



# TEACHER'S NOTES



## Unspoken Rules

By Lora Inak

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Reading Level: 15+ years

Seventeen-year-old Natalie has two lives.

At home, her life is governed by the unspoken rules of her Christian Orthodox background. At school, she is the Syrian girl who never goes to parties. She pretends she doesn't care, but deep down she just wants to be like everyone else.

Natalie wants to have the freedom to choose her own destiny ... to fall in love with the new boy without fear of repercussions.

*Unspoken Rules* is a fresh and inspiring story about family, first love, walking a cultural tightrope and freedom.

### Themes

- Multiculturalism • Belonging • Family • Cultural Heritage • Social Barriers
- Self-identity • Stereotyping • Tradition • Friendship • Love • Religion

## Discussion Questions & Classroom Activities:

1. In *Unspoken Rules*, the protagonist Natalie, is grappling with her personal identity and trying to discover where she belongs – whether she’s Syrian or Australian. Character construction is therefore very important.
  - Split students into small groups and allocate each group a couple of chapters. Ask students to look through those chapters and find places in the text where we see Natalie navigating that cultural tightrope between her two selves and where the major conflict points occur.
  - Then as a class, discuss culture clash and how it affects our individual identity and impacts our sense of belonging.
2. Throughout the book, we see that Natalie views the world differently from her parents, and even her sister. She disagrees with some of their fundamental values (e.g. with regards to a woman’s place).
  - Have you ever disagreed with your family about your fundamental beliefs?
  - If so, how do you deal with that? If not, how do you think you would do so?
3. People often show different parts of themselves in different situations, for example, Natalie shows only one side of herself to Chris, but hides her more cultural self. Ask students to think about how they present themselves to their family, school friends, teachers and others. Why do they present only parts of themselves to friends versus family, and are any of those “selves” any less genuine than the others?
4. How would *Unspoken Rules* differ if it were written from an alternative perspective – for example, from Misha’s point of view or from Chris’s point of view? How important is the narrative’s viewpoint in communicating the major themes?
5. Mr Nelson asks Natalie’s class to consider the stereotypes that exist in society about people from different cultures and about Australians.
  - Ask your class to do the same and discuss why these stereotypes are there.
  - Discuss the ways in which these stereotypes are flawed/true.
  - Have you ever perceived someone through the lens of a stereotype and then realised you were wrong?
6. Natalie’s father says, “without community, we are like sheep without a flock.” Consider this statement. Do you think people gravitate towards individuals that are similar to them in their beliefs and values? What are the benefits and dangers of doing so? What are the benefits of being a part of a community?
7. Natalie is unhappy about the double standards in her community, yet she judges Katelyn for having sex before marriage, in the same way that the girls in her community judge her for having different values/dreams/priorities to them. Do you think the way we are brought up impacts our deeper belief systems, and if so, as we mature and learn about the world, can our long held beliefs and values change?
8. The “night” and “darkness” come up throughout the book as times and places in which Natalie processes her emotional turmoil. Ask students to consider the significance of this symbolism, and other symbolic devices used in the story, such as Natalie’s school bag and her Atlas. What do these items represent?

