

## Teacher Notes: *Flora's War* By Pamela Rushby

**Synopsis:** *Flora's War* engages the reader within both a factual and fictional setting. Based around the traumatic occurrences of World War 1, the narrative follows events, experiences and emotions of 16-year-old Australian, Flora Wentworth. Flora is revisiting Cairo with her archaeologist father. Her encounter with soldiers based in Cairo takes Flora and her best friend Gwen, into a whirl of support for troops before they leave for Gallipoli.

Later, she watches with growing alarm as first a trickle and then a flood of wounded soldiers are shipped into the city from Gallipoli. She is soon volunteering to transport injured soldiers and helping out exhausted nurses.

As Flora battles to save lives and find her own, a tragic misunderstanding changes everything.

A short romance with her best friend's brother, Frank, develops emotions she has not felt before. Flora is confused when Frank does not continue with his perceived love interest. Another meeting with a soldier, Jay, develops into a one-sided romance. Flora does not return Jay's overwhelming affections. Before leaving for Gallipoli, he leaves Flora a faded group photograph and continues to pursue her in his letters from Gallipoli.

When Jay returns to Cairo, he is hospitalised in the ward for mentally exhausted soldiers. The tragedy unfolds when Flora has mistakenly identified another soldier as Jay from the old photograph.

As a result, she fails to recognise Jay when visiting his hospital ward. Jay is so traumatised that Flora cannot identify him during her visit, he commits suicide.

This horrific event challenges Flora and how she really feels about having romantic relationships. Despite an opportunity to go away to America and be with Frank, Flora, showing a maturity beyond her [now] 17 years, remains true to her roots and decides to continue in her father's world of archaeology.

### **Preliminary Ideas and Activities**

Select ideas/activities from the following information before introducing the text. *Flora's War* presents students with unfamiliar periods of time, events and locations. This will assist in setting the scene for the novel.

**Prior to reading the novel –**

- Collect images of 1900s clothing fashions from Australia as well as photographs showing nurses, soldiers and general war scenes from Gallipoli in WW1. These are easily downloaded from the internet and put into a slideshow. Check with your local RSL for materials. See later *Resources Section* for details. This will allow students to understand, at least visually, life in the early 1900s.
- Societal norms – Discuss the general role of women in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Although women were taking a more prominent role in society, women of some wealth lived in a similar fashion to the upper classes in Britain.

Generally their role was still seen to be in the home, performing domestic duties and raising children.

Our links with overseas nations was limited: our exports were mainly agricultural. Communications were in their infancy – delayed telegraph news, mail and supplies delivered by ships.

- Fascination with Egyptology – during the period from the late 1870s, exploration of the magnificent structures in Egypt continued at a frantic pace. Many archaeologists sort fame and fortune from these discoveries, some achieved grand appointments through their discoveries (eg Tutankhamen's tomb). Some archaeologists shipped their finds back to England and Europe without any thought of their historical/religious value to the Egyptians. Poor communities gained work at the dig sites whilst others took advantage of visitors by selling off dubious finds. Egyptian designs and ideas spread throughout wealthy society creating a new business for many to advance or exploit.

Use the websites listed below or resources from libraries to explain this fascination by society. Students can discuss issues surrounding the nature of these phenomena as an activity listed in the section *Discussion and Debate*.

- Australia's geographic 'isolation' – use an atlas to point out the distances ships had to take to travel to Australia from Britain. Ask students to suggest what the general population would need to import during these times. Ask: How did newspapers derive their news, what was contained in newspapers, magazines during this period?

Discuss how educators followed British curriculums as little was published about Australia's past. Many of Australia's organisations followed the traditions established within Britain. Find examples using the resources suggested below.

\*A sense of what it meant to be an *Australian* is contained within this novel.

**Presenting and Reading *Flora's War***

- Ask students to describe the book's cover – who would the figure represent? Where is she looking? What is in the background?

Why has the illustrator selected a muted colour?

