

THE MIMOSA TREE

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THEMES: Independence, Friendship, Breast Cancer, Family, Tragedy

YEAR LEVEL: Y10, Y11, Y12

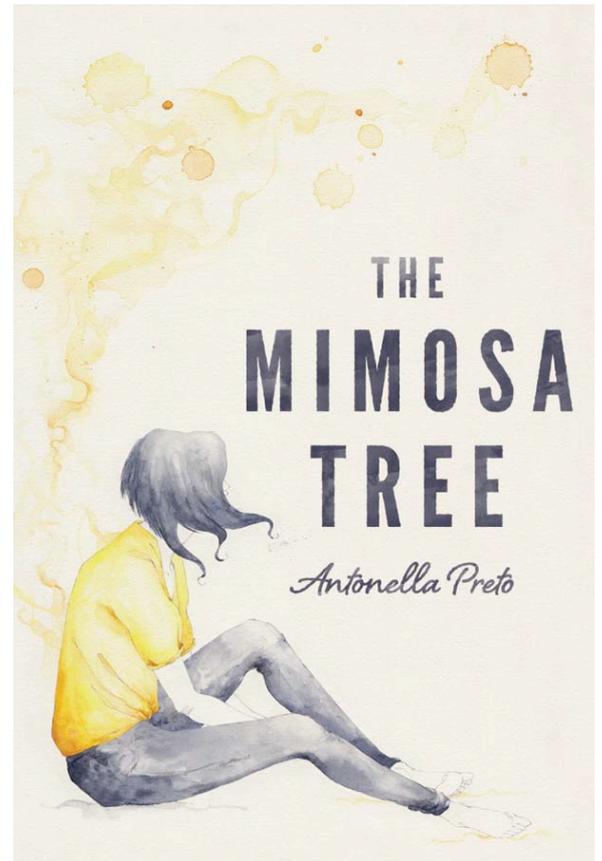
ABOUT THE BOOK

It's 1987 and Mira Verdi is just about to start university. Leaving her schoolgirl self behind, she gives herself a radical identity makeover. Gone are the green school uniforms and neat hair and in its place emerges a radically different Mira: ripped jeans, crazy haircut, Doc Martens and lots of black. Despite the freedom to be herself, Mira struggles to fit in at university. She is studying a course in which she has little interest, she lacks the confidence to make friends and obsessively worries whether the raging Cold War will spill over into actual nuclear catastrophe. Adding to the pressure is Mira's Aunt Via, a dominant force in their household, her negligible relationship with her beer-swilling father and her mother's recovery from cancer. The only one who seems to understand her is her Aunt Siena. Recently separated and stepping out on her own, Siena represents Mira's desire for independence, and resistance to the critical and domineering Aunt Via.

Mira's only friend is 'Princess' Felicia, the Celica-driving beauty whom Aunt Via has organised to take her to university each day. Despite Mira's initial refusal to accept that they have anything in common, Felicia persists in developing their relationship, until Mira overcomes her own prejudices and sees Felicia's depth. In art class, Mira meets Harm, an eye-liner wearing misfit like herself, who shares her love of alternative music. Importantly, he seems to have an interest in her that stems beyond just friendship. Life seems to be improving for Mira, and there are even signs that the Cold War is thawing.

Then the real bomb hits: Mira's mother's cancer returns, more aggressive than before. Via practically takes over the running of their house, and Mira's inability to share her fears sees her sabotage her friendships with both Felicia and Harm, leaving her more alone than ever before. When the unthinkable happens, and Mira's mother Sofia dies, the girl is sent spiralling into depression. In a fit of rage, Mira orders Via out of the house but this becomes the genesis of greater understanding, as Via opens up about her own mother's death, when Via was the same age as Mira. Realising her niece's need for independence, Via leaves but Mira's traditional father demands that Mira bring her back to care for them. Instead, Mira runs away, turning up at Harm's house, a condemned squat.

Eager for some respite from her life, Mira accepts an LSD 'trip' from Harm, an incident that coincides with the arrival of the demolition team and a massive storm. Amidst this maelstrom, Mira sees clearly for the first time, understanding that her mother will always be a part of her, that the future can be beautiful and the importance of her family and friends.



