

Teachers' Notes by Helen Sykes

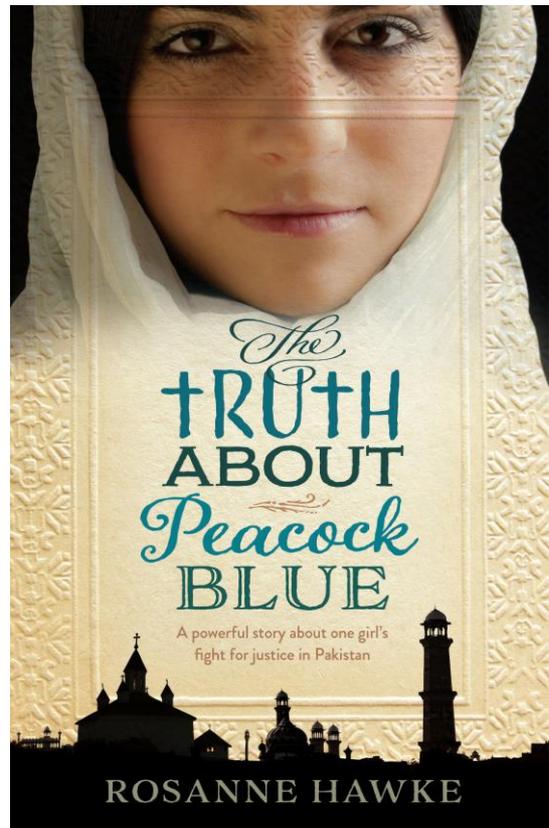
The Truth about Peacock Blue

by
Rosanne Hawke

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Recommended for ages 13-16 yrs

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83 Alexander Street
Crows Nest, Sydney
NSW 2065
Australia

PO Box 8500
St Leonards
NSW 1590
Australia

ph: (61 2) 8425 0100
fax: (61 2) 9906 2218

info@allenandunwin.com
www.allenandunwin.com

Allen & Unwin PTY LTD
ABN 79 003 994 278

INTRODUCTION

The Truth about Peacock Blue is an engaging and moving novel for young adults that will appeal strongly to girls in lower-secondary school. Hawke has used first-person narration to allow readers to share the experiences of Pakistani teenager, Aster. While many of the details of Aster's life in her family home and little rural village are very different from the lives of Hawke's readers, most young people will empathise with Aster and discover how much they have in common with her. Readers share first her shock and grief when her much-loved only sibling, Ijaz, dies in his sleep at age fifteen, and then her apprehension and difficulties as she faces the unfamiliarity of a large government high school, very different from the little village school where she has had her primary education.

Aster is Christian in a country where Christians are part of an approximately four per cent non-Muslim minority. The government school is of course Muslim, but Aster's father is assured by the principal that her constitutional right to freedom of religion will be respected. However, some of the girls are hostile to her and the teacher of Islamic studies and Arabic, Mrs Abdul, believing she has a mission to convert Aster, begins to regularly harass and abuse her. Readers share Aster's shock and horror when she is accused by Mrs Abdul of committing blasphemy in her examination; Aster never knows what error she is supposed to have committed that is seen to be blasphemous - perhaps a spelling mistake - and Mrs Abdul claims to be so appalled by the obscenity that she felt forced to burn immediately the offending exam paper, so there is no evidence. The lack of evidence, however, is inconsequential in a society where just the charge of blasphemy taints lives forever. Aster is dragged away in a police van surrounded by angry men calling for her death into a nightmarish world of a prison system that is brutal and inflexible and of a justice system that moves painfully slowly and that is evidently corrupt.

Hawke uses Aster's story to explore not only the injustices of the Pakistani blasphemy laws but to canvass a wide range of human rights issues, from freedom of religion to Australia's treatment of asylum seekers. She particularly looks at issues involving girls and women: the extraordinary injustice that women who are raped must find four independent male witnesses to prove they were forced or else be accused of adultery; limited opportunities for girls' education; the powerlessness of women in prison. Hawke uses a blog, set up by Aster's Australian cousin, Maryam, to expose readers to diverse opinions about such issues, some of them quite extreme. Maryam, in her blog posts, argues for justice, for freedom of speech, for freedom of religion and for religious tolerance; the messages posted on her blog from teenagers from all around the world debate her arguments.

The story follows Aster through three years of imprisonment to a court judgment that sentences her to death and then an endless wait for an appeal. Hawke has chosen not to give us an easy happy ending: at the end of the novel, Aster is at peace with herself and her God but still awaiting a hearing by the High Court to consider her sentence.

USING THE TRUTH ABOUT PEACOCK BLUE IN THE CLASSROOM

This is a perfect class-set title for classes of girls in Years 7 and 8. It will also work well in Year 9 in many schools.

While the obvious appeal is to girls, it would not be difficult to interest boys in the issues of justice and human rights. *The Truth about Peacock Blue* is certainly worth considering for class-set use in co-ed classes.

- Make *The Truth about Peacock Blue* available to more mature readers in Year 6. It may be suitable for shared reading and discussion in some Year 6 classes, but the issues may be too confronting for some younger readers.
- Use *The Truth about Peacock Blue* in wide reading programs in the Year 6-9 classroom. Group together titles about teenage lives in Pakistan or in Asia more generally. Make a selection of titles about teenagers facing injustice or teenagers living in areas of conflict. See the Further Reading section of this teachers' guide for some suggestions.

The novel will be enthusiastically welcomed by Christian schools, as it is - among other things - a celebration of Aster's Christian faith and an affirmation of how her faith helps her to endure her ordeal. However, the book's themes are much wider than that: Hawke's message is that religious faith of any kind can offer strength and inspiration, but alongside that message is a very strong appeal for religious and ethnic tolerance. The epigraph on Maryam's blog is: 'To see a world where freedom, peace and justice reign' (p.40). In the words of Affat, one of the posters on the blog, the message is that: 'We need to stand together for freedom to believe what we want, or not to believe, without threat of violence' (p.115).

RELEVANCE TO THE CURRICULUM

The Truth about Peacock Blue is a perfect title to satisfy the requirements of the cross-curriculum priority *Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia*: 'An understanding of Asia underpins the capacity of Australian students to be active and informed citizens working together to build harmonious local, regional and global communities.'

A study of this novel will also develop students' general capabilities in the areas of:

Literacy

This well-written and accessible novel offers students an enjoyable reading experience and many opportunities for speaking, listening and writing about issues that will engage them. In particular, Hawke's writing, though accessible, is sophisticated and will extend students' vocabulary.

The novel also uses intertextuality and a variety of different types of text that give depth to the narrative. Most prominent is the use of Maryam's blog, supported by messages from teenagers from many different cultures: this allows Hawke to explicitly present conflicting and sometimes extremist views. Hawke also includes many letters sent to Aster in prison, increasingly ones from strangers who have heard about her plight through Maryam's blog. The main narrative is echoed by several other literary narratives: the Old Testament story of the Jewish queen from *The Book of Esther*, a story Aster often tells; the Old Testament stories of Joseph in prison and of Daniel in the lion's den; and the story of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which Aster was reading in class: 'an American book [that] did more to change attitudes about race than any other work of art in the twentieth century.'

Critical and creative thinking

This novel explicitly demands that readers evaluate a wide range of important issues about justice, freedom, tolerance and human rights. Contrasting and sometimes extreme positions are presented in the messages posted on Maryam's blog.

Ethical behaviour

This novel is particularly valuable in providing students with opportunities to discuss ethical issues. Many of the situations presented in the novel are ethically quite complex: for example, Mrs Abdul believes she has a responsibility as a good Muslim to try to convert Aster, but that belief conflicts with her disregard for Aster's personal rights. Characters like Rabia and her father exemplify a different kind of ethical conflict: they have converted for pragmatic reasons and their faith is hollow. Similarly, one of the posters on Maryam's blog, Rashid, says that he has personally lost faith in his religion but he cannot admit to it, as rejection would be interpreted as blasphemy, which would be subject to the death penalty.

Personal and social capability

The Truth about Peacock Blue encourages students to consider different views and beliefs and appeals strongly to their emotions. The use of first-person narration helps students to develop empathy as they share Aster's experiences. The use of the blog and the messages attached to it allows students to evaluate different points of view and to test their own views against those expressed.

Intercultural understanding

Hawke's use of first-person narration allows students to recognise how much they have in common with Aster, despite the very different details of their social and cultural circumstances.

Information and communication technology (ICT) competence

Hawke's use of Maryam's blog in the novel provides opportunities for students to consider the role and influence of ICT in their worlds. The novel raises questions particularly about the role of social media, such as the promotion on the internet of petitions like the one Maryam creates to try to free Aster.

SYNOPSIS

The setting is a small rural village in the Khyber Pukhtunkhwa region of Pakistan (until recently called the North-West Frontier) and later, jails and courts in the Punjab. The narrator, Aster, has grown up very happily in a loving extended family in the village. The villagers are Christian in a predominately Muslim country, part of the approximately two per cent of the Christian minority in Pakistan. Although there is always some fear in the village of growing Muslim extremism, including awareness of the burning of girls' schools by the Taliban not far away in the beautiful Swat region, Aster's community knows that their minority religion is protected under the Pakistani constitution and Aster's family has a warm and loving relationship with the Muslim Rafique family. Aster's mother works in the Rafique household and Colonel and Mrs Rafique seem like additional grandparents to Aster and her brother, Ijaz. The Rafiques give the children presents at both Ramadan and Christmas.

Ijaz's death at fifteen, when Aster is almost thirteen, dramatically changes her life. As well as trying to cope with her grief, Aster is presented with the challenge of a high school education at the Government Girls' School. Her parents decide that, as she is the only surviving child, she should be given an education as the family's 'hope', rather than an early marriage with minimal education as would have happened if her brother had lived. While the high school is Muslim and the study of Islam and Arabic are compulsory, Aster's father is assured that her constitutional right to freedom to practise her religion will be respected.