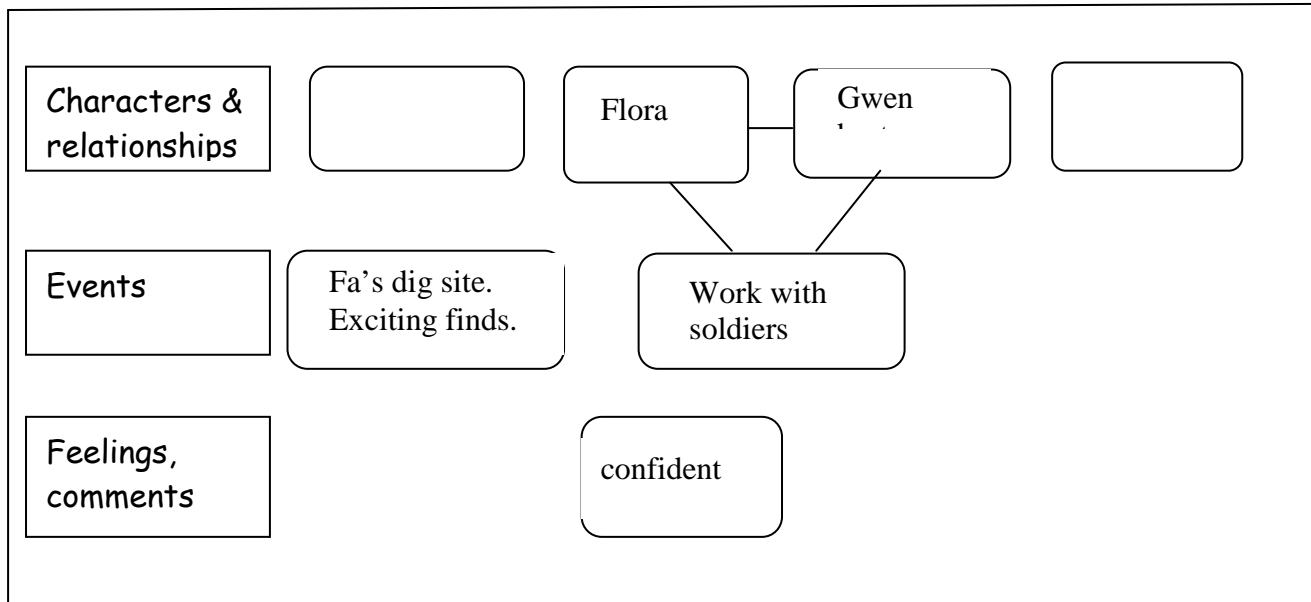
- Read the blurb . . . this will focus students' attention on the time in which the book is set as well as introduce Flora. Discuss what the novel may include and what is the "war"? Does it relate to Flora? How? Record students' predictions.
- Read from page 1 to the middle of page 3 ending with "*It's only afterwards, when the train is empty, that I can cry*".
- Ask students to comment about the introduction of the novel. What has it told you about Flora's character, eg, her feelings, her tasks? Are there any other characters introduced? What do you think Flora is describing?
- NB: As this novel is written from Flora's point-of-view it is fair to comment that by writing in this style Pamela Rushby provides the kind of voice that lends authenticity to a story. Students might comment about the style of writing later as they read on.
- Continue reading page 2 – the time changes from 1915 to an introduction of Flora's arrival in Cairo. Ask students how effective this "leap" back in time means to them as a reader.
- Read on as Flora describes herself: *This season, I was sixteen years old. A very significant age. I'd be officially grown up.* Ask students: why did Flora think 16 was a significant age and what did she mean about being "officially" grown-up?
- The novel progresses introducing new characters, as well as two significant storylines – that of Flora as an assistant for her father's dig site and the other the introduction of war preparations and eventually the outcome of that war. It is important for students to keep evidence of these storylines as they also reflect Flora's development.

Using a graphic organiser, as shown here, support students' understandings about the novel and build a resource for later activities.

