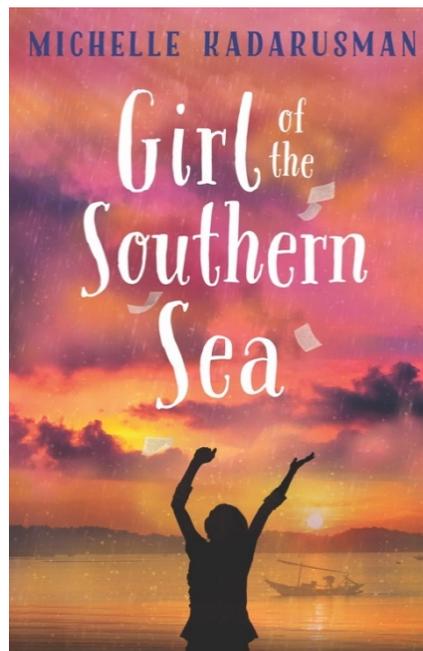


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# GIRL OF THE SOUTHERN SEA

## Michelle Kadarusman



### Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian  
in context with the Australian curriculum  
(English)

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**SYNOPSIS**

As a young girl, Nia created stories about her heroine, the mythical Javanese princess Dewi Kadita. Now fourteen, Nia is desperate to continue her education and become a writer, however, high school tuition fees are beyond her means. Her father sells banana fritters at the train station, but he drinks most of their earnings away. Left to run the household, the food cart and care for her little brother, it seems Nia will forever be trapped in the impoverished slums of Jakarta.

But Nia is determined to defy her unfortunate circumstances. After she survives a minibus accident, she is convinced by an onlooker to charge double for her fried bananas because she has been blessed by 'good luck magic'. She quickly discovers though, that selling superstitions is dishonest, and before long, her future slips further from her grasp. Determined to write her own story, she summons tremendous courage to pursue her dreams.

*Girl of the Southern Sea* is an inspiring novel about the power of storytelling, and the importance of hope, grit and independence.

**THEMES**

- Courage
- Friendship
- Poverty
- Javanese folktales
- Hope
- Storytelling
- Education
- Indonesia

**WRITING STYLE**

*Girl of the Southern Sea* is told through the first-person perspective of Nia. By integrating Nia's narration with her stories about Dewi Kadita and dreams of her mother, Kadarusman effectively entwines themes of love and loss to highlight the power of storytelling. Her stark depiction of setting and characters creates an engaging, often confronting text that reflects notions of right and wrong in an environment in which basic needs are rarely met. Not only that, it shares difficult stories inspired by the realities of girls in Indonesia. This results in a book that is difficult to put down, with broad appeal to early adolescent readers. In addition,

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the author's effective use of figurative language strengthens a sense of connection with Nia and her story. Importantly, *Girl of the Southern Sea* does not offer simple solutions; rather, it weaves together Nia's story in a way that demonstrates her willingness and ability to stand up for herself. It is certainly a text that helps readers to appreciate the value of education, health care, and legitimate systems of justice, but also the importance of hope and courage.

**STUDY NOTES:**

- The first chapter introduces readers to the slums of Jakarta. How do the opening paragraphs of *Girl of the Southern Sea* reveal Nia's situation? How has the author evoked an instant sense of empathy with Nia? Why is it important that readers feel a connection with a novel's protagonist?
- As you read the text, take note of the way the author describes the setting. What language features has she used to depict the slums of Jakarta so vividly?
- After reading Chapter 1, make predictions about the story. Continue to revisit and revise these predictions as you read.
- Use Chapter 2 to examine the literal and implied information that shows how poor Nia and her family are.
- How do we know that the relationship between Bapak and his children is deteriorating? Why is he so dismissive of Rudi?
- Why is the wedding chest so precious to Nia? Why does she look at its treasures so often? How does the kebaya and gold comb play such a special role in *Girl of the Southern Sea*?
- Discuss the author's use of figurative language throughout the text. Examples include:
  - A hulking figure is looming towards me, swaying from side to side like an overloaded train carriage (p. 4)
  - The morning air hangs heavy with heat (p. 8)
  - ... the early dawn doesn't provide relief from the suffocating temperature (p. 8)
  - A sour smell wafts from his body (p. 8)
  - His feet poke out from the blanket like small brown rabbit ears (p. 9)
  - His heavy shuffle and hooded eyelids betray his hangover (p. 12)
  - She snickers in a way that stirs a fire inside my belly (p. 20)

