

DRIVING INTO THE SUN

MARCELLA POLAIN

ISBN (PB): 9781925591996

YEAR LEVEL: 11–12

ABOUT THE BOOK

Perth, Western Australia in the late 1960s was a place wrestling with its identity. Orla, her little sister Deebee and mother Henry find themselves at a loss when Dan, their father and husband, unexpectedly dies. Orla, who is just about to reach adolescence, struggles to find herself in a time when patriarchy determines the rules and women are cast adrift without a man in the house. In the heat of summer, Orla must navigate a path of death, loss, identity and coming of age while keeping one foot in the family home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Marcella Polain was born in Singapore and immigrated to Perth when she was two years old, with her Armenian mother and Irish father. She has a background in theatre and screen writing, and has lectured in the Writing program at Edith Cowan University. She was founding WA editor for the national poetry journal *Blue Dog*, has been poetry editor for *Westerly* and was inaugural editor for the WA journal *Indigo*. She has published essays on writing and completed her PhD at the University of Western Australia in 2006.

THEMES

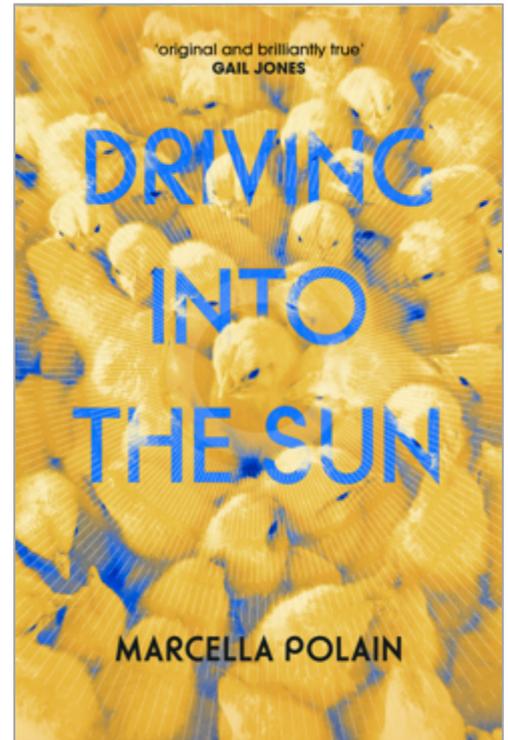
- Death
- Coming of age
- Identity
- Immigration
- Belonging
- Innocence
- Fear
- Patriarchy and family roles

AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

- English – focus on representations, language features, perspectives, voice and language patterns
- Literature – elements and forms that shape meaning, identity

USEFUL WEBSITES

- Interview with the author: www.sbs.com.au/yourlanguage/armenian/en/audiotrack/interview-marcella-polain
- In conversation with the author: westerlymag.com.au/vidya-rajani-in-conversation-with-marcella-polain/



CLASSROOM IDEAS

Discussion questions

1. Orla is the main voice in the novel, but sometimes the perspective shifts to Henry's. Discuss why the author includes this perspective and how it influences your response to Henry.
2. Orla appears to feel more at home at Cora's house next door. Discuss why she might feel distant from her own family, taking into consideration her family's migrant background in 1960s Perth.
3. After Dan dies, a man starts stalking Orla's family. Discuss what this male figure represents and the purpose of introducing this character. Why is Orla's family vulnerable after the death of Dan?
4. The main perspective explored in the novel is Orla's, so why does Polain choose to finish the novel from Deebee's perspective? What is the purpose of this shift?
5. Chapter 29 talks about the hierarchy of chickens. Examine the representation of the chickens and the family in relation to each other, taking into consideration that Henry's nickname is 'Hen'.
6. What purpose does Kit serve? Why has she been included in the novel and how does she relate to Orla and her family?
7. There are frequent references to a place called 'Iya'. What does this place represent to Kit, Henry and Dan?

Narrative Elements

1. The characterisation of Orla is important to the theme of coming of age in the novel. Examine the last sentence of chapter 1 and how this sets up the reader's expectation of Orla. Why does Orla refer to herself as 'bad' after her father dies? What does this mean in the context of the novel?
2. What is the importance of each of the following settings: the school, Cora's house, Dan's workplace, Orla's house, Mrs Thompson's house? Take into consideration the often contrasting ways these places are described.
3. Polain uses symbolism to develop the themes in the novel. What do the chickens symbolise? Why does Orla describe them as 'fragile as twig' (p. 20) and what does this fragility represent?
4. Unusual language features and sentence structure are used throughout the novel to develop the narrative voice. How does Polain employ these to construct her narrative voice? What effect do these techniques have on the reader's response to the characters and themes?
5. What is the climax of the novel? Can you identify any other key turning points in the novel?
6. The death of Dan, Orla's father, happens in chapter 1 and is repeated in subsequent chapters. What purpose does this repetition serve?

Creative Writing

1. Orla's father is writing about an Arab with a knife but Henry burns the writing before Orla can read it. Construct a chapter in which Orla finds the short story. Pay particular attention to the representation of this writing and how it relates to the relationship between Orla and her father.
2. Consider a moment in the novel and rewrite it from a different perspective. In the passage, carefully construct the narrative voice and ensure it is authentic to the new perspective.
3. The novel finishes from Deebee's perspective. Write a short chapter exploring what happens after the novel ends, paying particular attention to the change in narrative voice, where Deebee is left without Orla and how Henry might react upon her return.

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