

Teachers Notes (Secondary)
by T. Martin & A. McBride

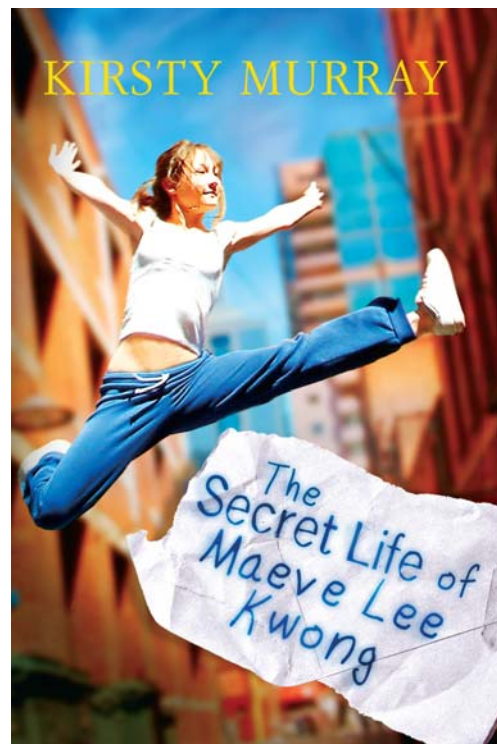
**The Secret Life of
Maeve Lee Kwong**
Kirsty Murray

ISBN 9781865087375

Recommended for ages 10 – 14+ yrs

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INTRODUCTION

Maeve's safe world is torn apart when her mother dies in a car crash. Sent to live with her strict Chinese grandparents, she fights to hold onto the things she loves most - her two best friends, her dancing and her baby brother Ned. Secretly she pins her hopes on her Irish father, who doesn't even know she exists. From Sydney to Surfers, from Hong Kong to Ireland, Maeve searches for a path to follow, a place to belong. This is a story about true friends, scattered family, and the life you make for yourself.

The Secret Life of Maeve Lee Kwong is an absorbing, textured story – a great recreational read as well as having strong themes for the classroom. It deals with a range of teen concerns, from friendship groups, boys and parties, to big issues like family, culture and belonging in contemporary Australia.

The Secret Life of Maeve Lee Kwong is a great stand-alone novel and is also the fourth and final book in the ***Children of the Wind*** quartet. The ***Children of the Wind*** quartet is made up of four inter-linked novels for 10- to 14-year-olds, dealing with the lives of three Irish/UK child immigrants to Australia and a modern Australian girl of mixed Chinese/Irish heritage.

<i>Bridie's Fire</i>	1848 - 1852	Published 2003
<i>Becoming Billy Dare</i>	1896 - 1899	Published 2004
<i>A Prayer for Blue Delaney</i>	1954 - 1956	Published 2005
<i>The Secret Life of Maeve Lee Kwong</i>	2003 - 2005	Published 2006

The central child character of each story becomes the adult mentor of the child in the succeeding book. The sweep of time covered, and the buffeting of the winds of change, allow Murray to take in and link numerous themes beyond that of the Irish contribution to Australia:

- The lost child/parent
- Poverty and survival
- Change and continuity
- The search for identity
- The child moulding her own destiny
- Australian theatre tradition
- Organised child migration schemes
- Servant life
- 'Belonging' in an immigrant nation
- Mixed heritage - choosing our identity
- Working children
- Immigration
- Refugees
- Families - natural and made
- Economic migration and the globalised workplace

Settings include: Colonial Melbourne (Toorak and turn of the century Fitzroy), Victorian gold fields, rural NSW, Fremantle, the deserts of Western Australia and South Australia, the Dingo Fence, the Northern Territory, the Melbourne Olympic Games, Ireland, Hong Kong.

THEMES

The most important aspects of *The Secret Life of Maeve Lee Kwong* centre on the learning experiences of the central protagonist, Maeve. While general themes such as change, crossing barriers and overcoming diversity are evident in the novel, five key messages or ideas that may engage students with the novel are listed below.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FRIENDSHIP

One of the most vital elements of Maeve's development is the changing importance of her friends. After her mother's death, Maeve's perspective on the role of her friends in her life rapidly changes.

Possible discussion questions:

- Highlight the moment when Maeve realises that her friends are vital in her changing life.
- Plot the changes in Maeve's friends' attitude towards school. How is this similar to your own experiences?
- Describe the roles of the different friendship groups in Maeve's life.
- Explain her mother's and grandparents' attitudes to Maeve's friends.