This is the story of a young woman coming of age, finding her own identity amidst the competing forces of family, expectation and individuality in an uncertain world. Readers share her journey as she comes to terms with her grief, and learns to appreciate her connections to family, friends and culture.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Antonella was born in Western Australia to Italian migrant parents. She has a Bachelor of Arts in English, with a major in Literature Language and Culture and a minor in Film and Television. Over the years she has worked on numerous film, music and writing projects, and while she has always sustained an interest in writing, *The Mimosa Tree* is her first completed novel. Professionally she has worked as a technical writer, trainer, graphic designer, gardener, 'check-out-chick' and most recently a counsellor and psycho-educator.

STUDY NOTES

A. Before Reading

Thinking about the book

1. What does a mimosa tree look like? What other name is it known by? Find out about its life cycle. Why do you think the name of an Australian native plant might be so significant to a story about a girl of Italian heritage? Later consider the depiction of the mimosa tree at the beginning of chapters 2 and 11 and what it comes to represent to Mira. This becomes especially poignant when Mira relates the mimosa tree to her mother on p270, p279 and p294. The life-cycle of the tree is explored on p280 as a metaphor for life, death and renewal. The tree becomes an important motif, appearing in Mira's hallucination and drawings, p252 and p371.

2. The novel's cover features a young girl, yet her face isn't shown. What do you think this might suggest? Is the fact that the cover has been rendered in watercolours significant? Later, return to this in light of Mira's struggle to find her identity.

3. Despite the fact that the blurb tells us Mira has an "all-black wardrobe", she is depicted here in yellow. What connotations does the colour yellow have? What impact does this have on our predictions for the novel?

4. What does the blurb reveal about the character of Mira? What was her school experience like? What concerns does she have?

5. How does the blurb create a sense of tension? What questions does it encourage the reader to ask? Why is it important for a novel's blurb to create tension and intrigue?

NB: This novel deals with sensitive issues such as the death of a parent, grief, depression and drug-taking. Teachers should consider the experiences of students within their classes and be prepared for those who might be distressed by these issues.

Understanding the context

Research the Cold War era.

6. What circumstances led to the Cold War? Why is it called the Cold War? Who was involved in this conflict?

7. What was Australia's relationship with the two superpowers: The USA and USSR?

8. How real was the threat of nuclear warfare? How were Australians being prepared for the threat of nuclear weapons being used?

9. What was the response of Australians to the Cold War? What was our official position as determined by the government? What about resistance and protest?

Research the history of Italian migration to Australia.

10. When was the major wave of Italian migration? What significant events prompted this migration? What was life like in Italy at this time?

11. What difficulties did migrants face once they reached Australia? How did migrant communities overcome these difficulties?

12. The children of migrants face particular difficulties growing up in a new culture. What problems might arise from being caught between two cultures?

Explore the dominant youth culture of 1980's Australia.

13. Find out what the clothing and music fashions were for mainstream teenagers.

Explore the alternative sub-culture scene of the era.

14. Explore the rise of the New Romantic and Goth movements. In particular, research alternative music from this era, such as The Sisters of Mercy, The Triffids, Joy Division, Bauhaus. The Smiths, The Cure etc. How can this subculture and its music be considered a response to the zeitgeist of the 80's?

Making predictions

15. Based on your thoughts so far, what kind of a character is Mira? What do you imagine her personality to be like? What problems does she face?

16. The blurb tells us something terrible is going to happen to Mira. What do you think it might be?

B. During Reading

Characters

17. Make notes on the protagonist, Mira. Look for evidence that describes her appearance, particularly in the first chapter. Consider why she radically changes her appearance, especially in light of her family's reaction. Is the fact that her hair hangs in front of her eyes symbolic? How does her outward appearance reflect her inner character?

Explore the relationships she has with her mother and two aunts. How do they differ? What does she admire in Siena and what frustrates her about Via? What can you learn about Mira here? Contrast these with her relationship with her father.

Note the way she interacts with others outside of her family, particularly when she first meets Felicia and Harm. What does this tell you about her?

Make a list of all the problems Mira is faced with. Is she a pessimistic character, or just a product of her context? Explain your reasoning.

Consider Mira's love of art, but her decision to become a teacher instead. What has shaped her decision-making?

Consider Mira's risk-taking behaviour; drinking, drug-taking, running away. What prompts such behaviour? Is this standard adolescent rebellion, or is there more going on?