9. Natalie's mother is clearly frustrated with the limitations of her life and wishes to study and work. Why do you think Natalie's father is against this? Do you think that his ideas of a woman's place should exist in Australian culture today?
10. Azeem is judged and ridiculed by some of the girls for being disabled.
  - What prejudices exist in our community about people with disabilities?
  - How do you think this stigma can be removed/changed?
11. Natalie is concerned that she is "leading Chris on" because, despite wanting to be independent, she feels like her life has been predetermined. She is expected to grow up, get married to someone from the community and have children. Ask students to consider:
  - How much is our future shaped by our family and their values?
  - How much is our life influenced by our family's expectations?
  - How much is shaped by our friends, teachers, employers? Compare the differences.
12. At the party, some of Chris's friends snap photos of him and Natalie kissing and post them on Facebook. Natalie is worried about the photos being seen by people in her community. Ask students to consider the following questions:
  - With the onset and prevalence of social media platforms such as Facebook, SnapChat etc, does privacy still truly exist (and if so, to what extent)?
  - Have you ever posted a photo of someone without his or her consent – or had it done to you? What action should be taken against those who breach this trust?
13. After an altercation, Natalie's father hits his wife. What barriers (social/financial/cultural) exist which make it hard for people to leave abusive or unhealthy relationships? Do you think Baba's eventual apology is enough? Is it possible to forgive such an act?
14. Natalie has to balance two lives—her Syrian and Australian identities. Do you think many Australian teenagers walk this cultural tightrope too? What does culture mean and what does it encompass?
15. Do you think Australia is overall embracing of other cultural identities? Explain by using evidence from current affairs. Students can look up ABC or SBS news online websites.
16. Discuss the way the author has foreshadowed some of the plot arcs in the story? Misha's illness, Baba's background, Mama's addiction.
17. Discuss the difference between Natalie's approach to her family's traditions and expectations versus that of Misha. Is one girl's views more right than the other?
18. Is religion a part of culture or culture a part of religion. Discuss.

## About the Author

Lora began her writing journey aged ten - with a short story featuring an evil eyeball named Optic. Not her finest work but fortunately she kept on writing (Mills and Boon style short stories in her teens).

Lora is married with a son, a daughter, a rescue dog called Chloe and a possum that won't go away (Chloe and the possum are often at war). She lives in the burbs of Melbourne, has a full time corporate job in Marketing, a passion for food, Harry Potter, Anne of Green Gables, coloured pencils, books books and more books, and an obsession with neatness (which is hard to come by with two kids, a dog, and a possum).



## Questions For Lora

### 1. What do you mean by 'the cultural tightrope'?

By the term 'Cultural Tightrope' I mean: The act of balancing between the culture you're born into, and the culture of the place or country in which you live.

Like the traditional circus tightrope we all know, the cultural tightrope can be precarious as it swings and bounces over the journey of the walker. For us first, second, and even third-generation Australians, we sometimes find ourselves on an oscillating tightrope, unsure of where we fit. Are we real Australians? We weren't born here! Or, if we were, we don't look like the typical Aussie in TV commercials. Inevitably, we look for cues about what is culturally acceptable should we choose to define ourselves as an Australian, and too often change ourselves to blend in, to balance, rejecting the culture of our forefathers. Alternatively, we deep dive into it, immersing ourselves in the safety of where we know we definitely belong.

As I get older, it increasingly dawns on me just how much the culture within us, and the culture without, affects every part of how we exist. And with this awareness, comes the realisation of just how important it is to understand, accept, and be proud of it. Not only is culture a wide and frameless being, it is also complex in its constant evolution and fusion. So, it's no surprise that balancing that tightrope can be tough

### 2. Natalie has to balance two lives—her Syrian and Australian identities. Do you think many Australian teenagers walk this cultural tightrope too? Is it tricky to balance?

The ABS tells us that around 30 per cent of Australians are born overseas. This figure covers the entire population and within it, a wide age range so yes, I definitely believe many Australian teenagers find themselves on that precarious cultural tightrope, but so do a great many adults. What I think varies is the type of tightrope we walk.

As a teenager we want so much to fit in, but simultaneously, stand out as an individual – so the balance is more about what we wear, how we speak, our social activities etc. As an adult, the balance changes focus to how we parent, how we behave in our working life, what language we speak at home – do we encourage our kids to assimilate or adopt their cultural heritage. Of course, it's not the same for everyone and I've made some generalisations but for some, that balance can be pretty tricky.

### 3. You're a Turkish-born Australian. Did you have similar experiences to Natalie when you were growing up?

I did. My parents were loving, but also strict and overly protective so I missed out on school camps and mixed sex parties. Sleepovers at friends' houses were a definite no, as was dating boys. I was in constant terror of being caught walking home with male school mates – but in hindsight, some of it was in my head, and as I grew older, I found my parents weren't as strict and unreasonable as I'd thought. In fact, when I finally introduced them to my now husband, they were really warm and welcoming, despite him being an Aussie .