

Ten Things I hate about Me by Randa Abdel-Fattah

Student worksheet: prepared by Tania Roxborough

Thinking about what you are reading:

1. After you have read the first three chapters, do the following:
 - a) Describe what you know/feel about 'Jamie' so far: ethnicity, religion, looks, likes, dislikes, fears, skills, etc
 - b) Describe 'Jamie's' relationship with Amy and Liz; the 'cool' boys; the 'ethnic' boys.
 - c) Describe 'Jamie's' family.
 - d) Look closely at page 8 and 9. What is it that 'Jamie' wants most?
 - e) What are the things preventing her from getting her wants.

2. Why do you think people bully others?

3. Find an example of bullying from the novel and discuss the situation in light of your opinion.

4. Look again at Hakim's comments on pages 75-77:
 - a) What is his object of desire (the thing he wants the most)?
 - b) What seems to be the obstacle (to him getting his object of desire)?
 - c) How do we, the readers, feel now about the parental restrictions 'Jamie' has to endure?

5. Re-read pages 104-105 where Amy and 'Jamie' are discussing Liz:
 - a) Briefly describe Amy's concerns.
 - b) "I can't stand people who change themselves just to fit in."
 - i) explain how and why this statement relates to 'Jamie's' situation
 - ii) What is 'Jamie's' agreement ("Yeah, I know.") ironic?

6. What are the advantages of communicating with someone via email? What are the disadvantages?

7. Describe 'Jamie's' relationship with 'John'.

8. Look closely at the conversation between Ahmed and 'Jamie' on pages 131-132:
 - a) Compare Ahmed and Jamie.
 - b) "The same prejudice and bigotry that silences me, vocalizes him. And even though my silence protects me, I'm the one walking with my head down."
 - i) Write the dictionary definitions of the underlined words.
 - ii) Explain what 'Jamie' means.
 - iii) Why is her head down?

9. Re-read page 142 from “then, again, this is high school...” to “...you’re a nerd.”
 - a) How accurate is this description?
 - b) Suggest an alternative (positive).
10. Re-read page 152 from “It’s a long struggle...” to “...he gained nothing.” In your own words, explain the message the teacher is trying to teach ‘Jamie’ (Jamilah).
11. List the advantages of being ‘an individual’; List the advantages of being ‘a conformist’.
12. Page 175, ‘Jamie’ says: “All I want is to fit and be accepted as an Aussie.” List the things which are stopping this from happening for her.
13. Page 204. “I’ve got so much protective padding strapped to myself that it’s suffocating my voice, my conscience, my personality.”
 - a) What has prompted her to say this?
 - b) What does she mean when she says this?
14. What things does Jamilah realise/learn about her father?
15. What is the author wanting us to understand from this relationship?
16. Page 228 “I’m beginning to realise that I want complications. I need them. Because without them, I’m a shadow in the playground. A whisper in the classroom. Barely here or there. I’m not living. I’m just surviving. Surviving a battle of my own making.”
 - a) Briefly describe ‘the battle of [her] own making’.
 - b) How different is she from the start of the novel?
17. A number of ‘problems’ are solved by the end of chapter 39. Identify three and explain how they are resolved.
18. “I was so busy hiding who I was from everyone, including myself, that I was completely unaware of anyone else.” Explain why you think this is an important quote from the novel and why it is a significant statement for ‘Jamie’ to say.
19. Discuss the significance of the *darabuka* as a symbol in the novel: it’s importance to Jamilah. In what way is it representative of Jamilah’s desire to be true to herself.