18. Make notes on each of the main characters, looking at evidence of their personality evident in their speech, actions and interactions with others. In particular, consider the following points: Via seems domineering but after Sofia's death, Mira learns why her aunt is so controlling. What do we learn about her character?

In what ways does Siena challenge Via's values of family?

Mira initially stereotypes Felicia. In what ways does Felicia surprise her? Is she a true friend?

Harm has a difficult relationship with his family. Why do you think he calls himself Harm, instead of Hamish?

What does the way Harm acts and lives reveal about his personality, particularly in relation to his upbringing?

Narration & Point of view

19. Explore the effect of the first person point of view. How does this create an intimate connection to the narrator?

Is Mira a reliable narrator? How does her character 'colour' her interpretation of events? Find examples of Mira's misunderstandings of events.

What is the effect of 'hearing' Mira's thoughts, particularly in terms of her disparaging comments regarding others?

How 'authentic' is Mira's voice? What language choices have been used to create a consistent voice for her? How different might this story be if it were narrated in omniscient third person?

Style

20. Preto constructs beautifully descriptive passages, particularly of place. Look at examples of such description, for example of Harm's bower under the tree on p338, or Mira's own bedroom on p7. Examine these descriptions noting the use of sensory detail.

21. When Mira recounts her thoughts, for example when she drives to university with Felicia for the first time, Preto creates a strong sense of cynicism in her writing. Find examples of how this tone is created.

22. Dialogue is very important in this novel. Examine different characters' dialogue to identify how their personality becomes evident in how they speak.

23. Consider how Preto conveys Via and Sofia's second-language English.

24. What effects are created through writing in the present tense?

25. Find examples of when Preto uses non-standard English, for example, sentences that begin with a coordinating conjunction. When are these types of sentences used and for what effect?

26. There are a number of one-sentence paragraphs also. How do these add impact at key moments in the narrative?

Structure

27. Chart the events of the story on a plot graph, indicating the increase in tension over time.

28. How has the story been divided into sections? Compare the size of each section with how much time passes in it. What effects does this have on the pacing and tension of the novel?

Symbolism

29. A number of symbols and motifs are used effectively throughout the novel. Find instances of the occurrence of these symbols and consider their meaning:

The mimosa tree

The threat of Cold War and potential nuclear catastrophe

Mira's safety map, both its existence and then when it blows away

The maelstrom: the combination of storm, demolition of Harm's house and the imagined nuclear bomb

Food and its preparation

Themes

30. The struggle to define one's identity is a common theme in novels aimed at a teenage audience. What are the influences upon Mira's identity and sense of self?

31. The loss of a parent is a traumatic event and Mira finds it difficult to express her grief. Discuss the ways that Mira tries to cope with her mother's death. Via and Siena react differently; compare their responses to grief with Mira's.

32. Death is revealed as part of a cycle of life. How does the life-cycle of the mimosa tree represent this? What other suggestions are there that Sofia's legacy will live on?

33. The closeness of the women in Mira's family is significant. At times it is a comfort for Mira and at times it is overwhelming. Consider your own family and their impact on you. What about the males in Mira's family? How are they treated in the text?

34. A lot of importance is placed on food in Mira's family. Look for examples when food is being prepared in the novel. Is this only an Italian cultural tradition, or do other cultures place importance on food as a way of showing their love?

35. Images of resistance to authority recur throughout the novel: Mira's rejection of her childhood self, her objections to Aunt Via, her running away, Harm's rejection of his upbringing, counter-cultural music, the goth subculture and protest rallies. How important is it to stand up to authority? When is it appropriate?

C. After Reading

Discussion topic.

36. Coming of age can be a challenging time, even without the added trauma of death. Important aspects of coming of age are rites of passage, events and experiences that mark the passage from childhood to adulthood. What rites of passage does Mira face?

37. Mira's fears of the Cold War escalating into a nuclear assault are a metaphor for other fears. What do you think Mira's real fears are? Is the Cold War an effective backdrop for the events of this story?

38. Mira experiments with drug-taking and alcohol within the novel. When does she do so? What are the effects? Do you think the novel endorses this kind of behaviour?

39. Consider the representation of gender in this novel. Do you think the novel reinforces gender stereotypes? In what ways are gender stereotypes reinforced and in what ways are they challenged?

