

## **Notes for THAT STRANGER NEXT DOOR**

*Here is some information that can be used to extend knowledge, explore research skills and give readers the opportunity to express their ideas.*

### ***From the present Australian Modern History Curriculum:***

“This section is designed to allow secondary students to study the forces that have shaped today’s world and provide them with a broader and deeper comprehension of the world in which they live. The focus is on the 20th century...”

### **RATIONALE:**

The concept behind That Stranger Next Door is to present history in an accessible and interesting format. One way to do this was to imagine what life might have been like at a particularly interesting time in Australian history.

### **RESOURCES AND PREPARATION.**

In a fiction based on history, the trend is that it

- starts with the premise ‘what if you were there at the time’
- describes a society which is based on fact
- is set in the past
- has total internal logic

### **Synopsis:**

In 1954, Melbourne is still reeling from WWII, the Cold War sees suspicions running high and the threat of communism and spies are imagined in every shadow.

Jewish schoolgirl, Ruth, is trying to navigate her own path, despite her strict upbringing and the past that haunts her family. A path that she wishes could include her first love, Patrick, but the rich, Catholic boy is strictly off limits.

When a mysterious woman moves in next door in the dead of night, Ruth becomes convinced that she is none other than Eva or Evdokia Petrov, a Soviet spy and wife of famous Russian defector, Vladimir Petrov.

Could the woman that Ruth starts an unlikely friendship with really be the most sought after woman in Australia? Will Ruth’s own clandestine meetings be discovered? How does the Petrov Affair, as it became known, impact the life of one ordinary girl and her family?

### **More detail:**

**Clever** Ruth, her Jewish mother, father, 4YO brother Leon and her grandfather (Zeida) live above the family milk-bar in Melbourne’s Elwood. Ruth is a scholarship student at St.

Margaret's Girls' College. Because Ruth's father once belonged to the Communist Party, the family fear that Prime Minister Menzies will use the 'Petrov Affair' to bring in anti-Communist legislation that will harm bring on another wave of anti-Semitism and thus harm the Cohen family.

When Vladimir Petrov arranges to stay in Australia, his wife Eva is forced by the KGB onto a plane leaving Darwin that will return her to Russia. As a nationwide outcry takes place, ASIO hides Evdokia in a 'safe house'. Thus when the next door flat to the Cohens is rented to a mysterious Russian called 'Eva' Ruth decides this 'Eva' must be Evdokia Petrov.

The story opens with Eva moving in to the next door flat and Ruth meeting Catholic Patrick Sean O'Sullivan. (Patrick's father is about to work for Bob Santamaria and the emerging DLP party). In spite of his father insisting that he study law, Patrick is determined to become an artist. Patrick offers to teach Ruth to ride a bike at a time when some Jewish girls were actively discouraged from riding bikes, *never* allowed to mix with gentile boys, and kept sexually ignorant. Eva agrees to provide Ruth with an alibi for meeting Patrick, but only with the proviso that her presence also be kept secret. As Ruth rails against her mother's insistence of 'how a good Jewish daughter should behave', she is fascinated by Patrick's totally different background, though his mood changes upset her, and she actively dislikes his father.

The youngsters' rebellions lead to Ruth's deceptions becoming known, Patrick leaving for Canberra and Ruth discovering Eva's true identity. Between Ruth's account of her first love, Eva fills in her own sad story of a misplaced refugee. All this takes place during the height of the Cold War when the world seemed to be on the knife edge of nuclear annihilation.

### **Historical background:**

#### **Australia in the 1950's**

The fifties are usually remembered as a barren, conservative decade. Most often recalled as the conservative time of Prime Minister Menzies, the Queen's visit in pearls, England as Home, the Korean War, migrants arriving and being shunted into camps, the Snowy Mountain Scheme, the nuclear family, six o'clock closing and the resultant swill, housewifery for women and the coming of television. Also significant was the Communist Referendum, the split in the Labour Party into ALP and DLP, and the infamous Petrov Affair.