CHANGING RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS AND RELATIVES

The catalyst for change in Maeve's life is the tragic accident that leads Maeve towards her authoritarian grandparents. A closer study of sudden and shocking accidents could engage students with messages about generational expectations, differences between generations and the impact of multiculturalism on Australians. Further, the accident leads Maeve towards a change in attitude towards her memories of her mother and a stronger relationship with her grandparents.

- You are speaking to an audience of students who are studying the novel; describe Maeve's relationship with her mother. (Pages 11, 21, 23, 35, 47.) Make a list of the most important moments between mother and daughter. Consider physical gestures; her mother's attitude to Maeve's request to attend the party; her mother's traits and her thoughts about being a mother to a teenager.
- Discuss the major differences between Maeve's mother's attitudes and her grandparents' strict view of the world.
- What role do her grandparents play in Maeve's search for self?

MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR OPPORTUNITIES

Despite the tragic accident, Maeve always makes the most of her opportunities. The accident acts as a mechanism for Maeve to value her friendships more highly. Also, when faced with the sudden change of living with her grandparents, she comes to the conclusion that she can learn about her heritage and that she will gain more by acting in a positive way rather than defying the people who love her the most.

- In pairs, students should identify the moments Maeve makes the most of bad situations. Rank them in order of importance and share with other groups.
- Discuss with the students how they think they would react to such dramatic changes in their lives. Would they react like Maeve does?
- What role do Maeve's friends play in her positive outlook on life?
- Class debate/discussions: Some possible debate topics that may allow for students to examine the changes faced by the characters in the novel, but also changes they face in their own life. These topics may suit formal debates or informal discussion:
 - Changes are opportunities.
 - Change is always positive.
 - Problems are always opportunities.

BEING A TEENAGER

Essentially, we can all learn how tough life can be for teenagers by discussing the barriers, choices and decisions Maeve has to face in her life. The idea that being a teenager is not easy is a theme central to Murray's development of the character of Maeve. While the focal point of the car accident

can overshadow the other moments of pain, the break-ups and the continual balancing of school, home, and social life are vital parts of the novel.

- How does Maeve maintain her links with her friends after the car accident?
- Would you describe Maeve as a normal teenager? Students could be referred, for instance, to:
 - the opening chapter, when the girls are having a sleep over;
 - pp. 19-28, when Maeve and her mother are discussing the party invite;
 - Chapter 12, *Runestones*, when Steph and Maeve meet for coffee.
- When Maeve finds her father, how does she act? Could it be said that she acts like an average teenager?
- Describe Maeve's school in Sydney. Describe the similarities and differences with your school. How do these schools reflect different parts of society?
- What are Maeve's favourite social activities?

DEATH AND OTHER DISASTERS

The characters and settings help establish the novel's key messages, yet it is the death of her mother and other minor disasters that drive the plot of the novel. It is Maeve's continual search for her heritage that acts as a motivating factor in the development of students' responses to the novel.

- In your own words, describe two characters' reactions to the death of Maeve's mother.
- Describe the differences in Maeve's life before and after the accident.
- How do the characters handle minor disasters (such as failing a test at school, or breaking up with a boyfriend) after the accident?
- What is the effect of placing the accident so early in the novel? How does this help show Maeve's development into a young adult?

ENGLISH & DRAMA

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

Bold Prediction

Upon viewing the cover of the novel, students should be encouraged to make a prediction about the plot, characters and themes/ideas of the novel.

Key questions to guide the students' short prediction:

- What do the colours represent?
- What is the importance of the positioning of the human in the image?
- What is the effect of the font type and positioning?

Glossary and Spelling List:

This list can be used as a way into the techniques employed by the writer and for use in students' own extended writing tasks. The writing style of Kirsty Murray can be used as a model for students' own developing writing style.

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WORD	MEANING	COVER	WRITE
Simile			
Metaphor			
Personification			
Dialogue			
Imagery			
Plot			
Characterisation			
Antagonist			
Protagonist			

POST-READING ACTIVITIES

Annotation of passage

Students are to select their favourite passage from the novel and present a brief description of features of the passage and an explanation of why they selected this section.

Student reading from novel

Students select a passage from the novel to dramatically read to the class.

Production Company

In small groups, students combine to create a production company that begins to develop *The Secret Life of Maeve Lee Kwong* into a play. Students can choose to be actors, set designers, makeup artists, costume designers, directors or backstage crew.

