl Young Reader's Prize and the Golden Slate Pencil. In groups and drawing on their own experience of reading the novel, students should discuss possible reasons the book has won so many awards. Do they think the awards are deserved? Why or why not? Then, students can write a literature blog arguing their point of view. Students should try to use some of the persuasive techniques they identified in Part A.

Alternatively, students might write on one of the following topics:

- The use of land mines should be banned.
- Children should be seen and not heard.
- Parents should always put their own children first.

Activity 15: Writing a narrative

Students can plan and write their own narrative with the title *Against the Odds*.

Activity 16: A Guide to Keeping Pets

The boy at the pet store offers Kiki advice on how to keep her mice (advice she intends to ignore). Imagine you work for a pet store. Write an illustrated guide to keeping a pet of your choice – mice, dog, guinea pig, cat, parrot.

Here are some examples:

- <http://www.bugshop.com.au/insectspets.html> [A reasonably informal version written by the owner of an on-line pet store.]
- <http://frogs.org.au/x/media/cs-caerulea.pdf> [a quite sophisticated guide that includes frequent technical language.]

Alternatively, students may like to produce a video guide to keeping pets. Here are a couple of examples:

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SrewJ982gdY>
- http://www.ehow.co.uk/video_4439372_things-consider-keeping-mice-pets.html [There is some advertising at the beginning of this one.]

Activity 17: Buying a pet role-play

In pairs, role-play the purchase of a pet. One student could be the customer and the other the pet shop store assistant. Alternatively, act out a role-play in which a customer complains about a pet they have bought. Use the role-play cards in Blackline Masters 2 & 3 to help you.

Extension: Before or after attempting the second role-play, view Monty Python's dead parrot sketch (see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vuW6tQ0218>).

SOCIAL SCIENCE

Activity 18: The issue of land mines

On p.95, the reader discovers that Kiki's father has been injured when a 'mine exploded' and his 'car drove over it.' Unfortunately, injury from landmines in war-

torn countries remains a serious problem – for soldiers and innocent civilians. Using the Internet, students can research the problem of land mine use around the world, what's being done to prevent further injuries and what's being done to help existing victims (many of whom become amputees like Kiki's father). Findings could be presented as a poster, brochure or self-looping PowerPoint presentation.

Here is a starting point: <http://www.icbl.org/intro.php>.

Activity 19: What is a hero?

On pp.54-55, Margie tells Kiki that she thinks her 'father is a hero...Because he goes off to help people. Even if it's dangerous.' Re-read this section and discuss Kiki's reaction: does she believe her father is a hero? Why or why not? Then, re-read the discussion about Kiki's father on pp.56-59: Oma believes he is 'too self-centred to be a hero'.

Using these excerpts as a starting point, students should discuss and try to define the qualities of a hero. They could also research people they regard as a hero and be prepared to justify their choice. One wall of the classroom could become the Wall of Honour where the students' ideas of heroes are displayed.

Extension: It seems that every time we open a newspaper or listen to the news, someone new is being labelled a 'hero'. While the term is applied to soldiers who have shown feats of bravery in war or to rescue workers who have performed astonishingly, it has also been applied to survivors of natural disasters or victims of serious health issues such as cancer. As a class, discuss whether we use the term 'hero' too loosely and whether or not it has lost its meaning. Students could debate the topic: The term 'hero' is overused in the media.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Activity 20: Seeking help

In *Against the Odds*, Kiki and her mother face a difficult time when their father and husband goes missing. What does the mother do to cope? What does Kiki do to cope? Are their coping mechanisms successful, particularly early on in the story? What else could they do?

As Kiki discovers in *Against the Odds*, sometimes parents can't help in times of trouble – perhaps because they are as worried and upset as you are. Who else could you turn to in a difficult situation – especially other trusted adults? Make a list of names and contact addresses. Who are the friends you could rely on for good advice?

Extension: As a friend, how does Margie try to help Kiki? Does she provide the sort of support and help that Kiki needs (re-read pp.81-84 for example). Visit the Beyond Blue teenagers' website (<http://www.youthbeyondblue.com/>) and find out how to help friends who might be in trouble. Make a poster or produce a podcast giving advice to children and teens on how to best help their friends.

MATHEMATICS

Activity: Calculating the odds

Re-read the discussion about odds and chance on pp.7-9. Discuss how 'the man who is afraid of everything made the odds smaller' and Kiki's father 'is making the odds bigger'. Then calculate (or discover through a web search) the odds of various events occurring, e.g. being hit by lightning, being stung by a bee, rolling a six on a die. Brainstorm ways that the odds in each case could be raised or lowered. Finally, discuss the positive and negative aspects of Kiki's plan to lower the odds of her father being hurt (see bottom of p.9).

OTHER RESOURCES

MORE ON MARJOLIJN HOF...

<http://www.marjolijnhof.nl/en/Home>

[This is Marjolijn Hof's official website. It includes a biography and lists other books by Hof. The site can be read in a number of different European languages.]

<http://marjolijnhofenglish.wordpress.com/>

[Marjolijn Hof's blog, including news and other bits and pieces about *Against the Odds*.]