The organiser below is one example where students can record information. It charts the flow of the story and the inter-relationships of characters and events.

Students can design their own organiser as they read – they may decide to have separate flow charts for characters, events or a timeline, etc.

NB: Insert graphic organiser similar to this: characters, places and events can be included



## Character Development

Identify major characters then write comments to answer the following questions:

Flora –

- How did she feel about the clothing and advice her Aunt provided in the context of her time in Egypt?
- What was she planning to do before she met up with Frank and Gwen?
- What was her relationship with Gwen? How and why did this relationship change?
- What did Flora choose to do after finding out that “*the social life in Cairo during the season was absolutely glittering. And this year, I’d be able to go to all the parties and dances and dinners*”?
- How did Flora’s volunteer role progress from the Rest and Relaxation centre at the Ezbekieh Gardens to her work in hospitals?
- List some events that demonstrate Flora’s willingness to be involved in helping others . . . for example: her acceptance to write to many

soldiers, even keeping up with the correspondence when she was exhausted.

- How did Flora cope with the attack on Mr Hussein's car? What does this tell you about her character?
- Why did Flora decide to 'keep quiet' about the antiquities she had discovered in the House of the Butcher and Blacksmith?
- How did the feeling of romance and personal relationships develop for Flora?
- Why do you think she mistook Jay in the photograph?
- What impact did Jay's continued advances and his return to Cairo as a haunted man have on Flora?

## **Fa**

- How do you think Fa felt about Flora's involvement with the soldiers?
- What 'concessions' did he make after Flora seemed so confident?
- As the reader, how do you feel about Fa continuing to work at his archaeological dig whilst Flora and her friends assisted Lady Bellamy and then the nurses?
- How did Fa show his trust in Flora? List some examples.
- Write a paragraph describing what Fa achieved during his stay in Cairo. Show the effect his work had on Flora and Jim (Jay).

## **Gwen**

- What does the following passage tell you about Gwen?  
*"A vision in white: a crisp white linen blouse and skirt, a glimpse of white-stockinged ankle, white high-heeled shoes, a waist so slim that a corset was definitely in the picture, a wide white hat, and even – only one girl could carry this off – a white parasol".*
- Was Gwen's character similar to Flora's? Write examples to support your answer.
- How did Gwen treat Frank?
- Why did Gwen decide she'd had enough of working in the hospital?
- What part do you think Gwen played in the decisions Flora made throughout the story?

## Frank

- Describe the sibling relationship between Frank and Gwen, was it always amicable? Find some dialogue in the text as an example in your answer.
- What were the circumstances that led Frank to become closer to Flora? Did Flora return his approach?
- When did Flora feel that her future maybe with Frank? Why?
- Was Frank happy to be in Egypt or did he think of doing something else? Why?

## Mr Khalid

- Mr Khalid was a very dominant character in the story – make a list of how he helped the Wentworths’ arrival and then their life in Cairo – include his “connections” at the archaeological dig site.
- How did Mr Khalid and Flora share the ‘secret’ about the contents found in the store room in the House of the Butcher and Blacksmith?
- Comment on the following extract: “*Mr Khalid floated as serenely as one of the white-sailed Arab feluccas on the Nile*”. p13
- How would you describe Mr Khalid’s role in his community?

## Additional Character studies:

Ask students to choose another character from the text to produce a “character profile” – refer specifically to the text to include quotations or dialogue that supports their description.

For example: Mr Hussein, faithful servant, creates a trusting relationship with Flora. “*That is excellent,*” said Mr Hussein. “*If you had not been able to start the motorcar, what would you do if it stopped in an isolated place?*” demonstrates his caring and protective nature.

## Narrative Structure

This story is richly imbued with clever similes and powerfully descriptive vocabulary.

- Use the following examples of similes, explain their meaning (read them in context)

Page 4: “*Aunt Helen, who bore a bosom like a battleship*”

Page 4: “I’d been laced up until I was gasping like a floundered fish”

Page 6: “My father brushed my worries aside like slightly annoying flies”

Page 11: “I always felt like a princess stepping into an enchanted castle as I entered”

Page 54: “Lady Bellamy gazed at me rather as if I were something unpleasant she’d discovered on the sole of her shoe”.