40. The climax of the novel involves a lot of destruction: of Harm's house, their grip on reality under the influence of LSD, the imagery of the storm and the nuclear explosion. Do you think that old ways of thought need to be destroyed before renewal or peace can be found?

41. Discuss your response to the text with others in your class, reflecting upon, extending, endorsing or refuting others' interpretations.

Writing tasks

42. Write paragraph answers to the following questions:

- a. Why does Mira change her appearance so radically?
- b. What is significant about the fact that Mira's bedroom remains unchanged from when she was a child?
- c. What is suggested by the fact that Mira instinctively understands how to season and, later, cook her own Italian food?
- d. Describe Mira's relationship with her aunts.
- e. Why is Mira initially resistant to Felicia's friendship?
- f. Why does Mira agree to become a teacher, instead of following her passion for art?
- g. What is represented by the setting of Harm's house, particularly as it gets destroyed?
- h. What are Mira's reasons for taking drugs?
- i. What is symbolised by Mira's nuclear safety map being blown away?
- j. What is significant about the fact that when Mira tries to draw the mushroom cloud of a nuclear explosion, she ends up drawing mimosa flowers?
- k. How does Mira regain a sense of closeness to her mother after her death?
- l. Explain the symbolism of the mimosa tree.

43. Harm's story is not fully explored within the text. Write an additional chapter for *The Mimosa Tree*, in which Harm explains to Mira how he transitioned from Hamish to Harm and came to be living in a condemned house. Alternatively, you might like to present this as a letter, or a monologue.

44. Write a poem using the mimosa tree as the central image. Use the symbolic meanings and associated emotions created within the novel as stimulus.

45. Pick another text that also explores the experiences of adolescents. Write an essay comparing the representation of the adolescent experience.

46. Mira's fear of nuclear war was very real during the time of the Cold War. In a journal or blog entry, write about a fear you have for the world today.

47. Write the eulogy that Mira might have delivered at her mother's funeral, where she explains how important her mother was and the lessons she learned from her.

48. Mira's own fear of being judged often leads her to pre-judge others, such as when she dismisses Felicia as a 'princess', or assumes Harm is dating Apocalypse. Write a story drawing on a time where you were misjudged, or where you misjudged others.

Other activities

49. Undertake some research into the signs and symptoms of depression. Create a brochure alerting teenagers to these signs and outlining the services available to help those in need.

50. Conduct a debate using one of the following topics: Experimenting with drugs is a normal part of growing up.

The threat of nuclear war is over.

Family is the most important influence in a person's life.

51. Music is extremely important to Mira and often provides her with comfort amidst the turmoil of her life. What songs are important to you? Make a list of the songs that would form the soundtrack of your life. Provide a brief explanation for each song's inclusion. Create a playlist to share with others. Alternatively, select the six most significant songs and create a digital presentation where you pair each song with an appropriate photograph. Present this to your class.

52. In the novel, Siena opens her own Italian restaurant. Research the food of a particular region in Italy, such as Tuscany or Calabria, and create a menu for Siena's restaurant.

Suggestions for addressing the Australian Curriculum

(These suggestions are based on the Year 10 content descriptions and elaborations.)

Language

Language variation and change

53. Examine the dialogue of Aunt Via, which Mira characterises as 'Ding-lish', to explore how the English language evolves, and its impact on other languages and vice-versa.

Language for interaction

54. Examine dialogue to explore how it works to include and exclude others. For example, Via often uses the first person plural, including Sofia, when really she is speaking on behalf of herself, eg p10-13 when discussing the party. Harm's father uses second person to create a sense of distance between himself and his son, eg p316.

55. Identify references to shared assumptions, particularly the value of family within Italian culture. For example, when it is revealed that Siena is returning home, p61-63.

56. Ask students to reflect on their own family traditions and values, and make comparisons to Mira's family.

Text structure and organisation

57. Discuss the use of dates as a structuring device.

58. Set students tasks that require the correct citation of textual evidence, such as formal paragraphs and analytical or discursive essays.

Expressing and developing ideas

59. Examine a passage for particular sentence structures, such as verbless phrases, being used for effect.

60. Examine the use of stylistic features that add emphasis, such as capitalisation or italics, eg p53, or that join words to create new meanings, such as hyphenation, eg p48 or p110.