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- ... shacks along the train tracks ... shake like there's an earthquake every time a train goes by (p. 22)
- Eating one of her banana fritters was like biting into a sweet cloud (p. 24)
- '... you kicked like an angry water buffalo' (p. 25)
- 'He was howling in pain like a speared boar' (p. 40)
- ... there is a line-up snaking its way from the door out to the street (pp. 43–44)
- His skin looks angry – it is raw and blistering where the hot oil has fried it (p. 48)
- The doctor ... interrupts the flood of memories (p. 49)
- Soot from exhaust fumes creeps up my nostrils and clings to my skin, coating me in a film of grime and sweat (p. 60)
- I swallow my fury and bury my face in my hands (p. 64)
- His voice ... sounds thick with sleep (p. 74)
- The night sky ... is ... a cobalt blanket littered with sparkling jewels. The jewels are stars ... (p. 78)
- The passing traffic swirls up blankets of dust that sting my eyes (p. 85)
- 'She landed light as a feather' (p. 90)
- I feel like the wind has been completely knocked out of me (p. 92)
- Others watch me intently like I am a rare bird that might flap away any second (p. 109)
- ... words stick in my throat (p. 112)
- The mob disbands and melts back into the market (p. 137)
- ... the lid gapes open like the mouth of a dead animal (p. 145)
- Then anger rises up in me like a tidal wave (p. 157)
- My head rattles as I try to make sense of the information (p. 162)
- His slap is sharp, and the pain flashes bright (p. 173)
- Kids dive in from the muddy riverbank, their heads popping up like corks from under the brown water (p. 189)
- Industrial areas give way to a patchwork of rice plateaus (p. 193)
- Why is Nia sceptical about the stories in the *Flying Gazette*? Why has the author included this element to the story?
- How important is education to Nia? How do we know? Why isn't it as important to Yuli?
- Discuss the way in which the author drip-feeds details about Nia's mother to readers. Why has she done this in this way?

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- Create a visual representation that contrasts the shack in the slums with the Lembang house Mama and Bapak dreamt of building (see p. 23).
- How important are Nia's stories to Rudi? Why does he love to hear them repeatedly?
- How does the funeral for Nia's mother show how very loved she was? How does this help you to empathise with Bapak?
- Nia loves to write stories about Dewi Kadita. Using some of her ideas on p. 31, write your own Dewi Kadita folktale.
- Explore folktales from your own culture. Share these with the class.
- Discuss the relationship between Nia and Rudi. Why are they so important to one another?
- How does Nia use writing and the stories of Dewi Kadita to help her?
- Nia says, 'the only way to quiet my thoughts is to write' (p. 64). What does she mean by this? In a reflection, discuss how you quiet your thoughts.
- Nia writes Rudi a story for his birthday. Write a story of your own to give to a friend or relative as a gift.
- In what ways does Nia reach out to Jango? Why does he help her? Discuss the role of Jango in the story. In what ways does his character develop throughout the text?
- Discuss the role played by Mr Surat in *Girl of the Southern Sea*. Who, in your personal journey, is your 'Mr Surat'? Share in a reflection.
- In the role of Nia, write a journal entry to express your bittersweet feelings about having good grades but not enough money to attend high school.
- What impact does Alit's death have on Nia? Why does she apologise to him after her ordeal with the mob?
- Why does Nia go along with Oskar's plan to double the price of her banana fritters? At what point does she begin to have regrets about this?
- What were your initial thoughts when Big Sula's mother bought fritters from Nia? Why was this included in the text?
- In the role of Nia, write and perform a monologue to express your feelings towards Bapak.
- Why is Jimi so disappointed in Nia? How does this prompt her to act in a manner more commensurate with her values?
- How do Nia's choices damage her relationships? How does she restore these?