Filling in the background:

using the web, dictionary, the library, find out about the following:

- **Lebanese Culture:** list the similarities and differences to *your* culture; what are some stereotypes?
- **Arabic Language:** who speaks it; how old is it; where does it originate from? what are some stereotypes?
- **The Muslim Faith:** origins? Who can be a muslim? What are some key aspects of the faith? what are some stereotypes?
- **Immigration to Australia:** who? when? why? compare immigration trends to New Zealand.
- **Terrorism:** what is it? key terrorist attacks in the last decade; what are some stereotypes linked to terrorism?
- **Beach Riots in Sydney:** Read the article at this link:

<http://www.theage.com.au/news/editorial/sydneys-beach-riots-a-warning-for-all-australians/2005/12/12/1134236000266.html#>

(hard copy at the end of this worksheet)

Answer the following:

1. Briefly describe what happened on the weekend beach riots in Sydney.
2. What is the MAIN POINT the author of this article wishes to get across to the readers?
3. Do you agree with this stance? Explain your answer.
4. What did Prime Minister John Howard mean when he said the attacks “should be repudiated by all Australians, irrespective of their own background and their politics.”?
5. List the reasons offered by the writer for the riots?

Analysing the construction of the novel:

Characters:

- 1) Write a short essay describing a problem Jamilah struggles with, what she does to try to overcome this problem and what she learns in the process.
- 2) Chose one of the many issues Jamilah is struggling with. Write a letter of advice to her.
- 3) Imagine you are Amy. Write a diary entry for the day you visit Jamilah’s house. In the entry, describe what happens, your impressions of her family, what Jamilah told you, and what you felt about what she said.
- 4) Construct a Venn diagram exploring the similarities and differences of Ahmed, Timothy and Peter. Write a short paragraph analyzing your ‘findings’.

Theme:

Read the following extract from an interview

<http://abc.net.au/rollercoaster/therap/interviews/s1451590.htm>

(hard copy at the end of this worksheet)

or, listen to the following pod cast:

http://72.14.253.104/search?q=cache:EbMRgZ1KduwJ:home.vicnet.net.au/~artsaliv/guest_event/2006-pgm31-42.htm+randa%2BAbdel-Fattah+Ten%2Bthings%2BI%2Bhate%2Babout%2Bme+radio+interview&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=8&ql=nz

(Story No. 35)

The author and interviewer agree that *Ten Things I hate About Me* is about the crises of identity, in particular the struggle to be an individual amongst the masses.

Randa says that Jamilah is struggling to define herself: as a daughter in a single parent family, her religious and cultural heritage compared with her Australian heritage. In the end, though, it is a story of the journey to realizing that her identity is hybrid.

Using these key ideas (crises of identity, racism, the struggle to define yourself – or any others you’ve picked up from the novel), describe the events which highlight these themes and discuss what the author is wanting us to learn about the world we live in and the way people behave.

Opinion

A class of students giggled all the way through the reading of the novel. The topic is a serious one so what is it about *the way* Rand Abdel-Fattah writes which makes us laugh. List three things she does, give one example for each and then explain why it is funny.

Read the following review from The Otago Daily Times:

It’s good to have the perspectives of people who are different to us: gender, culture, religion. That’s why reading books is so cool. *Ten things I hate about me* by Randa Abdel-Fattah is a hilarious account of one young lady’s struggle with the idea of coming out to her peer group about her culture. 16 year old Jamie aka Jamilah Towfeek is an Arabic speaking Lebanese Muslim born and bred in Australia. So painfully aware of the xenophobic culture of her West Sydney school, Jamilah dyes her dark hair blonde, wears blue contacts and straightens her curly hair. Crunch time comes in a number of convincing pivotal points as the prospect of her Y10 (read, NZ Y11) formal looms, which her father has forbidden her to attend. This and that fact that Jamilah plays in a traditional Lebanese band which has been asked to provide the music for the school formal – much to the disgust of the outspoken ‘cool crowd’ at Guildford High – make for an exciting and satisfying climax. Deals with the themes of cultural clashes, father/daughter relationships and friendship. Memo to schools – get this as a class set.

Do you think this is an accurate review? Explain your answer.

Write your own review, with your audience being parents and teachers, explaining why you think this book is suitable as a book to be studied in schools.

Sydney's beach riots a warning for all Australians

December 13, 2005

THE word "un-Australian" has been much bandied about in the past 36 hours by politicians, police, radio shock jocks, talkback callers and sundry commentators seeking to explain the racially motivated riots in Sydney at the weekend. The term was probably first used by NSW Police Commissioner Ken Moroney to describe an extraordinary outbreak of violence in the southern suburb of Cronulla. A mob of 5000 people "demonstrated" at the beachside suburb on Sunday yelling racist chants, chasing and bashing people of Middle Eastern appearance at the beach. An ambulance crew and police were also targeted. Twenty-five people were injured. Two were stabbed in apparent revenge attacks.