- Ask students to find other similes in the text.  
Write sentences using some of the similes in a different context:  
For example: The little girl played in the worn out tent with such delight that she felt like a princess stepping into an enchanted castle. (from page 11)

- Read the following passage from page 29. Locate the adjectives.  
Can students suggest alternatives?

*“The women wore sober grey dresses with high, primly buttoned collars and cuffs, a sharp contrast to the delicate, pretty evening gowns other women were wearing”.*

- Write some examples describing current fashions using similar adjectives.
- Find passages describing the dig site eg p42, 47. Which words help the reader to visualise this setting?
- Contrast the descriptions found about the dig site with the passage describing the riot in the area known as ‘the Wozzer’. Discuss how the author has achieved this contrast – for example: p124 *“They’re sold diluted liquor, they’re robbed, they’re overcharged for what they buy, there are even stories of some being stabbed”.*
- Research the various Arabic names, write an English translation.  
Examples: cotton gallibayahs, red fez with a tassel, Arab feluccas.
- Why did the author use dialogue as a device to introduce new characters?
- Ask students about the bringing together of Flora’s relationship with Jay.

Write a short explanation about the events that show this complication unfolding.

## Discussion and Debate

1. Through discussions with students, establish their personal ideas/feelings about ‘war’. (Most students will know about current war-like activities through television and news.) Allow students to voice their beliefs.

Review several references in *Flora’s War* that describe the age of the soldiers, their initial expectations, then the realities of war in Gallipoli and its traumatic consequences.

Draw up a page with headings Agree and Disagree/Against – list reasons that support going to war and those that show the opposite view.

2. Gender: Re-read page 10 in *Flora's War* where Flora is frustrated about her wish to learn to drive – “*I sighed, but that was the way it was. There was little I, or any woman, could do without approval from a male relative*”.

Follow with this quote from page 81: “*You’ve climbed it?*” he said. “*If a girl can do it, it can’t be too hard. I think I’ll give it a try*”. Which is a challenge from Lewis to climb near the dig site.

Discuss the role of women during this time and the effect war had on their lives.

Include some research about women in Australia during wartime.

Ask students to comment and record the changes and challenges faced by women to advance in careers, daily family living and their status in the community in general.

3. Archaeology and Egypt – students will have some knowledge about what has happened in Egypt along with other countries such as Greece and Rome in the face of their treasured heritage being taken by explorers and archaeologists.

In *Flora's War*, Pamela Rushby does not indicate any political links surrounding the dig sites of Fa and Mr Travers. She leaves it to the reader to gain an insight into the archaeological diggings during the period covered by the story.

Ask students to research some of the world famous discoveries made in Egypt and what became of them. For example: the tomb of Tutankhamen, the statue of Nefertiti. There are arguments for and against returning some of these treasures from overseas museums, to their country of origin.

Form debating teams after gathering information to argue a statement either supporting or decrying that archaeological discoveries from the past should/shouldn't be returned to their place of origin. Can this apply to all finds in other countries?

## Curriculum Links

*Flora's War* provides teachers with a text which effectively links many of the Australian National Curriculum Learning Areas of English and History: “The study of English involves the development of understanding and knowledge for informed and effective participation not only in English but also in other learning areas.

When knowledge, skills and comprehension from English are meaningfully applied to other learning areas, learning becomes more relevant and understanding deepens.

‘Strong connections exist between English and History, and Literacy is essential to historical understanding. Through the study of history, students learn how to read texts with critical discernment and how to create their own texts that present the results of historical understanding clearly and logically. In their studies, they encounter representations of the past that demonstrate the power of language and symbol, and they learn to extend the range of their own expression.



These skills are developed across a range of textual genres and formats, including art, photography, film, music, fiction and multimedia.’