Speech

It is the opening night of the play version of *The Secret Life of Maeve Lee Kwong*, and as directors, the students are preparing to present a motivational speech to the cast and crew. They are to write and present their final speech to the class. Teacher modelling and group discussion about the purpose and audience of the speech should occur prior to students drafting and writing the speech.

Character analysis

Finally, after dozens of auditions, the students have scored their first roles as actors! They are to select one of the characters from the novel and, in a piece of writing, explain how they would **play the part of this character** in a film or play version of the novel. In their response, they are to refer to their reading of this character's:

- personality and appearance;
- voice, movements, costume and makeup;
- relationships with other characters;

- role in the film or play – refer to a key scene;
- reception by an audience.

Appropriation of novel (play script)

In small groups, students are to appropriate a short section of the novel into a play script. Explicit teacher direction, concerning the features of play scripts, should occur. Students can practise and perform their play with opportunities for peer evaluation

Story board

The Secret Life of Maeve Lee Kwong has been targeted by the Australian Film Commission to be made into a film. Students are to compose a story board of the opening scene.

Film Pitch

As a result of the impressive story board, the Australian Film Commission has offered the students an interview to pitch their idea for the film, *The Secret Life of Maeve Lee Kwong*. This presentation can take any form, such as PowerPoint presentation or a short film. Students are to present advertising material, suggestions for filming locations and actors to play the lead roles.

Advertising Package

After the successful presentation, the groups have been awarded a marketing campaign for the film version of *The Secret Life of Maeve Lee Kwong*. In their packages, they must include various forms of advertisements for a range of mediums such as posters, newspapers, magazines, television, radio and internet. Part of the package is their description of their target audience for each advertisement.

Heart beat

In pairs, students are to plot the tension in the novel. Using the heart beat method (the higher the tension, the higher the students place the line) students can map their interpretation of the novel and visualise how a novelist creates tension to drive the narrative. For example, the novel opens with a mild to high situation at the sleep-over. In this instance, the heart beat may begin at a quite high level. Each of the key moments in the novel can be tracked via the drawn heart beat.

Character Passports

Students can demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of each of the main characters by creating brief character passports.

FURTHER READING AND COMPARATIVE STUDIES

Exploring themes

The novels below could be read in conjunction with *The Secret Life of Maeve Lee Kwong*. Each novel is followed by a suggested link between the two novels, for example, immigration or multicultural Australia.

Refugee – Diary of Ali Ismail by Alan Sunderland – Immigration, Multiculturalism

Does my head look big in this? By Randa Abdel-Fattah – Multiculturalism

Shadows of olive trees by Susanne Gervay – Immigration

So far from Skye by Judith O'Neill – Immigration

Sparring with shadows and *the Dons* by Archimede Fusillo – Multiculturalism, relationships with parents

Wolf on the fold by Judith Clarke – Multiculturalism, immigration, relationships with parents, being a teenager

48 Shades of Brown by Nick Earls – Changing relations with parents, being a teenager

Watching Jamie Joel by Mike Dumbleton- Being a teenager

Children of the Wind

Keen readers could read all four books in the Children of the Wind quartet: *Bridie's Fire*, *Becoming Billy Dare*, *A Prayer for Blue Delaney* and *The Secret Life of Maeve Lee Kwong*. They might like to construct a 'family tree' of the principal characters, as it is revealed over the course of the quartet. This would take in non-biological as well as biological relationships.

Historical fiction

Kirsty Murray has written:

I believe the dearth of Australian historical fiction for children compounds the problem of kids perceiving Australian history as essentially boring. For a nation of immigrants to gain a strong sense of identity we need narratives that we can relate to, set in landscapes with which we can identify.

It might be interesting to explore with your students their attitudes to historical fiction and to Australian history.

- How do they respond to Kirsty's comments, above?
- Which characters and events in the book do they believe were:
 - Real historical characters or events?
 - *Based on* documented historical characters or events? (and can they name them?)
 - Created from the author's imagination and general knowledge of history?
- If they enjoy history, what do they like about it?
- If they find Australian history boring, why do they think this is?
- Is it important for us to have a strong sense of Australian identity?
 - Why?
 - What role does history play in national identity? Think of positive and negative examples.
- What role does history play in our individual identities?