The protests were an apparent attempt to "reclaim the beach". For and by whom and to what end remains unclear. Those who gathered included many carrying Australian flags and dressed in Australian shirts. The use of such patriotic symbols is interesting, but perhaps less significant than the alcohol-fuelled state of many of the participants. Chants of "Kill the Lebs" and "Get off our Beaches" gave way to that ubiquitous chorus reserved for the cerebrally challenged: "Aussie, Aussie, Aussie . . . Oi, Oi, Oi." Yesterday Prime Minister John Howard condemned the riot but refused to accept it was evidence of a racist nation, adding that the attacks "should be repudiated by all Australians, irrespective of their own background and their politics".

The reasons behind the events at the weekend reflect social, demographic and historical realities that distinguish Sydney from other large Australian cities, especially Melbourne. The beach culture that dominates the lives of those who live in the northern, eastern and southern beach suburbs immediately separates them from those who live in the sprawling western suburbs that run out into the foothills of the Blue Mountains. But, as writer Robert Drewe argued in *The Age* at the weekend, the coast has a powerful grip on the Australian psyche. He contends that the national ethos once rooted in the bush has moved to the seaboard. That may be so among the affluent middle class, but the reality for many lower-income urban dwellers is rather different.

Sydney trades on its image of beaches and harbour, but its demographic centre is deep inland at Parramatta - 24 kilometres west of the central business district. Within the western suburbs are communities that have become mono-ethnic silos in a manner that has simply not occurred in Melbourne. Cabramatta is actively promoted as "a day trip to Vietnam without the airfare or passport". Other suburbs have become synonymous with other ethnic communities. The beach culture purports to represent another ethnic silo: white, Anglo-Saxon, blonde, sometimes dubiously referred to as "real Australians". Yet this description is little more than a social construct, fostered - even nurtured - by conservative politicians and interests who have for decades challenged the legitimacy of

the quite different Australia that has emerged in recent decades. The unsympathetic approach to asylum seekers, and the rhetoric attached to that by the Howard Government, has added fuel to that fire.

The triggers for the rioting in Sydney are without doubt complex. There is an element of racism, which incidents such as Tampa and the rise of One Nation have demonstrated lurks just beneath the surface in Australia. There is an element of historical social intolerance, which commonly finds expression in the sobriquet "Westies" applied to anyone who lives past the suburb of Auburn. There are reactions to specific events, such as the ethnically linked gang rape trials in Sydney in recent years. There is the added complication of extreme right political groups inflaming racist sentiment and even an element of religious intolerance. And elements of the media have fanned the situation. It is a volatile mix that makes the events difficult for those outside Sydney to grasp.

This does not diminish the abhorrence Australians will feel over these events. There is no place for such behaviour in Australia; not because it is "un-Australian", simply because it is brutish, stupid and unconscionable.

Roller Coaster Interview with Randa Abdel-Fattah

How did you get into writing?

I've been writing stories since I was a kid. I love writing stories. Then getting into the serious writing was in Year Nine and *Looking for Alibrandi* had just been released and I thought "Wow, I am determined to write the Muslim version of this and I gave it a shot then and there.

I was maybe 14 or 15 years old. The problem was I didn't use humour in the book, so the publisher said it sounded too preachy. Then ten years later I tried it again and I thought I want to write a funny book about how it is to grow up as a Muslim and that's how *Does My Head Look Big In This?* got written.

What was the first thing you wrote?

I remember a lot of my stories from when I was younger. They were about me and my sister with me stealing her Barbie dolls.

What advice would you give to anyone who wants to write?

You should take notes whenever you hear interesting or original language. What I did was I wrote a lot of my book on the train to and from work. And because I'm so disorganised I rarely had pen or paper, so if I heard something or an idea came into my head then I put it in my mobile phone as a text message and save it in archives. Then when I got home I typed up all the notes in my archive folder and just keep them on the computer. When I would write I would look at them and something would jog my memory or inspire me. So, be an eavesdropper.