Aster is praised by her mathematics teacher for her mathematical competence and by her English teacher for her English expertise. However, she must also study both Islamic Studies and Arabic, subjects she has not done previously, and she is constantly criticised and physically abused by the teacher of those subjects, Mrs Abdul. She seems unable to please Mrs Abdul, despite a noticeable improvement in her work thanks to help from a school friend and Colonel Rafique. Immediately after completing an exam, Aster is confronted by Mrs Abdul and a policeman and accused of blasphemy. As the terrified child is brutally dragged away by the policeman, Mrs Abdul says: 'Now you will have to become a Muslim to save yourself.'

Aster is held first at the local police station, where an angry mob gathers outside calling for her death. She is then taken to prison, where she has to share a cell with adult women, most of whom despise her because she has been accused of blasphemy and because of her Christian faith. Adult prison is a threatening place for a young girl. Aster is abused by her fellow prisoners and subject to lecherous behaviour from her guards. It is too dangerous for her parents to visit. Her only contact with the outside world is Dr Amal, a Christian doctor she had met in the village.

Hawke gives the reader some insight into the prisoners. Even the nastiest of them have their own sad stories. Most have been forgotten, both by the legal system and their own families. Many are on dubious charges, often brought by malevolent and self-interested accusers. The saddest is the girl Kamilah, wrongly accused of adultery when she cannot find the necessary four independent male witnesses to prove that she was raped. Her child Jani has been born in prison and knows no other life.

Unlike the other prisoners, Aster's case attracts the interest of *pro bono* lawyers who believe that the Pakistani blasphemy law is being unjustly used. She is represented by Mrs Jamal, who is also able to insist that Aster's conditions in prison are slightly improved. After several

disappointing delays, Aster's case comes before the court. Despite the fact that there is no evidence against her, she is found guilty and condemned to death. Soon after, her lawyer, Mrs Jamal, is assassinated.

Aster's case is taken up by Mrs Jamal's father-in-law, another lawyer, but there are endless delays waiting for a hearing before the High Court. Aster moves through despair and nightmares to a recognition that her Christian faith can sustain her. At the end of the novel, she is still in prison and still waiting a High Court hearing, but she is at peace. At the suggestion of a journalist called Zaib, a friend of Mrs Jamal, she is beginning to write her story, in the hope of helping others, especially those falsely accused and those brave enough to fight for justice.

ADVISORY NOTE

The Truth about Peacock Blue deals with contentious issues that may offend certain communities. Despite the fact that it is easy to argue that the book promotes tolerance and understanding, not criticism or condemnation, teachers may need to consider sensitivities in their classrooms and communities.

There are some who will see the novel as an attack on Islam and a promotion of Christianity. There is no doubt that Hawke is demonstrating in the novel that a Christian faith can inspire courage and endurance in a believer, but she is meticulous about presenting a balanced view about Islam. She argues strongly in the novel for religious tolerance and freedom. For example, while she makes clear that she condemns the unjust use of the blasphemy laws in Pakistan to accuse the vulnerable, she does not explicitly condemn the idea of blasphemy itself. She is careful to include characters like Colonel and Mrs Rafique, respectable Muslim citizens who live in peaceful friendship with their Christian neighbours. There is no question that characters like the lawyer Mrs Jamal, who fights the unjust use of blasphemy laws, and the English teacher, Miss Saed-Ulla, who argues that 'art [must] be free to cross cultural and racial borders, especially those of distrust and intolerance', are represented as sincere, practising Muslims. There is a reminder, several times throughout the novel, that even many leading imams do not support the way the blasphemy law is being implemented.

There may be prejudice in the classroom, too, from students like Hawke's fictional Australian teenager, Dana, who is frightened and ignorant about 'the other' - people of different ethnicity and religion to her own. Such students may even misread the novel, seeing it as a confirmation of their bigoted beliefs, or their communities may even see the teaching of it as 'un-Australian'.

While community and student attitudes must be respected, a novel like this that so thoroughly explores conflicting positions and gives students the opportunity to evaluate their own and others' views is immensely valuable in the classroom. Community complaints can sometimes be avoided by sending a letter home beforehand explaining the nature of the proposed unit of work and its relevance and importance to the curriculum.

TEACHING *THE TRUTH ABOUT PEACOCK BLUE*

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

THE GLOSSARY

There are many Urdu and Arabic words used in the novel. Hawke usually explains the terms the first time they are used (for example, 'shalwar gameezes, the baggy trousers and long shirts everyone wears', page 2, or [the] 'men were cooking curries and rice in deks, huge steel pots', page 46). In other cases the meaning is evident from the context (for example, 'On Friday afternoon, our chutti from school, I went with Ammi to Mrs Rafique's house', p.31). However,

make sure that students are aware of the glossary at the back of the novel before they begin reading.

There will be occasional references to such things as 'the Partition' and some vocabulary with which students will not be familiar. Encourage students to jot down the reference, including the page number, as they read, and to bring queries to class.

THE COVER OF THE NOVEL

Ask students to look closely at the front cover of *The Truth about Peacock Blue* before they begin reading. Questions for discussion include:

- What might the title mean?
- Who is the author? Have they read other books by this author?
- What seems to be the name of the girl on the cover? Where is she (probably) from?
- What is she wearing?*

Ask students to look at the back cover.

- What are the buildings in the silhouette that runs along the bottom of both front and back covers?
- The first paragraph of the back cover blurb refers to a minority faith. What is meant by a 'minority faith'?
- What is the majority faith in Pakistan?
- What minority faith might the girl belong to?***
- What is 'blasphemy'?
- Does the back cover blurb say that this is a true story?
- What adjective is used on the front cover (under the title) to describe this story?
- What three adjectives (other than 'true') are used at the bottom of the back cover blurb to describe the story?
- Taking account of those four adjectives and the other clues from the cover, what do you expect from this novel?
- Given the title of the book and the information that they find on the cover, what sort of book do they think this will be? What clues have they used to form their opinion?
- Would they have chosen this book for themselves in a bookshop or library? Why, or why not?

* Some students will know that the girl in the cover photo is wearing a dupatta, defined in the novel's glossary as a long silk scarf. Students may know words like 'hijab' (usually in Australia just a head scarf), 'niqaab' (a head scarf worn to cover most of the face) or 'burqa' (a full length garment covering all but the eyes). In Pakistan women who wear a dupatta usually cover their heads in public and the scarf drapes down, also covering the chest.

** Islam is the state religion and has that status in Pakistan's constitution. More than 95% of the population are Muslims. About 2% of the population are Hindus and less than 2% are Christians. The constitution grants all citizens the right to practise their own religions.

THE DEDICATION

Ask students to flick through the beginning of the book and to turn to the page that follows the imprint page. Explain that this is called a 'dedication'. Ask if anyone knows who Asia Bibi is. If so, talk about Asia Bibi at this stage, but otherwise tell students that they will find out later, when Asia Bibi is mentioned in the text of the novel. Ask students to notice that, whoever Asia Bibi is, it seems to be someone who has been 'unjustly accused'.

THE EPIGRAPHS

Ask students if they have noticed other books that have quotations like these on an introductory page, or perhaps at the beginning of chapters. Explain that the word for quotations used like this is 'epigraph' and that they are often used to sum up a main theme. What main ideas seem to be expressed by the three epigraphs Hawke has chosen? Do students know who are Martin Luther King Jr or Gilbert K. Chesterton, or what is *Micah*?

GUIDED READING

READING THE FIRST CHAPTERS ALOUD

Every class will need a slightly different procedure for ensuring that everyone reads the novel, but it is usually a good idea to begin with the teacher reading the first part aloud, to give students the opportunity to become engaged with the story and characters. With *The Truth about Peacock Blue*, chapters 1-3 (to page 17) are a good introduction. Chapter 1, about Ijaz's death, provides a comprehensive orientation that tells us a great deal about Aster, her family and her village and introduces a lot of the main characters, especially Hadassah, Sammy and Maryam. Chapter 2 tells us Hadassah's story, the full implications of which Aster is too innocent to understand, and has the crucial plot development of Miss Saima encouraging Aster's parents to send her to high school, so that she will become 'the hope of my family' (p.11). Chapter 3 is the first day of high school, introducing the cautiously-friendly Rabia and the nasty Saleema, and also Mrs Abdul. The chapter ends with the ominous foreshadowing: 'I had a feeling that Mrs Abdul would never warm to me.' (p.17)

There are some details in these first 17 pages that will need explaining but, if possible, delay interruptions and explanations until the section is completed, to allow students to focus on the story itself.

At the conclusion of the section, it would be helpful if students collectively drew a family tree for Aster showing both her immediate family and the extended family mentioned in this introduction. Names to include at this stage are:

- Aster
- Ijaz, Aster's brother (deceased)
- Ammi, Aster's mother
- Abba, Aster's father
- Dadi-ji, Aster's grandmother
- Sammy, Aster's boy cousin
- Barakat, Aster's boy cousin (different parents to Sammy)
- Hadassah, Aster's girl cousin (different parents to Sammy or Barakat)
- Aunty Feebi, Hadassah's mother
- Maryam, Aster's girl cousin from Australia
- Uncle Yusef, Maryam's father
- Aunty Noori, Maryam's mother
- Shahbaz, Aster's great-grandfather (deceased)

As students read further, they can add the following names to the family tree:

- Uncle Ibrahim, Sammy's father (p.27)
- Sammy's surname - Ibrahim (p.28)
- Maryam's surname - Yusef (p.28)

- Aunty Assia, Barakat's mother (p.46)
- Afia, Barakat's sister (p.48)
- Rubina, Barakat's sister (p.48)
- Uncle Yunis, Barakat's father (p.49)
- Uncle Bashir, Hadassah's father (p.53)
- Shahbaz, the son Hadassah had to give up for adoption (p.72)
- Dada-ji, Aster's grandfather (deceased), p.78
- Danyal Peter, Hadassah's husband (p.78)
- Daud, Hadassah's step-son (p.165)
- Rebekah, Hadassah's step-daughter (p.165)

Ask students to brainstorm a list of details about Aster's life that they have noticed, such as the fact that she has to collect water from the canal with a clay pot on her head, or the fact that there are forty students in her class.