## **World Politics:**

1954 was the height of the 'Cold War' between Communist countries and the West. In the US, Senator McCarthy was using anti-communist laws to force academics, film producers, movie stars and writers to a senate hearing to ask if they ever belonged to the Communist Party and to name anyone who had gone to their meetings. As a result, many writers, film directors and academics, lost jobs, family and some committed suicide.

When a Russian diplomat Vladimir Petrov defected to Australia, in return promising to provide information about a Russian spy-ring, as his wife Evdokia was pulled onto a plane by the KGB, she was rescued at the last minute by ASIO and hidden in a 'safe house'. PM Menzies tried to bring in similar legislation to the US but was unsuccessful. Yet the 'Petrov Affair' was used by the Liberal/Country Party Coalition to stay in power and split the labour party in two. History can repeat itself. Those 1950's 'anti-communist' events can be translated into the 'children overboard' incident when John Howard used this incident to win back his position as prime minister.

Here are some useful articles about the Petrov Affair:

<http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/law-order/the-1954-petrov-affair-sparked-a-huge-public-scandal-in-australia-as-russian-spy-defects/story-fnat7jnn-1226475982853#>

<http://moadoph.gov.au/exhibitions/online/petrov/webquest-evatt.html>

see <http://textpublishing.com.au/books-and-authors/book/the-petrov-affair/> for Professor Robert Manne's definitive book on this topic.

## **RESEARCH:**

1. Any newspapers of the time. Some may be found on the Internet. Others can be read in public libraries.
2. Discuss possible multiple meanings of the word STRANGER.
3. Research post war restrictions on young women's activities
4. Find 1950's attitudes towards socialists and communists.
5. Explain what was meant by THE COLD WAR
6. Explore different beliefs between Roman Catholics and Protestants.
7. Research the McCarthy Senate investigations in the United States
8. Look up Prime Minister Menzies and his Coalition Government.
9. Research the breakup of the ALP and the creation of the DLP.

10. Look up Australia's post war openings up for migrants.
11. Look up fears of a nuclear catastrophe and stockpiling of weapons.
12. Australian cuisine and housekeeping in the mid fifties. Has it changed?

### **TALKING POINTS:**

#### **Imagine that it is a decade after World War 2.**

- Describe urban Australia in 1954. What differences can you see between then and now
- Much of Europe and Japan still had to be rebuilt.
- Mao Tse Tung was in charge of China
- Asia was perceived as 'the yellow peril'.
- Asians were still not welcome in Australia
- Britain was still viewed by many Australians as 'home'.
- Europe was still perceived as our cultural hub.
- Many of our artists, writers and intellectuals travelled to England and the USA to further their careers.
- Anyone who had ever joined the Communist Party before and during the war or joined a University Labour Club was refused entry to the United States.
- Who wrote "The Lucky Country" about Australia? Do you think it still is?

### **DISCUSS:**

To any visitor from 1954, 21<sup>ST</sup> Century Australia would be almost unrecognisable.

### **DEBATE:**

- Young adults are no longer sexually ignorant.
- No longer do we have to hide our differing religious beliefs
- Young girls are no longer carefully supervised.
- We are no longer as afraid of a nuclear war. Or are we?

### **ACTIVITIES:**

- Mock up an interview with Ruth with you as the interviewer.
- Then change roles.
- Do the same for Patrick.
- Illustrate a cover for this story.
- You are a TV producer who has just bought the rights to this novel. Your budget only allows for three settings. What are they?

### **WRITING EXERCISES:**

- Research and write a non-fiction piece called THE COLD WAR.
- Imagine an interview with Evdokia Petrov.
- Choose a second cover for this story.
- Find another title.
- Write a letter arguing for more freedom between different religions and political beliefs.

### **What led me to write this story:**

Though many books have been written by the children of Holocaust survivors, I don't think anything has come out about the after effects of the Holocaust on those Jews who were here well before WW2 and their children, though repercussions have echoed through the decades. This is my fictional account of what it was like to be a Jewish girl living in Melbourne, Australia in the mid 1950's. I should add that this story is fiction and not autobiographical.