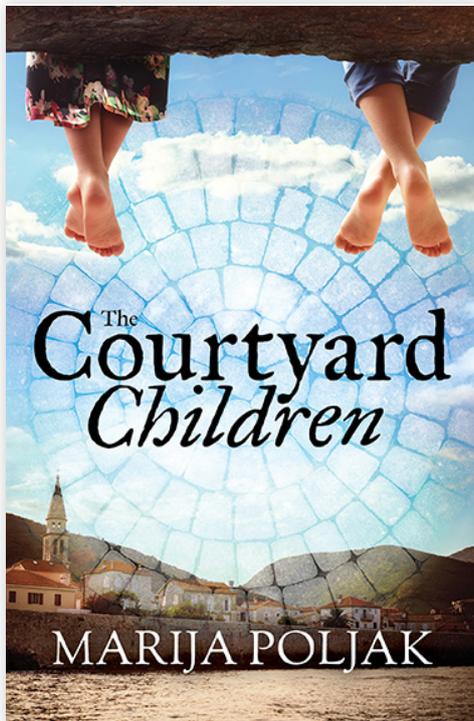




TEACHING NOTES



The Courtyard Children

Marija Poljak

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Reading Level: 15+ years

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Mileva Marinković was born into a family descended from resistance fighters and patriots, and bestowed with an identity formed on the values of brotherhood and unity. Marko Ivanić was born into a family where love is earned, not given, and was branded as a troublemaker and a lost cause.

Despite conflicting upbringings, the two develop a formidable friendship. As they grow older, their attraction transforms into a deep love. Yet as they approach the turn of the 1990s they find themselves facing the collapse of their country.

Forced into opposing directions, their separation changes both their lives forever, leading to a tragic event. As she struggles to make sense of her identity moving forward, Mileva attempts to salvage all that is left of the life and love she once had.

Themes

- Identity • Loss • Family
- Belonging • Coming of age

Discussion questions

Identity

Mara grows up feeling like she knows exactly who she is; right until she doesn't. As her country begins to change, so do the people around her, and Mara begins to doubt all she has ever known about herself. Through both peace and conflict, Mara is constantly on a journey of self-discovery. But does she ever truly find herself?

1. How much does your nationality, ethnicity or religion define who you are?
2. Do your family and friends shape you into the person you become?
3. How do you stay true to your identity when it comes under attack by others, or maybe when you're made to feel different?

Loss

Mara experiences many losses throughout the novel. From the passing of a good friend's parent, to the gut-wrenching deaths of family members lost to war, and ultimately to the tragic suicide of her best friend and first love; all of this pain is amplified by the loss of her hometown and country, forcing Mara into learning how to process her grief and move on.

1. Have you ever lost someone or something close to you? How did it make you feel?
2. How do we learn to maintain hope and deal with grief in a healthy way?
3. What are ways to look out for your loved ones and help them cope in times of difficulty?

Family

Family is central to Mara's life; she frequently speaks fondly of her parents and sister and maintains strong connections with other relatives. Mara's family serves as her greatest support, especially when they try to protect her from the surrounding conflict. Mara sometimes struggles with feelings of guilt because of this, but she learns that the love of family is stronger than anything.

1. Who are you closest to in your family, and why?
2. Mara seems to have a great relationship with her parents, yet Marko does not. Why do you think this is so?
3. Sometimes we feel like we might not 'fit in' with our family. Have you ever felt that way? Do you think you are a different person to your parent(s)?

Belonging

Growing up, Mara and her friends had a lot of things in common that held them together; school, sport and especially music. They would get together during summer holidays and feel completely comfortable in their hometown by the sea. This changes when the war starts, and some of them, including Mara, feel like they no longer belong.

1. Where do you feel like you belong the most? Could it be at home, at school, within a club, or just while doing something that you love?
2. How important is it to feel like you belong in your community? Why do you think some people might feel afraid or unwelcome in a certain place?
3. When Mara decides to leave her hometown, do you think Marko understands why she does it? We only ever get Mara's perspective, so how do you think Marko feels when she leaves?

Coming of age

Mara's story follows most of her childhood and into early adulthood. Particularly during her teenage years, she tries to figure out who she is and what she wants in life. When the war begins, it disrupts her life and leaves her feeling lost and hopeless. Mara struggles to make sense of her feelings towards Marko, her family and her country, all while trying to do what is best for herself.

1. Can you think of a time in your life where you changed as a person? Maybe you had to mature very quickly, or you changed your mind about someone or something?
2. Do you think there is too much pressure on young people to have their lives 'figured out'? Do you know what you want to do when you're older?
3. Out of all the characters in the text, who do you think is the most mature? Who do you think is the most interesting? Who is the least likeable, and why?

About the author

Marija Poljak teaches English and Women's Studies in an Adelaide high school. She has lived in Adelaide for most of her life, but previously lived in Sydney, Serbia and Croatia (Former Yugoslavia). Her family migrated to Australia as refugees when Marija was a child, but they have always remained very connected to their home country and their culture. Marija's work focuses heavily on her cultural background and questions surrounding identity and belonging.

In between writing and teaching, Marija spends most of her time with her partner and young son and daughter. Her interests include music (playing the drums), reading (everything), drinking coffee (daily and relentlessly) and playing soccer (whenever she gets the chance). Marija plans to continue writing more novels and looks forward to connecting with a wide range of readers.



Author's note

This novel is a work of fiction, but the historical events that transpired were real. The characters and personalities in this book, although fictional, are also inspired by real people, namely, my own family. The novel's protagonist is part of a generation closer to my parents in age than to me, but her observations and experiences draw largely from my own. The influence of my parents contributed to many of the anecdotes and relationships in the novel. I am forever grateful for the stories they've shared with me and the compassion they've instilled in me.

This story captures just one perspective of the many stories of Former Yugoslavia and is by no means the only representation of Former Yugoslavia.