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- Why does Ibu Jaga step in when the mob attacks Nia? Discuss her statement: 'She has been foolish, but ... it is not up to you to judge her. That is for God only. Shame on all of you.' (p. 136) How is this critical to the themes of *Girl of the Southern Sea*?
- Ibu Jaga reveals her own experiences of abuse to help Nia understand the difference between right and wrong. In your own words, explain how the author uses Ibu Jaga to express this important lesson.
- Why doesn't Bapak tell Nia about Suna and Tomi? How would you feel if you were Nia? Why is Nia so accepting of them?
- Nia is sick of being referred to as 'a girl like me' (p. 180). How does this realisation allow her to pursue her goals? Discuss the significance of her statement that 'You just see a poor girl, but that is not who I am' (p. 180).
- What does Nia really mean when she declares 'I am the Girl of the Southern Sea' (p. 180)?
- What is the significance of Ibu Jaga bringing flower stems and pandan leaves to Nia?
- What does Nia mean when she says 'I will write my own story' (p. 191)?
- Sketch the scene depicted on p. 195 of Nia and Yuli at Pelabuhan Ratu. How does this adventure reflect the depth of their friendship?
- What character strengths does Nia possess? What can you learn from her? Share in a reflection.
- In pairs, choose a scene from *Girl of the Southern Sea* to perform to your class.
- In the role of Nia, write a description of the Sea Queen Festival (see Chapter 32).
- Nia is invigorated and inspired by visiting the ocean where her heroine's story began. What place would hold the same significance for you? Share in a reflection.
- Re-read pp. 196–197. Why is this such a powerful and fitting way for *Girl of the Southern Sea* to conclude? How has the author successfully brought Dewi Kadita, Nia's mother and Nia together on these pages?
- How is Dewi Kadita a metaphor for Nia's personal journey?
- Create a character profile of Nia, outlining her traits. Support your ideas with evidence from the text.
- Describe the relationship between Nia and her mother. Why does Jango say she is just like her (see Chapter 12)?

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- Discuss the roles played by Mama Tutti and Ibu Jaga in *Girl of the Southern Sea*. Why are characters like these necessary?
- In what ways is *Girl of the Southern Sea* a story about courage? Use evidence from the text to support your ideas.
- What is your biggest takeaway from reading *Girl of the Southern Sea*?
- Write a chapter of *Girl of the Southern Sea* from Yuli's perspective.
- Using the chapter headings as a guide, outline the main plot points of *Girl of the Southern Sea* on an illustrated story map.
- What role do characters such as Ibu Merah and Big Sula play in *Girl of the Southern Sea*?
- Investigate organisations that help girls like Nia. As a class, decide on what action you can take to improve the educational prospects of girls in Nia's situation.

**AUTHOR MOTIVATION**

I've known many girls like Nia and interviewed many more for this story. The most common complaint voiced is always the lack of opportunities, most especially education. Education is recognised as a human right in most countries because it has a huge impact on the trajectory of a young person's life; without it the poverty cycle continues. Since childhood I have been fascinated with Javanese mythology and I found inspiration in the legend of Nyai Roro Kidul (Queen of the Southern Sea) as a way for Nia's character to find the resolve to challenge her situation. I also recognised in Dewi Kadita the courage and strength I saw in all of the young women I interviewed. As I mention in the author's note, stories like Nia's occur all over the world, not just in Indonesia. Poverty, forced marriage, lack of health care and education are global issues that I hope to address in this book.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Michelle Kadarusman is an Australian-Indonesian children's author. She grew up in Melbourne and has lived many years throughout Indonesia, and in Canada. Her novels have been nominated for various awards and honours including the Canadian Governor General's Awards, USBBY Outstanding International Book, Malka Penn Award for Human Rights in Children's Literature and American Junior Library Guild Gold Star selections. Her other titles include *The Theory of Hummingbirds* and *Music for Tigers*.