References that students may need to know from this section include:

- Aster speaks of terrible monsoon floods that destroyed her village when she was ten (p.2). Floods happen regularly, but they were particularly bad in 2010 and 2014. Students could research Pakistani floods and their impact on villages like the one Hawke describes.
- the Partition (p.4) - the term used to refer to the division of the Indian sub-continent into the two independent nations of India (predominantly Hindu) and Pakistan (predominantly Muslim) at the time of independence from Britain in 1947. Although, legally, freedom of religion was guaranteed in both of the new countries, this division caused major disruption: millions of people left their homes and moved to the region where their religion was the majority religion. The disruption led to chaos and violence, including riots, religious massacres and kidnappings, and hundreds of thousands of people were killed. One of the areas most affected was the Punjab, the area in which Aster's story is mostly set. The Punjab had always been considered as one region, but it was now divided into a majority-Hindu area in the east (in India) and a majority-Muslim area in the west (in Pakistan). Aster's grandmother tells her that she lost a brother during the Partition.
- the term 'Dalit' on page 16. Aster says: 'My Dalit great-grandfather, Shahbaz, had indeed been a sweeper of the streets, before an Englishman told him he didn't have to wait centuries to work his way to heaven.' In the Hindu caste system, 'Dalit', meaning 'oppressed', was the name given to the so-called 'untouchables', the lowest group in society.

The first writing suggestion ([Blackline Master 13](#)) could be used now. It is based on Aster's experience of the new school and asks students to write about a new experience.

Have students google and collect images of:

- Punjabi embroidery designs of the kind that Aster's grand-mother teaches her (p.2)
- the Pakistani floods of 2010
- rickshaws (p.12)
- buffaloes like Gudiya (p.3)
- shalwar qameezes, the baggy trousers and long shirts worn in Pakistan (p.2)
- rural villages in the Punjab in Pakistan.

Make a wall display of the images.

COMPLETING THE READING - SOME IMPORTANT ISSUES

Tell students that Rosanne Hawke explores some important themes in *The Truth about Peacock Blue*. Some of them have been introduced already, in the opening chapters of the novel: girls and their right to education; the treatment of women who have been raped; prejudice by some Pakistani Muslims against the Christian minority.

Ask students to be alert to these issues as they read the remainder of the novel. Ask them to work in groups, with each group responsible for a major theme. The members of the group need to jot down any page references that concern their particular theme. The themes are:

- girls' rights - the right to education; arranged marriages; the right to report rape without being accused of adultery
- blasphemy and the way the laws are applied
- freedom of speech
- freedom of religion
- Australian policies towards asylum seekers.

COMPLETING THE READING - SOME GUIDANCE

Each class and each teacher will have different strategies for completing the reading of the novel. In most cases there will be some time given in class for silent reading and perhaps some more reading aloud, supported by a requirement for certain sections to be read for homework. If students participate in the reading aloud, it is a good idea to give them notice beforehand of the sections that they will be asked to read, with an opportunity for them to rehearse their reading.

While some students will take the novel home and finish reading it that night, others will need some guidance and perhaps some encouragement. It can be helpful to give students deadlines, requiring that they complete a certain number of chapters by a certain date. Guiding students' reading with a few important questions can also be helpful. [Blackline Masters 1-6](#) provide such guidance, each worksheet based on a section of 4 chapters. Students should read the questions before reading the sections, looking for the answers as they read. In case they miss the answer, page numbers are provided below.

BLM 1 *The Truth about Peacock Blue*: Chapters 4-7

1 p.18 **2** p.27 **3** p.34 **4** p.31 **5** p.37 **6** p.40

BLM 2 *The Truth about Peacock Blue*: Chapters 8-11

1 p.44 **2** p.48 **3** p.52 **4** p.52 **5** pp.61-2 **6** p.63 **7** p.67 **8** p.72

BLM 3 *The Truth about Peacock Blue*: Chapters 12-15

1 The word appears on p.84 **2** p.85 **3** pp.87-97 **4** p.101 **5** p.102 **6** p.104 **7** p.106 **8** p.116 **9** p.121

BLM 4 *The Truth about Peacock Blue*: Chapters 16-19

1 p.131 **2** The word appears on p.134 **3** p.142 **4** p.143 **5** p.147 **6** p.156 **7** p.161 **8** p.159

BLM 5 *The Truth about Peacock Blue*: Chapters 20-23

1 p.169 **2** p.171 **3** p.180 **4** pp.183-185 **5** p.185 **6** p.194 **7** p.195 **8** p.201 **9** p.214

BLM 6 *The Truth about Peacock Blue*: Chapters 24-27

1 p.219 **2** p.220 **3** pp.229-30 **4** pp.230-1 **5** p.239 **6** p.241 **7** p.250 **8** p.251

The questions on each section draw attention to some important points that students need to be aware of. It would be good to work through the answers with students, allowing time for discussion.

ADDITIONAL FOLLOW UP ACTIVITIES

Chapters 4-7

Make sure that students realise that the reference to the assassinations of Shahbaz Bhatti and Salman Taseer, both of whom campaigned against the way the blasphemy laws were being implemented, is a real historical reference. You might want students to google those names.

What kind of student is Aster? Mrs Abdul criticises her constantly, but what do her maths teacher, Miss Rehmat, and her English teacher, Miss Saed-Ulla, think of her?

Students may not have read *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It is referred to throughout *The Truth about Peacock Blue*. You might want students to find a summary of the story, so that later references make sense; for example, after her conviction, Aster thinks of the killing of Tom Robinson as the angry mob surrounds the prison van (p.207).

In her first blog entry, Maryam refers to the Azad Kashmir border. Maryam has been able to visit Azad Kashmir but not 'the blue lake at the top of the world because of the Line of Control and the intermittent conflict'. India and Pakistan are still in dispute over the ownership of the Kashmir region: the 'Line of Control' is the current border, heavily militarised on both sides and a regular source of conflict. Some students may have read Rosanne Hawke's novel, *Shahana*, set in that region, and may be able to tell the class more about it.

Have students re-read Maryam's first blog entry on pages 40-1. What is Maryam's purpose in setting up the blog?

Chapters 8-11

Ask students if Aster should have confided in Colonel Rafique about the way Mrs Abdul was treating her. Why didn't she?

Make sure that students understand that Hadassah or her family could not have reported the rape. She was afraid of being accused of adultery ('zina'), because she could not call on four independent male witnesses to testify that she was forced, as was required previously under Pakistani law. Despite changes in the law, women still take great risks in reporting rape.

Have students re-read Maryam's blog entry on page 68. What does Maryam have to say about girls' education? Do they know who the blog writer, Gul Makai is? Aster realises later (p.181) that Gul Makai was the name used by Malala Yousafzai.

Chapters 12-15

Make sure that students understand what 'blasphemy' means and that it is subject to the death penalty in Pakistan. Make sure that they know as well that the number of blasphemy accusations increased enormously after the death penalty was introduced, and that there is lots of evidence that many accusations are vindictive. If appropriate, ask students what they know about the attack on the newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris in January 2015, killing 12 people.

Have students re-read Maryam's blog entry on page 113. What example does Maryam give of the blasphemy laws being unjustly applied? What action is she taking to try to help Aster?

Chapters 16-19

In Chapter 17 on p.142 Aster thinks about Asia Bibi, a mother who has been on death row for more than five years. Ask students if they remember the name: it's on the dedication page. Later in the novel we learn that Asia Bibi's appeal to the High Court was rejected, by which time she had been in solitary confinement for six years. Ask students to google 'Asia Bibi' to find out why she was charged with blasphemy and what has happened to her since *The Truth about Peacock Blue* was published.

Chapters 20-23

Have students re-read Maryam's blog entry on page 174. What do they think 'freedom of speech' means?

Have students re-read Maryam's blog entry on page 186-7. What does Maryam think 'blasphemy' means?

Ask students what they think about the conduct of the court case. Was justice done?

Chapters 24-7

Ask students to find evidence that Aster's attitude to her situation changes in this section. How important is her Christian faith?

AFTER READING

THE THEMES OF THE NOVEL

Ask students to get together in their groups and to compile the references they found to the theme they were allocated:

- girls' rights - the right to education; arranged marriages; the right to report rape without being accused of adultery
- blasphemy and the way the laws are applied
- freedom of speech
- freedom of religion
- Australian policies towards asylum seekers

Each group should prepare a class presentation where they outline what they have discovered in the novel about the issue. The presentation should include their conclusion as to what they believe the author's position is on the issue and what their own position is.

Ask groups to write up their presentations in a format that can be shared with all members of the class, such as a written report that can be posted on a class blog.

Religion in *The Truth about Peacock Blue*

There are many contrasting views of religion in the novel. [Blackline Master 14](#) collects some of the most interesting of them. Ask students to read the quotations and discuss which ones they agree with. Ask them too if they can come up with a statement about what Hawke wants to say about religion through the writing of this novel.

THE ENDING OF *THE TRUTH ABOUT PEACOCK BLUE*

Some readers will be disappointed that Hawke does not provide a neat ending to the novel. Is Aster eventually acquitted by the High Court or the Supreme Court? How long does it take? Do Aster and her parents find asylum in another country - and if so, where? And what about Sammy? Do Aster and Sammy ever have an opportunity to be together?

Students who have read John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* will remember Hazel's frustration at not knowing what happens after the end of her favourite book, *An Imperial Affliction*. She has to face the unwelcome truth that, for a novel - a made-up story - there is no true ending: we can never know what *really* happened, because we are dealing with the world of imagination, not real life. The characters in *An Imperial Affliction* (like the characters in *The Fault in Our Stars* and, for that matter, *The Truth about Peacock Blue*) are made-up people, characters in a novel, even if based on real-life people that the author knew. The story - whether the reader likes it or not - can end any way the author wishes.

So Rosanne Hawke, the novelist, makes a choice as to when and how to end Aster's story.

The Truth about Peacock Blue may not end the way some readers would like - for example, with Aster acquitted and living happily somewhere with Sammy and her parents - but there is a resolution. Aster's personal inner conflict has been resolved. Ask students to find evidence of this.

Ask students to complete one of these two sentences:

- I wish Rosanne Hawke had told us what finally happens to Aster because ...

or

- I agree with Rosanne Hawke's decision to leave Aster's story where she does because ...

Either as a whole-class activity or in small groups, ask several students to read aloud their completed sentences. Allow time for others to discuss the issues raised.