Despite Kirsty Murray's lament for the dearth of Australian historical fiction, it should be possible to find some in the school and local library for use in individual reading extension activities or in literature circles for groups or the whole class. Most libraries will subscribe to *The Source*, an on-line listing of books maintained by *Magpies*, the children's literature magazine - www.magpies.net.au , which can be searched by genre. Many Australian children's authors have written at least one historical novel set in Australia, including Allan Baillie, Errol Broome, Brian Caswell, Garry Disher, Ursula Dubosarsky, Kerry Greenwood, Sonya Hartnett, Peter D Jeans, Wendy Macdonald, David Martin, Sophie Masson, James Moloney, Robert Newton, Michael Noonan, Judith O'Neill, Jenny Pausacker, Beth Roberts, Bill Scott, Ivan Southall, Eleanor Spence, Colin Thiele, Alan Tucker, Ethel Turner, Nadia Wheatley and Dorothy Williams.

32-page picture books can be used to quickly identify the main characteristics of the genre, if necessary. Examine the following by Gary Crew, illustrated by two of Australia's top book illustrators:

- *Bright Star*. Illustrated by Anne Spudvilas. Kane/Miller Book Publishers, 1997 (set in 1871 Australia)
- *Pig on the Titanic: A True Story*. Illustrated by Bruce Whatley. HarperCollins, 2005 (set on the Titanic)

HUMANITIES

Research task and interview

"Australia has been a multicultural society for eons, how has this affected your community?"

Task One: Visual Text:

In this research task, students identify the cultures represented in our local community. This may be done using any visual text of their own selection. **Some suggestions include:** a map of their local area with flags, national dress, food or other cultural practises from other heritages represented in their community, a PowerPoint presentation, a collage or a brochure.

Task Two: Interview:

After their research of the local community, students interview a member of their community who comes from a different cultural background. Students are to compose 4-5 questions or discussion points that will allow them to gain knowledge and understanding of multiculturalism in their local community. **Some suggestions:** 'Describe the major differences between Australian now and when you first arrived.' 'Explain how you arrived in Australia.' 'Could you reflect upon your feelings about migration now?'

Web quests and related sites: This is a list to guide students and teachers who may want to research the history of the Chinese in Australia.

<http://www.truelocal.com.au/search> - Research an individual of Chinese heritage in Australia.

http://www.teachingheritage.nsw.edu.au/d_reshaping/images_meta1.html - Extensive background context in regards to migration to Australia and the notion of the Chinese sojourn to Australia with the hope of returning to China. Would provide teachers or students with some insight into the impact of migration, the influence of the Chinese in Australia and the challenges faced during the journey and when arriving in Australia.

<http://www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/chinese/> - Federal Government website

<http://www.chia.chinesemuseum.com.au/> - Excellent site with many images representing the changing face of Australia and the positive impact of Chinese on Australia.

<http://www.chaf.lib.latrobe.edu.au/education/history.htm> - A brief history of the Chinese in Australia. A good starting point for any research tasks.

ABOUT THE WRITERS

KIRSTY MURRAY

In addition to the four Children of the Wind novels, Kirsty Murray has written 3 junior fiction novels: *Zarconi's Magic Flying Fish* (Allen & Unwin, 1999), *Market Blues* (Allen & Unwin, 2001) and *Walking Home with Marie Claire* (Allen & Unwin, 2002) as well as several non-fiction titles. To find out more about the author, go to <http://www.allenandunwin.com/default.aspx?page=311&author=217> or visit her website at <http://www.kirstymurray.com/> .

Kirsty Murray says: "I hope to empower children with a sense of the significance of their own personal role in history ... I believe the dearth of Australian historical fiction for children compounds the problem of kids perceiving Australian history as essentially boring. For a nation of immigrants to gain a strong sense of identity we need narratives that we can relate to, set in landscapes with

which we can identify ...Stories that deal with the immigrant experience, with the struggle to adapt to a chaotic new world, are particularly relevant to contemporary children, living in a world of rapid change, a world where they will be obliged to reinvent themselves many times over."

TROY MARTIN

Troy Martin has been teaching for five years, previously in rural NSW, and currently at Callaghan College - Wallsend Campus. He spends his time watching sunsets, walking, listening to music, reading and writing. He lives on the central coast of NSW with his wife and two hyperactive dogs.

AMELIA McBRIDE

Amelia McBride is a Literature and Arts Management graduate and a keen writer. She lives in Geelong, Victoria, where she works with a number of community theatre companies as a director, stage manager, producer and actor. She has two dogs, two cats, and a passion for reading - particularly 19th century British fiction.