61. Look for examples of coordinating conjunctions being used to begin sentences in order to add to their impact, eg p152, p155.

62. Examining the ordering of clauses in sentences to indicate emphasis, for example Mira's discussion of security on p160, "For them, the walls are solid." and "My walls are like flimsy curtains." to highlight the differences in perspective.

Literature

Literature and context

63. Consider Mira's disparaging representation of Ronald Reagan. Conduct research and justify her attitude.

64. Discuss the differences in the understanding of war held by Mira and her father, p206-207.

Responding to literature

65. Consider personal responses to the ideas within the text. Compare response between students.

66. Consider the representation of adolescence within the novel with that experienced by students.

67. Discuss the scenes and events that caused the most significant responses within students. Analyse the construction of these scenes to explore the ways in which language can position readers.

68. Debate the moral and ethical dilemmas in the text, such as Mira's drinking and drug-taking. Especially consider whether such behaviour is being endorsed or criticised. It is important to note that it is the LSD trip which ultimately (and ironically) returns Mira to clarity.

69. Explore the values of Italian culture as represented through the construction of Mira's family, such as family, food, defined gender roles, tradition etc.

Examining literature

70. Identify, explain and discuss a range of narrative elements, in both analysis of short passages and in relation to the novel as a whole. For example:

71. Explore the characterisation of Via in pp302-304, or Harm on pp314-317.

72. Explore the symbolism of the map on p355.

73. Explore the role of narrative viewpoint in positioning the reader.

74. Explore the construction of voice, and how this is created through the use of a variety of language structures and devices.

75. Discuss the authenticity of this voice as a representation of adolescence.

76. Compare the voice and its construction with other bildungsroman novels.

77. Compare the linear narrative structure of this novel with other texts that rely on a chronological structure, such as biography or memoir.

Creating literature

78. Have students write their own literary texts in response to the characters and ideas of this novel, using the creative writing tasks outlined earlier in these teachers' notes. Conduct peer reviews and self-reflections for students to evaluate the effectiveness of their writing.

79. Encourage students to experiment with language features, including diction, syntactic structures and imagery, to create their own sense of voice in their writing.

Literacy

Texts in context

80. View a documentary or other media texts that explores Italian migrant culture and compare it to the representation within the novel. If possible research the role of women in Italian culture and evaluate Mira's family in light of this.

81. Examine political cartoons of the Gorbachev/Reagan era and analyse their construction.

82. Research Australian media from the Cold War era and explore Australian attitudes towards the superpowers and the potential nuclear threat.

Interacting with others

83. Have students present oral presentations based on topics from the novel, such as:

84. Monologues from the perspective of particular characters.

85. Informational presentations on topics such as LSD, the Cold War or Gothic subculture.

86. Presentations outlined earlier in these teachers' notes on students' own soundtracks.

87. Have students evaluate others' presentations, noting effective use of oral language skills.

88. Analyse Mira's conversations with others, such as the scene when she meets Felicia's boyfriend p226 - p231, and explain why it was ineffective communication.

89. Conduct debates as per the suggested topics outlined earlier in these teachers' notes.

90. Encourage students to use appropriate multimodal elements, such as powerpoint presentations, to enhance their speaking.

91. Invite guest speakers, such as those from youth mental health services, grief counsellors or migrant Australians to speak with students.

Interpreting, analysing, evaluating

92. Explore the role of audience when considering the values and beliefs being promoted by the text. For example, consider the likely audience of a bildungsroman is the adolescent and consider the impact this might have on the way concepts such as family, fear of the future, sexual maturation, drug-taking and friendship are represented.

93. Consider the effect of the inclusion of so many 80's pop-culture references and whether the target audience is likely to appreciate them.

94. Set small reading activities to encourage students to practise a variety of reading strategies, for example:

95. Skimming through a page to find a relevant quote.

96. Focus questions to guide thorough reading.

97. Set comprehension tasks requiring the students to justify their response with appropriate evidence from the novel or their wider reading and viewing.

98. Set compare and contrast activities to encourage students to make connections between the novel and their wider reading and viewing.

Creating texts

1. Model appropriate planning and drafting strategies, including the use of computer software, for students to use in the creation of a range of imaginative, informative or persuasive texts.

2. Use the novel as stimulus for teaching a number of points of spelling and grammar in to improve students' ability to effectively proofread their own work.