Ask students to examine again the front cover image of a girl wearing a dupatta. Did they notice that a dupatta is part of the high school uniform (p.13) and that Miss Rehmat, the maths teacher, wears a dupatta, whereas Mrs Abdul wears a burqa? Did they notice as well that Aster, handcuffed, is distressed because her dupatta had fallen from her head. On page 88 she thinks: 'I may as well have been naked'. As the policemen leer at her suggestively, she tries to cover herself with the dupatta (pp.92 and 95).

Ask students to go back to the dedication at the beginning of the book. They now know who Asia Bibi is. Do they agree that she was a suitable person to choose for the dedication?

Ask them to look again at the epigraphs at the beginning of the book. Why do they think Hawke chose these particular epigraphs?

Ask them to look again at the adjectives used on the cover of *The Truth about Peacock Blue* to describe the story: 'powerful', 'captivating', 'shocking' and 'uplifting'. Ask them to write a paragraph commenting on this evaluation of the novel and then, in groups, to write a brief review of the novel. The review should be aimed at students like themselves and should allow their audience to decide whether to read the book for themselves.

THE NARRATIVE VOICE

Students know that one of the most important decisions a writer must make is the choice of narrator. Why do they think Hawke chose to tell the story in the voice of Aster? (Why, for that matter, do they think Hawke decided to write a novel about a fictitious girl called Aster, instead of writing a biography about Asia Bibi?)

Ask students to choose a favourite part of the novel and re-write a paragraph or two in the voice of a third-person omniscient (all-knowing) narrator. For example, the following paragraphs are re-written from the scene in jail, when the guards have made suggestive comments and have touched Aster inappropriately (p.95):

Aster thought about defending herself and opened her mouth but then remembered in time the prisoner's advice. She forced herself not to be goaded. She wondered what would happen if it didn't work. She wondered whether the senior officer would come to her aid if she screamed. She wondered whether she was even worth his care. She shut her eyes. She could hear Ikram's breathing come closer. She realised that he must have been on his haunches, and then he must have stood up. She heard him say, 'You'll keep.'

Aster glanced up as he locked the door and wished she hadn't. He gave her that evil smirk. She felt as if she needed to bathe herself.

Ask students to consider if that is as effective as the original.

THE CHARACTERS OF *THE TRUTH ABOUT PEACOCK BLUE*

Character development

Character development is an important part of a fictional story. In real life people change in response to the experiences they encounter and the circumstances in which they find themselves. Good novelists reflect this, allowing their characters to grow and develop.

Aster is an excellent example of good character development. As we read, we see her go through a range of experiences that test her severely and that eventually leave her much stronger.

Ask students to find quotations from the novel that reflect Aster's emotions at particular times, including the following:

- the process of grieving
- the apprehension and excitement of facing something new and different
- the shock and incomprehension of the accusation and arrest
- the horror and shame at the way she is treated by the policemen and the prison guards
- the fear of abuse, both physical and verbal, by the other prisoners
- the empathy with the suffering of other prisoners
- the sense of despair at the endless waiting in prison
- the terror that she may be found wanting - that she may agree to convert to avoid further trouble, even possible torture
- the recognition that courage is not an absence of fear
- the gradual sense of acceptance and purpose, even of joy and hope.

Ask students to share their quotations to build up a profile of Aster's character as it develops.

The choice of characters

Just as a writer chooses a narrator, each character in the story is a choice. Characters are chosen and created for many different reasons. Ask students to consider the following:

- Sometimes characters are created to contribute to the plot; for example, Ijaz's death is necessary to explain why Aster is sent to high school, when most village girls only had a primary education and then married early. Similarly, Mrs Abdul is essential to the plot: the story can't happen without her.
- Sometimes characters are created explicitly to make a connection with the readers' knowledge and experience; for example, Hawke gives Aster an Australian cousin, with whom Australian readers can identify. The blog could have been started by, say, Sammy or Afia, but there would not have been that sense of connection with readers.
- Sometimes characters are created to contrast with the main character; for example, Rabia's pragmatism, professing a faith that she doesn't really believe, contrasts with the genuineness and constancy of Aster's belief.

Ask students if they can explain:

- why Rosanne Hawke created the characters of the maths teacher, Miss Rehmat, and the English teacher, Miss Saed-Ulla.
- why she created Aster's mother's employers, Colonel and Mrs Rafique, and why they are Muslim.
- why she created the character of Hafsa, who is also in prison for blasphemy.
- why she created the characters of Kamilah and Jani.

THE ORIENTATION OF THE NARRATIVE

Hawke is a skilful narrator and students can learn a lot about narrative techniques by looking at her writing. Blackline Masters 7 and 8 focus on the orientation of the narrative. [Blackline Master 7](#) can be worked through individually, for example as homework activities, or it can be worked through collaboratively, as pair work or as a small group exercise. [Blackline Master 8](#) is for small group work and is dependent on students having completed Blackline Master 7.

Answers to BLM 7

1 a Aster. We don't learn her name until page 3, when her cousin tells her how sorry she is about Ijaz's death.

b He is a tailor.

c Ijaz was not very strong as he had breathing problems and needed to stay inside a lot of the time.

d Fifteen.

e Ammi.

f Dadi-ji.

g Her grandmother.

h One of her boy cousins.

i Sammy.

j Australia.

k Hadassah. Aster tells Maryam: 'This is where it happened' (p.4), although we don't know what she is referring to. (This is called foreshadowing - a clue to an important part of the plot that will be revealed later.)

l The family from further south in Pakistan came on buses. They are probably mini-buses, but even so that must mean quite a lot of people.

m Aster's mother works for Colonel and Mrs Rafique, but Aster comments that 'they stood near Dadi-ji, as if they, also, were grandparents' (page 3), so they are close to the family.

2 a Her older brother, Ijaz, to whom she was very close, has just died.

b Ijaz and Barakat used to correspond on Facebook. Facebook was not launched until 2004 and was not available to the general public until 2006. However, it was not until the years 2011-2012 that Facebook became widely used in Pakistan. The story is probably set later than 2011.

c There was a huge monsoon flood that washed away the village. Monsoon floods are common in Pakistan, but there have been particularly severe floods in 2010 and 2014. It is probable that Rosanne Hawke, when telling us of the damage to Aster's village, is thinking of the floods that occurred in 2010. We can probably guess, from the reference to Facebook and to the floods, that the story is set a little while after 2010. From Chapter 1, we don't know exactly when: Aster was ten in 2010, but we don't yet know how old she is when the story opens.

3 a On page 2 we are told that the extended family 'from further south in Pakistan' have come to the funeral in buses.

b Aster's grandmother teaches her to embroider Punjabi designs, so it is probable that they live in the Punjab, a region in the north of Pakistan.

c It was in church.

d The village houses were made of mud and were not strong enough to resist the flood. After the flood the school and church were re-built with cement, but it seems the houses were still mud houses, as cement would have been too expensive.

e Her brother died in the Partition - the terrible conflicts that occurred after India and Pakistan were separated into two independent countries, one predominantly Hindu, the other predominantly Muslim. Many hundreds of thousands of people on both sides died.

Answers to BLM 8

Question 1: The re-written version of the orientation is deliberately as bland as possible to contrast with Hawke's skilful narration that involves the reader immediately with Aster's emotions.

Question 2: Hopefully students will recognise that the re-written version is very poor storytelling. There is nothing there to hook the reader, to encourage the reader to keep reading.

Question 3:

a Hawke manages to capture Aster's voice in a way that a bare re-telling of the information fails to do. We know how she feels. Ask students to find phrases that tell us how she feels, such as: 'it was like 'a black-and-white silent movie' (p.1), 'I was 'watching as if from a high cloud' (p.1), 'I was bereft' (p.3), 'the cataclysmic shift in our lives' (p.4).

b The story begins with Ijaz's death. The author is so concerned to make this the starting point that she even inverts the first sentence: 'The night Ijaz died, I didn't even dream of him' (p.1).

First paragraph:

The night Ijaz died, I didn't even dream of him. I thought I would have known, but I woke in the morning to the sound of my mother's wailing. He had died in his sleep. Some say that is the best way to die but he was only fifteen.

could have been written like this:

I woke that morning to the sound of my mother's wailing. My brother Ijaz had died in his sleep. Some say that is the best way to die but he was only fifteen. I thought I would have known when he died, but I didn't even dream of him.

The inversion puts the emphasis firmly on the death. The story opens with a shock. It is tiny details like this that matter in good writing.

c The orientation maintains a skilful balance between introducing Aster as someone not at all unlike the reader, with emotions that the reader can empathise with, and someone whose circumstances are very different.

d The orientation uses foreshadowing, with the reference to Hadassah. Foreshadowing creates suspense and keeps us reading.

IMAGERY IN *THE TRUTH ABOUT PEACOCK BLUE*

Hawke has a gift for striking images that both enable the reader to clearly visualise what is being described and that are wonderfully appropriate to character and setting. [Blackline Master 9](#) is available to assist students in exploring Hawke's use of images in the novel.

Activity 1 revises the terms 'simile' and 'metaphor'. You may wish to draw students' attention to the fact that quotation 'g' is a very good example of an extended metaphor.

If you wish to look up the context for any of the quotations, they appear on the following pages: **a** page 46; **b** page 101; **c** page 181; **d** page 128; **e** page 164; **f** page 129; **g** page 237; **h** page 84.

Activity 2 consists of images from the novel that have been exaggeratedly re-written using comparisons that would be outside Aster's world. Students will recognise that there is something not quite right about these images.

Activity 3 By discovering what Hawke actually wrote, students will appreciate her talent for finding comparisons that reflect the character's world.

Activity 4 gives students an opportunity to practise finding similes for themselves. If you want to extend this exercise, other images students could look for include: 'The girls ... seemed like a forest' (p.15); 'As soon as the room darkened Rubina fell quiet like a little bird in a tree' (p.50); 'Once started the wedding machine can't be stopped. Once you're strapped in there's no hope of

disentanglement.' (p.60); 'One young man threw cloth in the air so it would settle right in front of us like silk birds, colour after flying colour.' (p.64); 'The man behind the desk watched me impassively as if I was a stray mouse in a cage.' (p.100); 'I felt strange as if I was kneeling on a cloud and could see a bright light, like Stephen did when he was being stoned for blasphemy' (pp.204-5); 'Being in jail for blasphemy is like being in a coma' (p.217).