So what is *Does My Head Look Big In This?* about?

It's about a sixteen-year-old girl Australian-Muslim-Palestinian girl going to a private school in Melbourne and midway through the year she decides to wear the hijab which is the head scarf, so it's about the challenges she faces dealing with people judging her based on what she looks like on the outside.

It's also about a normal teenage girl growing up and all the challenges teenagers face: schoolgirl crushes, fashion senses, friendship issues. It's a book that can allow you to enter the world of the average Australian Muslim girl.

So much is this book based on your own experience?

A lot is inspired by events that happened in my own life, because I'm Australian-Egyptian-Palestinian, so I consider myself a hyphenated identity, so I've had to work out how the individual hyphens in my identity reconcile with one another and relate to one another.

I also wore the hijab when I was younger so I had people spitting at me or yelling out "Terrorist wog" or people yelling things at me from passing cars, so I used those experiences for Amal's character and how she deals with the prejudice out there. I also went to a Catholic primary school and then an Islamic college like Amal, so a lot of it is based on my life.

Amal goes and explores confession at one point – did you do that?

Yeah, that was based on something that happened to me. My best friend Monica was Hindu and we used to sit at the back of the church and not participate in the service. One day she was away and I wanted to try the holy bread. I was a bit of a chubber as a kid so I just wanted to taste the food.

I wanted to find out what the confession box was about, so I slipped into line for confession and the teacher didn't see me. When the priest asked me "What is your confession?" and I just clammed up, then whispered "I'm Muslim!" He told me five Hail Marys and five of the Lord's Prayer. He obviously hadn't heard me, because he was quite old and deaf.

You're a lawyer, a human right activist and even once ran for parliament – where do you find the time to write?

With my human rights advocacy that's always been through my writing. I've always tried to write articles and contribute to journals and a lot of online journals – about human rights, especially Palestinian human rights. I find the time to do things I'm passionate about, because I find enjoyment in them. I just have to juggle.

So where to next with your writing?

I'm currently writing my second book which is about an Australian-Muslim Lebanese girl growing up in Sydney and all the challenges she faces. What she does is actually hides her identity and at school she changes her name to from Camilla to Jamie, she peroxides her so people don't think she looks "lebo" or "woggy" as she calls it. It's all about how you can find yourself if you're true to yourself. It's quite funny. It's going to be a narrative in email session, so I'm going to have a lot of fun with a different form of writing!

How do you talk about heavy political things in books without getting boring?

I think it's by showing how Muslims are human beings like other people. Really the only way you can live with people treating you like a stereotype or people judging you is to have a sense of humour about it. The easiest way for readers to connect with characters and feel sympathy is to make the character entertaining, sympathetic and likeable.

I was inspired a lot by John Marsden's book *Everything I Know About Writing*, when he said always have a light touch with your characters. I'm dealing with really serious issues in the book, but the only way I'm going to connect with readers is if I makes it funny.

Do you think you have a big head?

[laughs] No, I'm trying to contain it. My husband would say I have a big head.

What's your favourite book and why?

It would have to be *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. I love it because it takes you into the world of romance and I've always had a crush on Mr Darcy. Of children's books I'd have to say *Matilda* by Roald Dahl, cause I love that his books are so wicked and cheeky.

Do you have any pets?

No, I've had dogs which have either run away or "gone to a farm". I had the experience of thinking that our dog actually went to a farm for years, but then I was told later by my parents that he was put down. His name was Toto. Then we had another dog who was named Toto in his

memory.

What's your favourite band?

I've always loved U2, they're one of my favourites.

Chips or Chocolate?

Chips, cause I love salt. Barbecue chips are my favourite.

If you had to be an amusement park ride what would you be and why?

I think I would be a rollercoaster, but I wouldn't be a pirate ship, because you know exactly what's going to happen with a pirate ship. I'm like a rollercoaster, because I can be very moody – I have my highs and lows.

What question would you like to ask Rollercoaster?

Have you ever spoken to a Muslim and have you ever been too scared to ask them questions?