FURTHER READING

So you don't want to read Twilight...Further Reading Recommendations

<http://thegreenapplecore.blogspot.com/2009/11/so-you-dont-want-to-read-twilight.html>

[This is a blog recommending books that young adult readers might enjoy – including *Against the Odds* – and not a vampire in sight! The recommendations target boys and girls.]

ABOUT THE WRITERS

MARJOLIJN HOF

Marjolijn always dreamed of being a writer. She wrote poetry and books for children for years in private but was never satisfied with her efforts. She became a librarian, specialising in children's literature, and finally, after 20 years in this profession, she took the plunge, resigned, and dedicated herself full-time to writing.

Against the Odds (Een kleine kans) was Marjolijn's first published novel and was met with high critical acclaim, winning three major Dutch and Flemish children's book prizes – the Golden Owl Juvenile Literature Prize, the Golden Owl Young Readers' Prize and the Golden Slate Pencil – and it has been translated into at least nine languages. She has gone on to write more books since.

Allen & Unwin are proud that this book is joining our small but special list of translated books, bringing the world's best children's literature to Australian readers.

LINDSAY WILLIAMS

Lindsay Williams taught in state and private schools for 25 years, teaches pre-service English teachers at the University of Queensland, has an educational consultancy business and is in the early stages of a Ph.D. through the University of New England. He has written the two-volume *English Teaching Survival Manual*, on-line resources for Screen Australia's digital learning site, the curriculum package for the ACTF's *Lockie Leonard* series, and teacher notes for other Allen and Unwin publications, Odo Hirsch's *Darius Bell and the Glitter Pool*, *Worldshaker* by Richard Harland, *Jameela* by Rukhsana Khan and *Yellowcake* by Margo Lanagan. Lindsay has been a member of a number of committees advising on state and national curriculum and is a past-Vice President of the English Teachers Association of Queensland (ETAQ) which presented him with The Peter Botsman Memorial Award for contributions to quality English education in Queensland. His website is www.englishteacherguru.com.

Three-level guide

Re-read page 113 (from 'One afternoon I was sitting next to my father's bed') to the bottom of page 115. Then, decide if each of the following statements is true or false. Be prepared to justify your choices by referring to specific lines in the novel.

Level 1: Right there in the text questions (literal)

Tick the statements that the author actually makes in the novel. The wording may be a little different.

- The father's leg ends a little way above his knee.
- Kiki thinks her father's amputated leg is revolting.
- While the father was away, his wife kept thinking about socks and underwear.
- Kiki's father does not want to become a man who is afraid of everything.
- Kiki's father tells her to count sheep if she is worried about anything.
- The father falls asleep and, so, Kiki pretends to be asleep.

Level 2: Reading between the lines (interpretive)

Tick the statements which can be supported by information in this extract from the novel.

- Kiki displays maturity in this scene of the novel; she appears to have grown up.
- Kiki's parents have underestimated her ability to cope and understand the world.
- Life was difficult for Kiki and her mother while her father was missing.
- Kiki's father is looking forward to a quiet life living with his wife and daughter now that he has only one leg.
- Kiki wants to escape her mother and Oma's bickering.
- Kiki's father is a bad parent.

Level 3: Real world connections (application)

After reading this section of the novel, and thinking about your own beliefs and values, with which of the following statements would you agree?

- Children should be seen and not heard.
- Family is more important than anything else and should come first.
- Men fight; women weep*.

*This traditional saying means that it is a man's job to go and fight wars (or fight for a cause etc), while women's role is to wait at home worrying and crying

Role play A

Option A: Buying a New Pet

Role 1: Pet shop store assistant

You are the shop assistant in a pet store. You are friendly and helpful.

- Greet the customer.
- Show them the options for pets.
- Discuss advantages and disadvantages of various pets.
- Close the sale.
- Offer advice on how to best treat the pet.
- Be prepared to respond to questions from the customer.

Role 2: Enthusiastic Customer

Be a customer genuinely interested in buying a pet.

- Talk with the shop assistant about various pet options.
- Listen to advantages and disadvantages of various pets.
- Ask questions.
- Make a decision about which pet you want.
- Purchase your pet.
- Seek advice about how to keep the pet.
- Thank the shop assistant for their time.

Role play B

Option B: Complaining about a Pet

Role 1: Unhappy Customer

You have bought a pet from the local pet store, but you are unhappy with it - perhaps it won't do tricks or talk like you were told it would. Maybe it has become sick shortly after buying it. Perhaps it bites people - or perhaps there is something much stranger about the animal you bought! Return to the pet shop (with the pet), try to return it and seek your money back.

- Greet the shop assistant.
- Explain your problem.
- Answer questions from the shop assistant.
- Describe what action you want taken, e.g. money back or new pet. Be firm.
- Respond to the shop assistant's attempts to avoid helping you.

Role 2: Unhelpful Shop Assistant

You work in a pet store and, when people complain, do everything you can to avoid helping them.

- Greet the customer with some disdain or disrespect.
- Pretend to listen to what they have to say.
- Ask questions that put the blame back on the customer, e.g. Did you not feed the dog for three days? Are you sure you fed it the right sort of meat?
- Make excuses for why you can't return their money or replace the pet.
- Try to get them out of the shop.
- In general, be as unhelpful as you can - while maintaining a facade of politeness.