Answers to BLM 9

1 **a** metaphor **b** simile **c** simile **d** metaphor **e** simile **f** simile **g** metaphor **h** simile

2 These quotations are not from the novel, although they may be based on images that appear in the novel. The comparisons are ones that Aster would not use.

3 **a** The rickshaw idled, putt-putt-putt, like a rich person's lawnmower spewing black smoke outside our house.

b No wonder Mrs Abdul watched her like a crane at a fishpond.

c The exams loomed close like a monsoon with the same heavy feeling in the air.

d I tried to pray, but my mind kept jumping like young goats.

e The taint [of a blasphemy accusation] stuck like the engine grease on Abba's clothes.

f I'd never heard her speak so sweetly, like almond halva.

g Whatever was said, the prosecution would have turned it over like a shovel mucking out a goat's pen.

h I felt like I was standing at the entrance to a tunnel in a cornfield in early summer, knowing I would have to walk through alone and the cobras were waking.

4 **a** The prison guard is compared to a fat genie in a picture book.

b Hadassah's eyes are compared to a startled gazelle, unsure which way to run to escape the hunter.

c The girls in the yard are compared to statues; only their eyes moved, watching.

d The frantic pace of the wedding preparations is compared to a barrel rolling down a steep hill.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

DISCUSSION OF ISSUES

The Truth about Peacock Blue raises a number of controversial issues, including issues about girls' education, about the nature of religion, about Australia's attitude to and policies about asylum seekers, and about the extent to which we are responsible for the lives of other people.

[Blackline Master 10](#) offers a small group exercise allowing students to present their points of views on these issues.

If students want to check the context of any of the quotations, they can be found as follows:

- Quotation 1 is from page 34. It is Colonel Rafique speaking to Aster.
- Quotation 2 is from page 55 and the words are Maryam's. It is part of an exchange of messages between Maryam and Aster when Maryam first tells Aster about her idea for the blog.
- Quotation 3 is from page 114. It is a message on Maryam's post from a teenager named Fozia.
- Quotation 4 is from page 68. It is something Maryam says on her blog.
- Quotation 5 is from page 69 and it is a message from Abdulla on Maryam's blog.
- Quotation 6 is from page 115. It is Tamsin posting on Maryam's blog.
- Quotation 7 is from page 115. It is Affat posting on Maryam's blog.
- Quotation 8 is from page 134. This is Tamsin again, posting on Maryam's blog.

THE POSTERS ON MARYAM'S BLOG

Hawke uses the posters on Maryam's blog to present a very wide range of divergent views about the issues that are raised in *The Truth about Peacock Blue*. Several posters post regularly enough for us to get to know them and their opinions. Have students work in groups of five and allocate one of the following posters to each person in the group: Rashid, Dana, Abdulla, Affat

and Tamsin. (If there are some students left over, they can double up; for example, you could have two students in one group looking at Dana, two in another looking at Abdulla, and so on).

Ask students to find out everything they can about the poster they have been allocated. They will find the person's posts on the following pages:

- Rashid pp.134, 161, 187, 210
- Dana pp.134, 162, 175, 188, 212
- Abdulla pp.69, 114, 133, 135
- Affat pp.114, 115, 134, 188, 210, 211, 212, 227 (and see her letter on p.235)
- Tamsin pp.69, 115, 134, 135, 174-5, 211, 212 (and see her letter on p.234)

Students should prepare a brief report on the person they have been allocated, giving as much information as possible about gender, country of residence, parents' original country if known, religion and attitudes.

Then ask students to assume the identity of the person they have been allocated and to answer, in that person's voice, these questions:

1. What do you think about the fact that Aster has been charged with blasphemy?
2. What do you think about the fact that Aster has been sentenced to death?
3. What is your attitude to girls and education?
4. Do you think that choice of religion should be each person's personal choice or should people be obliged to follow the religion of their parents or country?
5. What is your opinion of Australia's policies about asylum seekers?

Students in each group can share their answers to those questions. Each group can choose a representative then to present their answers to the whole class.

Allow time for students to discuss the points of view expressed.

DRAMATISATION

A worthwhile activity is to ask students to re-read the court case where Aster is sentenced to death and to turn it into a script to be performed. This can be done as a whole class or as a small group activity. You can also ask all students to work on the entire script, or you can allocate certain sections to different groups: for example, one group can script Mrs Jamal's questioning of Colonel Rafique; another group can write the prosecutor's questioning of Colonel Rafique; another group can write Mrs Jamal's questioning of Mrs Abdul; and so on. Preparing the script is an excellent writing activity. In some cases, lines of dialogue can be taken exactly from the text but in others they will need to be created, keeping the language appropriate to the character. Several drafts will be needed, with students working cooperatively to polish their writing.

Students can then be asked to rehearse and perform the script.

[Blackline Master 11](#) explains the task to students. You may want to adapt it to your specific circumstances, especially if you want to assign particular parts of the task to groups.

EXTENDING STUDENTS' VOCABULARY

While the novel is accessible, Hawke's writing is sophisticated. Good novels extend students and widen their worlds, including their recognition of and ability to use for themselves a wider vocabulary.

[Blackline Master 12](#) provides an opportunity for students to focus on Hawke's use of some very precise adjectives in her writing. The worksheet could be used as a homework activity.

Answers to BLM 12

2 a Her behaviour was always **demure**; she kept her eyes down in company and spoke only when she spoke to.

b I'd be **wary** of him if I were you. He makes lots of grand promises, but whether he has any intention of carrying them out is another matter.

c There is no need to be so **aggressive** and threatening; I have no wish to fight you.

d It was a major earthquake; the damage to the village was **cataclysmic**.

e She is completely insensitive to the feelings of others; she insulted half the people in the room but she was **oblivious** to the offence she had caused.

f I knew I would miss my friend when his family moved overseas but I did not realise how **bereft** I would feel without his companionship.

g In order to be **proficient** in any sport, you need to spend many hours practising the basic skills.

h She pretends to be meek and obedient but she's actually quite **wilful**, very much liking her own way.

IDEAS FOR STUDENTS' OWN WRITING

[Blackline Master 13](#) has some ideas for students' own writing. Suggestions 1, 2 and 3 could be set while students are reading the novel. The other suggestions would work best after students' first reading of the novel is completed, while they are discussing it in class.

You will probably not want to use all the writing suggestions.

Wherever possible, give students an audience for their writing. Have them post their work to a class blog that everyone can read, make a wall display of some of their work, and/or allow time for them to exchange their work in class.

FURTHER READING

STORIES SET IN PAKISTAN, AFGHANISTAN AND INDIA

For readers in Years 7-8

Shahana by Rosanne Hawke. Allen & Unwin, 2013.

Thirteen-year-old Shahana lives in the area known as the Line of Control, the border that divides Kashmir in two. Her tiny village on the Neelum River that runs along the border on the Pakistani side is an area of ongoing conflict. After their grandfather's death, Shahana and her younger brother struggle to survive alone in their tiny isolated house on the side of the mountain, some distance from the village. This is a remarkable story of a young girl's perseverance, resourcefulness and resilience.

Naveed by John Heffernan. Allen & Unwin, 2014.

Naveed, the sole supporter of his widowed mother and his irrepressible younger sister Anoosheh, lives close by Bagram Airfield, the huge American airforce base in Afghanistan. Anoosheh - like so many others in countries that have been battlefields - has lost both her legs after stepping on a landmine. Naveed makes an uncertain living finding work wherever he can. His life is changed when he is noticed by Jake, an Australian serving as a dog handler with the military. Jake recruits Naveed and his dog, Nasera, to train to detect explosives.

Mahtab's Story by Libby Gleeson. Allen & Unwin, 2008.

Based on true stories of Afghan girls now living in Australia, this is the story of a girl whose family is forced to flee Afghanistan. Mahtab and her family make it across the mountains into Pakistan. There follow lonely, isolated months in a shed, when their father decides to go ahead and find a home for them. Eventually, not knowing whether their father is alive or dead, Mahtab's family risks the journey through Indonesia to an overcrowded, leaking boat that eventually reaches the Australian mainland. The welcome they expected, however, is not there.

Parvana, Parvana's Journey, Shauzia and Parvana's Promise by Deborah Ellis. Allen & Unwin, 2002-2012.

The three *Parvana* books follow Parvana's life in Afghanistan from her days as a twelve-year-old, when she was forced to dress as a boy to try to make a living to support her family in the market-place, to her arrest by American troops at age sixteen as a suspected terrorist. *Shauzia*, the companion volume, is the story of Parvana's friend, who shared her perilous life in the first book, *Parvana*; in *Shauzia* she is struggling to survive in a Pakistani camp for refugees. All four books give a moving insight into the lives of children and young people oppressed by religious extremism, ongoing and widespread military conflict and occupation by culturally insensitive 'friendly' forces.

Homeless Bird by Gloria Whelan. HarperCollins, 2001.

Koly is obliged to enter a traditional Indian arranged marriage at age thirteen; a few months later she is a widow, imprisoned in a kind of social limbo where she is lower than a servant in her husband's family. She is eventually abandoned by her mother-in-law in the holy city of Vrindavan, home to thousands of unwanted widows who spend their days worshipping in order to be fed by the monks. Koly is rescued by a charity that helps these widows (many of them very young) to earn their own living.

In the Sea There are Crocodiles: The Story of Enaiatollah Akbari by Fabio Geda. David Fickling Books, 2012.

Translated from Italian, this is based on a real-life story. When his village in Afghanistan is taken over by the Taliban, ten-year-old Akbari is taken across the border into Pakistan by his mother and then abandoned. The story follows Akbari's traumatic five-year journey, from Pakistan, into Iran, then Turkey and Greece, before he finally finds asylum in Italy. This is an important exploration of the reality of life for asylum seekers.

Shadow by Michael Morpurgo. HarperCollins, 2010.