Students reading this book can:

- ❖ Explore a range of sources about the past
- ❖ Explore a point of view
- ❖ Develop a narrative about the past

**English** to “help students engage imaginatively with literature to expand the scope of their Experience”.

*Flora’s War* provides a well crafted, first person narrative. This allows students to experience storylines, dramatic events, devices to introduce new characters through the use of dialogue, as well as a rich use of descriptive passages that allows the reader to visualise changes in time and place.

*Flora’s War* helps students follow the development of a central character. Flora copes with a range of experiences, develops emotionally through her relationships and acts as an independent person.

**History** to “stimulate knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the past and the forces that shape societies, including Australian society”.

*Flora’s War* supports students’ ability to inquire and discuss family and community history. It will “assist their inquiry into the past so that it develops their curiosity and imagination”.

**Geography:** “nurtures students’ curiosity about places and the differences between them. It responds to their wonder about the world and its diversity, and teaches them how to explore this world directly through field work and indirectly through other types of investigation. It develops a geographical imagination that enables students to relate to other places and people, and to appreciate the cultures and perspectives of others”.

*Flora’s War* is set in an area where many students would not have had an opportunity to discover or research. Through the story students will be able to read vivid descriptions of the time and location of the novel. This knowledge can be applied in further studies so students can “*appreciate the cultures and perspectives of others*”.

## **Beyond the text**

After reading *Flora’s War* students can follow up with some of the ideas and activities below:

- Read the Author’s Notes: Students can comment or write about Pamela Rushby’s prior knowledge that supported her aim to write *Flora’s War*. Consider how other authors gain their motivation to write fictional texts based on personal experiences or knowledge. Select one of Pamela Rushby’s novels to enjoy or to find out if she has a different writing style etc.
- The bibliography – ask students why this novel has a bibliography. What is its purpose? Is it useful to the reader? Explain your answer.
- War – consider the place of this text in a world where conflicts and terrorism occur so frequently. Does this novel help in giving the reader information and experiences to

support their learning about past or current war torn areas of the world?

- Relationships – in *Flora's War* the reader learns about the social structures of that era (early 1900s). There are the issues of gender, morality, societal norms and a “class” system evident when dealing with people from other cultures (eg the Australian troops calling the Egyptians “gyppos”). What do students feel about our sense of a multicultural nation such as Australia? Were the people involved in the novel right or wrong in their treatment of the local inhabitants, their friends and authorities?

## Supportive Resources

- Australian involvement in war situations:  
Books/eBooks: please note that there are many more titles to select *Images of WW1* eBook by Paul Powici. Publisher: Paul Powic  
*Gallipoli and beyond: Australians at war 1914-1918* by Sadler, Hayllar  
*The Anzacs and the Battle for Gallipoli* by Melanie Guile from a set Stories from Australia`s History Set 1 – 6 hardback books. Publisher: Macmillan  
*Australian Women At War*, Adam-Smith, P 1996, Penguin Books, Australia  
*Prisoners Of War From Gallipoli to Korea* Adam Smith, P 1992, Viking, Penguin Books Australia  
*As We Wave You Goodbye: Australian Women and War*, Bassett, J (ed.) 1998, Oxford University Press Australia.

- Websites showing passage of WW1

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Australian\\_women\\_during\\_World\\_War\\_I](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Australian_women_during_World_War_I)  
<http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/women-in-wartime>  
[http://www.civicsandcitizenship.edu.au/cce/lower\\_secondary,9027.html](http://www.civicsandcitizenship.edu.au/cce/lower_secondary,9027.html)  
<http://web1.beverlyhgh.schools.nsw.edu.au/Faculty/History/WHITE/War%20and%20Peace/Aspects%20of%20the%20Home%20Front%20-%20women.pdf>  
<http://libguides.brisbanegrammar.com/content.php?pid=196547&sid=3027994>

- The RSL provides students with study guides and access to personnel who may be able to visit your students. Contact: <http://www.rsl.org.au/>

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