Morpurgo was inspired by the story of the Australian sniffer dog that went missing in Afghanistan for 14 months. The dog he writes about is used by the British to detect explosives, but it disappears after an attack and is presumed to have been killed. The dog turns up months later many hundreds of kilometres away in the caves where Aman, his mother and grandmother are trying to survive. Aman and his mother make the terrible journey from Afghanistan to join relatives in England. After six years living in the UK, Aman and his mother are denied refugee status, are arrested and are threatened with deportation.

Soraya the Storyteller by Rosanne Hawke. Lothian Books, 2004.

Soraya is a twelve-year-old Afghan girl whose family has been persecuted by the Taliban. Their attempt to find sanctuary in Australia results in a period in the Woomera Detention Centre, followed by an uncertain future in the community on Temporary Protection Visas. Like her father, Soraya is a storyteller and it is her stories that enable her to make connections between the difficulties of the present and the traditions of her homeland.

Broken Glass by Sally Grindley. Bloomsbury, 2008.

Suresh and Sandeep run away from a violent home, believing that their depressed father will stop mistreating their mother once they are gone. At ages twelve and nine, they find themselves homeless on the streets of a large city, sleeping at night on a traffic island and scavenging through the rubbish for broken glass, in order to make enough money to feed themselves. This is a realistic picture of the conditions of homeless children in India. The author is careful to expose the grimness of the life without traumatising young readers too much.

Boy Overboard by Morris Gleitzman. Puffin 2002.

This is the story of an Afghan boy whose family are fleeing the Taliban and who become enmeshed in John Howard's Pacific solution. The story is told with Gleitzman's iconic humour but alongside the humour, there is horror as well as sadness: women being executed in the soccer stadium in Kabul; pirates searching the refugees' boat for young girls; Jamal's fear that his parents have drowned; the news that they are not welcome in Australia. The humour is a blessed reminder of the resilience of human beings, even in the face of terrible inhumanity.

Gleitzman's opposition to the Australian government's treatment of the boat people is clear, but his anger is admirably restrained, limited to the occasional irony such as: 'Thank goodness Australians are so good at thinking of others.'

Jameela by Rukhsana Khan. Allen & Unwin, March 2010.

This is set in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Jameela lives in a remote rural village in a war-torn country. Her life becomes impossible when her mother dies and her father remarries, with her new stepmother determined to marry her off. Thrown on her own resources, she eventually finds refuge in an orphanage. The novel is based on the life of a real girl and the orphanage actually exists.

Under the Persimmon Tree by Suzanne Fisher Staples. Walker Books, 2006.

This tells the parallel stories of a girl living in a remote rural area of Afghanistan and a recently married American woman living in Pakistan. Najmah's life is devastated by American bombing that kills her mother and brother. Meanwhile, Elaine is waiting in Peshawar – with increasing anxiety – for news of her Afghan-born but American-trained doctor husband, who has gone to set up a field hospital. The two stories converge when Najmah finds herself a terrified and lonely refugee in Peshawar.

Secrets of the Henna Girl by Sufiya Ahmed. Puffin, 2012.

Sixteen-year-old British-Pakistani Zeba Khan has visited family in Pakistan before. This time she discovers that she is facing a nightmarish marriage to a cousin she despises. Because she protests, her parents cut off all communication with her. Only her maternal grandmother is on her side. This novel is unashamedly a polemic, written to expose the evil of forced marriages.

For more mature readers

Most of these titles will be suitable for readers of *The Truth about Peacock Blue*, but they may be confronting for some students.

Mountain Wolf by Rosanne Hawke. Angus & Robertson, 2012.

Fourteen-year-old Razaq survives the earthquake in the Pakistani mountains that kills his whole family only because that day he is away from the house, collecting water for his mother. He sets out for Rawalpindi to find his uncle Javid, but his good looks cause him trouble as he attracts the attention of sex traders. This is a confronting but sensitive exploration of the issue of sex trafficking of children.

Sold by Patricia McCormick. Allen & Unwin, 2007.

Written in free verse, in a series of short but powerful scenes, *Sold* tells the story of child prostitution in India. At thirteen, Lakshimi, who lives in the mountains of Nepal, is sold by her stepfather for four hundred dollars to a charming man who promises her a good job in India as a domestic servant. Instead, he takes her to 'Happiness House', a brothel full of young girls who are enslaved by debt.

Guantanamo Boy by Anna Perera. Angus & Robertson, 2008.

Khalid, a British-Pakistani teenager, is visiting family in Karachi post-9/11. As a consequence of 'the war on terror' he is kidnapped from his aunt's house and enters a nightmare world of interrogations, beatings, sensory deprivation, isolation, water torture, and forced confessions. He is finally incarcerated in Guantanamo Bay as an 'enemy combatant'. This is a disturbing story of the consequences of governments over-riding the rule of law in the anti-terrorist cause.

Marrying Ameera by Rosanne Hawke. HarperCollins, 2010.

Seventeen-year-old Ameera is Australian-Pakistani. She is falling in love with her brother's best friend but, when her father hears about the relationship, he insists that she leave immediately for Pakistan to attend a relative's wedding. It is only when she arrives in Azad Kashmir that Ameera discovers she herself is the intended bride - to a man she does not know. This is an exciting novel about forced marriages and about family pressures. It is also a novel about the struggle for personal identity.

OTHER STORIES OF CHILDREN LIVING IN AREAS OF CONFLICT OR UNDER DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES

For readers in Years 7-8

The Best Day of My Life by Deborah Ellis. Allen & Unwin, 2012.

Valli doesn't know how old she is - probably nine or ten. Realising that her adopted family don't want her, she runs away from the village where her job had been to pick up stray lumps of coal and becomes one of the many homeless street kids struggling to survive on the streets of Kolkata. The novel exposes with Ellis's usual perceptiveness the plight of lepers and of street children in India, but it is not depressing. Valli is a wonderfully resilient and engaging character, funny and bright.

Amina by J. L. Powers. Allen & Unwin, 2013.

Amina is set in 2011 in Somalia, at a time when the streets of Mogadishu were still controlled by the militant Islamist rebel group, al-Shabaab. No one dares to speak freely and al-Shabaab soldiers are everywhere. Venturing out to the local market - where there is little food, because of drought - is full of risks. Amina's father is targeted and kidnapped by al-Shabaab because he is an artist. Her brother Roble is snatched off the street by a truckload of rebel soldiers looking for new recruits. Amina is left alone with her seven-month-pregnant mother and her frail grandmother.

Spilled Water by Sally Grindley. Bloomsbury, 2004.

Lu Su-yian is trapped first in domestic servitude in the apartment of a wealthy family who are looking for a wife for their mentally disabled son. Then, when she flees, she becomes a virtual prisoner, making toys for the West in one of China's many factories, the youngest of a horde of very young girls working very long hours of 'voluntary' overtime in appalling conditions. However, this is a girl who refuses to be a victim. She remembers always her father's words that 'The journey of a thousand miles starts from beneath your feet.'

Emilio by Sophie Masson and Lyn White. Allen & Unwin, 2014.

Emilio and his mother live very ordinary lives. But everything is overturned when drug lords mistake Emilio's mother for a wealthy businesswoman, kidnapping her and demanding a huge ransom that Emilio's family have no hope of paying.

Malini by Robert Hillman. Allen & Unwin, 2014.

The setting is a Tamil town on the east coast of Sri Lanka in 2009, not long before the end of the civil war. At dawn the soldiers round up everyone in Malini's village and herd them into a small 'no-fire zone' to be used as human shields. In the chaos, Malini manages to escape with her younger sister Banni. Together they embark on a dangerous journey of survival through disputed territory to try to reach their grandfather's village. On their way they are joined by other child refugees.

Zafir by Prue Mason. Allen & Unwin, 2015.

Zafir has lived a comfortable middle-class life in relative freedom in Dubai for years, but when his family returns home to Syria he is concerned about the repressive regime. As civil war erupts and his father is arrested, his life is irrevocably changed.

Trash by Andy Mulligan. David Fickling, 2010.

Set in the Philippines on a huge tip in Manila, this is the story of three boys who make their living scavenging on the tip. The tip is their home as well as their workplace. One day one of the boys discovers a bag, containing an identity card, a key and some money. The money is very welcome, but it soon becomes clear that the bag is much more valuable than it appears, when hordes of police descend on the tip offering large rewards for its recovery. The bag holds a deadly secret and the boys' decision to solve the mystery propels them into a very dangerous situation.

For more mature readers

The Moon at Nine by Deborah Ellis. Allen & Unwin, 2015.

Set in Iran in the late 1980s, this is a teenage lesbian romance that has disastrous consequences for both girls under a regime where homosexuality can lead to a death sentence. Ellis has drawn two complex and credible characters who are trapped in a world that will never accept them. The story is based on a real-life story and has been described as creative non-fiction.

ABOUT THE WRITERS

ROSANNE HAWKE

Rosanne Hawke lives in rural South Australia. Many of her books have been shortlisted or notable in Australian awards. *Taj and the Great Camel Trek* won the 2012 Adelaide Festival Award for Children's Literature and *The Messenger Bird* won the 2013 Cornish Holyer an Gof Award for YA literature. For ten years Rosanne was an aid worker and teacher in Pakistan and the Middle East. She is a Carclew, Asialink, Varuna, and May Gibbs Fellow, and a Bard of Cornwall. In her books she explores culture, history, social issues and relationships. She also teaches Creative Writing at Tabor Adelaide. *The Truth about Peacock Blue* is her twenty-fourth book.

HELEN SYKES

Helen Sykes has been involved in children's and young adult literature for many years as a manuscript assessor, teacher, editor, writer and presenter. She has written more than 20 books for teachers and students of secondary English and has produced units of work on fiction texts for textbooks. She presents regularly on new titles at conferences of English teachers and librarians, including presenting on young adult literature at the NSW English Teachers' Association Conference every year for more than thirty years. The notes she prepares for participants at such conferences are highly valued. Helen also conducts a course in young adult literature for the English classroom as part of the Masters of Education at the University of Western Sydney.

The Truth about Peacock Blue: Chapters 4-7

As you read Chapters 4-7, find answers to these questions:

Chapter 4

1. Who are Shahbaz Bhatti and Salman Taseer?

Chapter 5

2. Where does the name 'Peacock Blue' come from?

3. What does Colonel Rafique say about girls' education?

Chapter 6

4. What creatures can be found in Mrs Rafique's garden?

Chapter 7

5. What secret does Rabia tell Aster?

6. What is the epigraph that Maryam chooses for the blog she decides to write?

The Truth about Peacock Blue: Chapters 8-11

As you read Chapters 8-11, find answers to these questions:

Chapter 8

1. What mean trick does Saleema play on Aster?

2. How will Aster's husband be decided one day?

Chapter 9

3. According to Mrs Abdul, what would make Aster's study easier?

4. How real is Rabia's faith in Islam?

Chapter 10

5. When does Aster finally realise that the attack on Hadassah by the landlord's sons was a rape, leading to a pregnancy?

6. Why is the man Hadassah is to marry looking for a wife?

7. Aster realises that she knows what she wants in life. What is it?

Chapter 11

8. What name did Hadassah call her baby? Why does Aster think that's a good name?

The Truth about Peacock Blue: Chapters 12-15

As you read Chapters 12-15, find answers to these questions:

Chapter 12

1. A mullah on his way to the mosque heard Miss Saed-Ulla say that Aster would never wilfully blaspheme. The word 'blaspheme' is enough. In no time an angry crowd gathers. What is a 'mullah'? Check the glossary at the back of the book.

2. Aster says: 'I had never been touched like that by a man and the shock of it shamed me.' What is she referring to?

Chapter 13

3. How do the policemen treat Aster at the police station?

Chapter 14

4. What is Aster now called?

5. What does Aster call the fat guard?

6. Kamilah has been charged with adultery. What evidence would she have needed to prove that she was raped?

7. Hafsah is also in jail for blasphemy. Is she a Christian like Aster?

Chapter 15

8. Aster has a nightmare, which is partly about the Old Testament story of Joseph and the many-coloured coat. What name does she give Joseph?

9. Who is Aster's visitor?

The Truth about Peacock Blue: Chapters 16-19

As you read Chapters 16-19, find answers to these questions:

Chapter 16

1. What does Aster dream of?

2. Affat says that some imams in Pakistan are joining the protests against Aster's arrest. What is an 'imam'? Check the glossary at the back of the book.

Chapter 17

3. What is the name of the mother who has been on death row for more than five years for blasphemy?

4. Mrs Jamal has been unable to get bail for Aster, but, while that is a blow, she says that Aster will actually be safer in jail. Why?

Chapter 18

5. Hafsa's mother-in-law accused her of blasphemy because she wanted to get rid of her. Why?

Chapter 19

6. What has Mrs Abdul done with the evidence - Aster's examination paper?

7. Rashid says that his country is a 'theocracy'. What is a theocracy?

8. What will Aster and her family have to do if she is ever released?

The Truth about Peacock Blue: Chapters 20-23

As you read Chapters 20-23, find answers to these questions:

Chapter 20

1. What was Aster taught about Islam in the village school?

2. What privilege has Mrs Jamal been able to get for Aster?

Chapter 21

3. How does Aster learn about what happened to Malala?

4. Aster tells Jani the story of the Jewish queen. Why does she have to insist on seeing the king, even at risk to her life?

5. Jani has heard Aster talking. What does she say will happen to Aster?

Chapter 22

6. Why has Aster's trial been postponed again?

7. Aster has been having nightmares, but now she has a very different kind of dream. What does she dream of?

Chapter 23

8. How does the prosecuting lawyer twist Colonel's Rafique's testimony so that it seems that the Colonel has done something wrong in not persuading Aster to convert to Islam?

9. Why does Sammy suggest Skyping?

The Truth about Peacock Blue: Chapters 24-27

As you read Chapters 24-27, find answers to these questions:

Chapter 24

1. How many signatures does Maryam have for her petition at this stage?

2. What has happened to Mrs Jamal?

Chapter 25

3. How does Aster stop Karam from harassing her?

4. Who is Aster's new lawyer?

Chapter 26

5. What will be Aster's conditions in prison from now on?

6. Zaib says that she will be Aster's ghostwriter. What does that mean?

Chapter 27

7. Sammy's letter to Aster has lots of information, but he also reveals his feelings. What does Sammy tell Aster?

8. Aster sings as she writes. What does she sing of?

The orientation of the narrative Part 1

You know from your own story writing how important the orientation is: the opening when you tell your readers the 'who?' 'when?' and 'where?' of the story. Rosanne Hawke is an experienced storyteller who knows how to give us the answers to those questions while capturing our interest at the same time.

Re-read Chapter 1, pages 1-4. What essential information is contained here in the orientation of the novel? Make notes on what we learn about the 'who?' 'when?' and 'where?', using the specific questions below as a guide.

1. WHO?

A	What is the narrator's name? When do we find that out?	
B	What work does her father, her Abba, do?	
C	Why was the work of a tailor a good job for Ijaz?	
D	How old was Ijaz when he died?	
E	What does the narrator call her mother?	
F	What does she call her grandmother?	
G	Who taught the narrator to embroider the clothes her father and brother made?	
H	What is Barakat's relationship to the narrator?	
I	Another boy cousin is named in this chapter. Who is he?	
J	Where have Uncle Yusef, Aunty Noori and Maryam come from?	
K	What is the name of the narrator's closest cousin, who has moved away from the village? What clue is there in this first chapter that something happened to her?	
L	Did you find the clue that tells you that the narrator's extended family is quite large?	
M	What is the relationship of Colonel Rafique and Mrs Rafique to the family?	

next page →

2. WHEN?

A	What significant event has just occurred in the narrator's life?	
B	What clues are there that the story is set fairly recently - certainly in the twenty-first century?	
C	What happened to the village when the narrator was ten years old?	

3. WHERE?

A	When do we find out the name of the country where the story is set?	
B	What is the clue that tells you the specific region in that country?	
C	The narrator says that she and Ijaz were a good team; he and their cousin Sammy played a tabla, a hand drum, while she sang. Where did that happen?	
D	What are the houses like in the narrator's village?	
E	The narrator's grandmother has told her that morning that she too lost a brother. When did that happen?	

The orientation of the narrative Part 2

Work in a small group to read through the following and then discuss the questions at the end:

You have discovered a great deal of information that Rosanne Hawke provides us with in Chapter 1 about the 'who?', 'when?' and 'where?' of the story. As you know, writers make choices all the time about how they are going to tell their stories. Rosanne Hawke could have oriented us differently and more directly, something like this:

My name is Aster and I live in a small village in the north of Pakistan with my father, mother and grandmother. My brother Ijaz, who had always had breathing problems, died recently, aged fifteen. We were very close, especially as he spent so much time at home as he was ill. My father, who is a tailor, had taught him to make clothes, which I embroidered, using traditional designs that my grandmother taught me. Ijaz used to play the drum while my cousin Sammy and I sang in church. Sammy is one of many relatives who live in my little village. When Ijaz died, many other relatives came from the south in buses to the funeral, including another boy cousin Barakat. My mother's employers, Colonel and Mrs Rafique, were also there. My Australian uncle and aunt and my cousin Maryam from Australia arrived a few days later. My uncle had come from Australia some years earlier, when I was ten, to help re-build the village after our mud houses were swept away in a monsoon flood. He paid for the cement to re-build the school and church so that they would be able to resist future floods.

We were all terribly upset about Ijaz's death. I was sorry my favourite cousin Hadassah was away, but my Australian cousin Maryam was a great comfort.

Question 1 for discussion:

Is that orientation as good as the one that Rosanne Hawke has given us in Chapter 1 of *The Truth about Peacock Blue*? Nearly all the essential information seems to be there, and it is much more concise. Is it a better opening to the novel? Why or why not?

Question 2 for discussion:

When you finished reading Chapter 1 in the novel, did you want to keep reading? If so, why? Would you have kept reading if the novel had begun with the re-written version?

Question 3 for discussion:

Can you explain what features Rosanne Hawke has included in her orientation that are missing from the re-written version?

Imagery in *The Truth about Peacock Blue*

Activity 1

Rosanne Hawke uses lots of striking images in her novel. Some of them create a visual picture in our minds of what is being described; others help us to understand the emotions being expressed.

Most of the images in *The Truth about Peacock Blue* are similes, but Rosanne Hawke also uses metaphors. Decide whether each of the following images is a 'simile' or 'metaphor'..

A	The village was an ants' nest.	
B	I felt like a monkey in a zoo.	
C	Reading about Malala from the courageous daughter of such a brave man was like putting a match under a dying fire.	
D	This cell is a farmyard.	
E	The blasphemy law is like a huge army tank that has no brakes. It squashes everything in its path ...	
F	Like a cobra strike, Gazaalah belted me across the head.	
G	Prejudice is a dung heap. It seethes with life when it is left alone. We need to dig this dung heap up, spread it over the ground for the world to see.	
H	I felt the click of iron like a thud.	

Activity 2

Read through the following quotations. Do they come from *The Truth about Peacock Blue*? Explain why you think they do or they don't.

	Quotation	Yes/No	Why
A	The rickshaw idled, putt-putt-putt, like an outboard motor on a fishing boat.		
B	No wonder Mrs Abdul watched her like a bouncer looking for underage club goers.		
C	The exams loomed close like an optician adjusting glasses even Elton John wouldn't wear.		

continued next page →

Activity 2 continued

	Quotation	Yes/No	Why
D	I tried to pray, but my mind kept jumping like a kangaroo leaping fences.		
E	The taint of blasphemy stuck like super glue.		
F	I'd never heard her speak so sweetly, like a Macca's caramel sundae.		
G	Whatever was said, the prosecution would have turned it over like a Thai chef tossing the ingredients in his wok.		
H	I felt like I was standing at the entrance to a long underground pedestrian tunnel late at night, knowing I would have to walk through alone, not knowing who lurked within.		

Activity 3

Check the accuracy of the quotations in Question 2 above by looking them up in the novel and re-writing them if necessary. Here are the pages on which you will find them:

A	page 12	
B	page 38	
C	page 81	
D	page 110	
E	page 147	
F	page 203	
G	page 208	
H	page 178	

continued next page →

Activity 4

Find some more similes in *The Truth about Peacock Blue*.

a. What is the fat prison guard compared to on page 102?

b. What animal image is used to describe Hadassah's eyes on page 64?

c. What are the girls in the yard compared to on page 83?

d. What is the frantic pace of the wedding preparations compared to on page 60?

Note: The clever image of the 'optician adjusting glasses even Elton John wouldn't wear' has been borrowed from the novel *Triggers* by Robert J. Sawyer.

Issues for discussion

Here are some quotations from *The Truth about Peacock Blue*. Most of them are contentious: some people will agree with them strongly and others will disagree just as strongly. Some of the quotations contradict others here.

In small groups choose one of the quotations and prepare a presentation to the class where you argue your position on the idea expressed. Argue strongly for or against the idea.

After making your presentation to the class, the group members become a panel to be questioned by the rest of the class. You must defend your position.

1	'Girls should be educated as far as possible. Educate a girl like you and you educate a whole village.'
2	'Some Australians have never travelled and they're frightened of people different from themselves. They think if people like us are let into Australia, extremists will follow.'
3	'Religion always causes problems. I'm an atheist and I live in a progressive country where no one cares about religion. Nothing like this can happen.'
4	'...all people on earth are our neighbours.'
5	'Girls should not be educated. They are not as intelligent as boys and will become proud, make wrong decisions, and be difficult to handle.'
6	'I believe God prefers a relationship with us; he's after mercy not religion, grace not rules.'
7	'We need to stand together for freedom to believe what we want, or not to believe, without threat of violence.'
8	'When I hear about how asylum seeker children are treated I'm ashamed to say I'm Australian. The fear of others is corrupting our soul.'

Dramatisation

- 1.** Re-read the court case on pages 200-206, from the paragraph beginning 'The court was already filled ...' to Mrs Jamal saying to Aster, 'Don't give up hope.'
- 2.** Script the court scene. Include in your scene the evidence from Colonel Rafique, Mrs Abdul and Miss Saed-Ulla, Aster's statement, the judge's verdict, Mrs Jamal's angry response to the verdict, and the conversations that follow. In some cases the exact dialogue you will need is provided for you; for example, the exchange between Colonel Rafique and the prosecutor about why the Colonel had not tried to convert Aster or Mrs Jamal's questioning of Mrs Abdul. In other cases, you will have to expand on hints in the text; for example, Mrs Abdul's questioning of Colonel Rafique on page 200. You might even find that you have to make some things up to fill in gaps, so that the scene flows well.

You will need at a minimum the following characters: a judge, a prosecutor, Aster and the two policeman on either side of her, Mrs Jamal and her assistant, Colonel Rafique, Mrs Abdul and Miss Saed-Ulla. You can include others if you wish; for example, you might want to represent the audience in the courtroom, including the line of mullahs in the front row (page 203), who may react to evidence given in the witness box.
- 3.** Appoint a director. Allocate parts and rehearse the scene. You don't need to memorise your lines, but make sure that you are sufficiently familiar with them that you can say them fluently, without having to look down at the script in your hand too often.
- 4.** Perform the scene for the class.

Extend your vocabulary

1. Rosanne Hawke uses some very precise adjectives. Do you know the meaning of each of the following? Check a dictionary if you are not sure.

demure:	'Hadassah wouldn't tell us anything about him, which was demure ...' (page 76)
bereft:	(at Sammy's funeral) 'I was bereft.' (page 3) The word is also used on page 100 when the guard who showed some compassion leaves: 'I was shocked at how bereft that made me feel.'
aggressive:	'And the teacher is aggressive.' (page 19)
cataclysmic:	Gudiya, the family buffalo, was 'oblivious to the cataclysmic shift in our lives.' (page 4)
wary:	'I was wary. If I gave my full name, they'd all know my religion.' (page 103)
wilful:	'I could hear the judge pronouncing me wilful and guilty... ' (page 205)
proficient:	'If only he could come to school to teach us all Arabic, we'd be proficient in no time.' (page 66)
oblivious:	Gudiya, the family buffalo, was 'oblivious to the cataclysmic shift in our lives.' (page 4)

2. Show that you understand the meaning of these adjectives by choosing the correct one to fill the gap in each of the following sentences.

- a.** Her behaviour was always _____; she kept her eyes down in company and spoke only when she was spoken to.
- b.** I'd be _____ of him if I were you. He makes lots of grand promises, but whether he has any intention of carrying them out is another matter.
- c.** There is no need to be so _____ and threatening; I have no wish to fight you.
- d.** It was a major earthquake; the damage to the village was _____.
- e.** She is completely insensitive to the feelings of others; she insulted half the people in the room but she was _____ to the offence she had caused.
- f.** I knew I would miss my friend when his family moved overseas but I did not realise how _____ I would feel without his companionship.
- g.** In order to be _____ in any sport, you need to spend many hours practising the basic skills.
- h.** She pretends to be meek and obedient but she's actually quite _____, very much liking her own way.

YOUR OWN WRITING

A SHORT STORY

1. Aster tells Mrs Rafique that school is fine. 'How could I tell her about the discrimination I felt? She'd probably think I'd imagined it. Someone like her would never have felt any discrimination in her life.'

Do you think that Aster is right? Is it impossible to understand discrimination if you have never experienced it personally?

Have you ever experienced discrimination? Have you felt as if you were treated differently from others because of who you are – your race, your gender, even your height or your weight?

Write a story about discrimination.

Decide before you begin to write on the narrative voice you will use. Will you tell the story in the first-person, from the viewpoint of the person who is discriminated against? Will you use limited third-person, writing from the point of view of someone in the story who observes and comments on what is happening? Or will you be an omniscient, all-knowing and all-seeing, narrator, writing in the third person but knowing what all characters are thinking and feeling?

A REPORT

2. 'And one person can start'. This is what Maryam says in the first entry of her blog when she is talking about changing 'the things we don't need in our world, step by step'. Can one person change the world?

Write a report on someone you admire who changed the world in some way.

If you can't think of someone, you could choose one of the people mentioned in *The Truth about Peacock Blue*: Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr or Malala Yousafzai.

JOURNAL ENTRIES

3. When Aster is about to start high school, she says that she feels 'excited ... but hesitant too'. Can you remember a time when you felt like that? It might have been when you started high school, or some other time when you faced a new challenge: the first time you flew in a plane; your first visit to a new country (perhaps the country that your family had come from); the first time you played in an important team or took part in a public performance.

Write a journal entry about that experience.

4. In her first blog entry, Maryam wonders what her life would have been like if her father had not won the scholarship that eventually led to him becoming a dentist in Australia. She comments that even the customs in church are different: 'Men and women and children all sit together in family groups' (page 41), whereas in Pakistan men and older boys sit on one side and women and children on the other.

Maryam must notice many other differences when she visits her relatives in Pakistan. Did you notice that, while there is obviously electricity in Aster's house (as they have a computer), their cousin Afia explains that in their home they only have lamps. What would an Australian girl like Maryam think of a life without electricity? What would an Australian girl like Maryam think about getting married, as Hadassah does, and moving in with her new husband's parents, his three sisters and his brother's family?

As we read the novel, we discover a great many details about Aster's home life and about the life of her village. Make a list of details that you remember, covering such things as:

- what the houses in the village are like

(cont. over)

- the way neighbours share such things as Aster's family's computer
- the way neighbours even cook together regularly, like Aster and Sammy's families
- what Aster's room was like (she remembers it while in prison, on page 118)
- the fact that there are communal latrines that the villagers dig, not in-house toilets
- the transport relatives use when they come to visit
- the chores Aster is expected to do (there are clues on page 81)
- what school is like, including the way Aster is expected to learn.

Write a journal entry in which Maryam speculates on what her life might have been like if her father had stayed in Pakistan.

A DRAMATIC SCENE

5. As you know, one of the first and most important decisions a storywriter must make is to choose the narrative point of view. Hawke chose to tell the story in the voice of the main character, Aster, but there are many other possibilities.

Write one scene from the story in a different voice.

Choose from the following voices:

- Sammy
- Colonel Rafique
- Rabia
- Kamilah

TEXTING

6. Sammy probably messaged Barakat regularly about what was happening.

Write three or four messages from Sammy to Barakat and include Barakat's replies.

BLOGGING

7. Maryam's first blog entries occur on pp.40-1, pp.57-8 and p.68. All these entries are written before Aster is charged with blasphemy. Choose one of these blog entries and **write your own message, responding either to what Maryam has written or to one of the other posters.**

Maryam's blog continues after Aster is charged. Now the entries are all dedicated to attracting attention to her situation. Re-read these blog entries, on p.113, pp.132-3, p.160, p.174, pp.186-7, p.209, pp.226-7 and pp.252-3. **Choose any one of these blog entries and write your own message, again responding either to what Maryam has written or to one of the other posters.**

8. Maryam calls her blog 'Step by Step' and she has an epigraph:

To see a world where freedom, peace and justice reign.

Create a title and choose or make up an epigraph for a blog that you would like to write. (A dictionary of quotations - either online or from your library's bookshelves - can be a great source of epigraphs.)

Outline the topics you would like to cover in your blog and write your first blog post. Email that first post to three people in your class and ask them to make comments.

Religion in *The Truth about Peacock Blue*

Read the following conflicting quotations from the novel.

- Can you identify whose point of view each one represents?
- Which ones do you agree with?
- Which ones do you think Rosanne Hawke might agree with?

'Religion always causes problems. I'm an atheist and I live in a progressive country where no one cares about religion. Nothing like this can happen.'

'I agree religions cause trouble, especially ones built on inflexible rituals and rules which open the way to prejudice. I believe God prefers a relationship with us and flexible hearts; he's after mercy not religion, grace not rules.'

'Who would want to change their religion if they were Muslim?'

'If you lived in a country like mine that has a state religion, you'd be put in jail for not believing. That also can be called blasphemy.'

'I knew then religion was just culture to her; whichever suited her best was what she'd say she believed. How many said they believed because it was expected, because they were born here?'

'I don't believe in religion but if I did I'd know God wouldn't want people killing each other.'

'I know about Islam and was taught to respect it as one of the world's great religions. We studied Hinduism too.'

'Australia's constitution prohibits a state religion.'

'If God wanted her to change religions he would have put it in her heart to do so.'