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THIS ONE IS OURS

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Teachers' Notes

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

ISBN: 978 0 7022 6028 5 / AUS \$19.99

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SYNOPSIS

When Francophile Sofie becomes an exchange student, she cannot wait to experience the Paris of her dreams. Bolstered by her artistic and romantic nature, she seeks wrought-iron balconies and flower-filled window boxes only to find a cold and grey France in her grungy arrondissement of Belleville.

Feelings of homesickness and alienation force her to dig deep. Her slowly developing friendship with host sister Delphine and overnight chats with best friend Crow help Sofie to challenge her preconceptions and discover a depth to herself she never knew existed.

Set against the backdrop of the yellow vest protests and Notre Dame fire, *This One is Ours* pays homage to the actions that instigate change, the expression of protest through art, and the power of finding one's voice.

THEMES

- Friendship
- Family
- Resilience
- Courage
- Action
- Climate Change
- Social Justice
- France and French culture
- Art

WRITING STYLE

This One is Ours is written in first person, present tense, and is suitable for an adolescent audience. The narrative cleverly interweaves the background of the French Revolution and the 1968 Paris protests with modern-day issues affecting the world such as climate change and the widening gap between the wealthy and poor. This is truly a coming-of-age story, as Sofie peels back her romanticism to discover an intense and true connection with art. Her character development from beginning to end is highly plausible, growing from a young girl infatuated by romance and 'tiny beautifuls' to a young woman prepared to act. The text incorporates French language and culture, figurative language and evocative writing, making it an engaging and rich text for class study.

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STUDY NOTES

- The opening line of *This One is Ours* immediately hooks the reader. Discuss the way in which the author has successfully drawn readers so quickly into the text. After reading this line, compare it with the front cover. Make predictions about how this story may progress from this initial line.
- At the start of the novel, Sofie is a dreamer, an artist and a romantic. Which of these characteristics change throughout the novel, and which stay the same? After reading the first chapter, discuss what we know about Sofie's character. As the narrative continues, create a character profile of Sofie, noting how the characters, settings and events of the text influence her development.
- Throughout *This One is Ours*, Sofie loves walking. What does she gain from these walks? How do these walks not only underpin her exhibition works, but also her coming of age?
- Sofie spends her time looking for 'tiny beautifuls' (p. 2). What does she mean by this? Does she still look for tiny beautifuls at the end of the text? Discuss.
- What role does Crow play in *This One is Ours*? Why is she a necessary inclusion in the text? In what ways is she like Delphine?
- Discuss the importance of Hana in Sofie's life. How has Hana helped Sofie become the best version of herself? In what ways have your siblings helped do this for you, and you for them? Share in a reflection.
- When applying for her exchange, Sofie lists her strengths as having a sense of adventure and resilience. In what ways are these not 'technically accurate' (p. 13) at the start of the text? How does she prove these to be strengths as the story progresses? If you were applying for an exchange, what would you list as your strengths (or soon-to-be strengths)? Share with a friend.
- Sofie says that her love for art and philosophy came 'straight from [her] heart' (p. 13). How is this verified in *This One is Ours*?
- Discuss the use of figurative language throughout the text, especially their contribution to the narrative. Examples include:
 - I stick to the shadows, flutter like leaves falling from trees (p. 1)
 - Excitement floods through me (p. 8)
 - He looks confident and has ruddy cheeks like an illustration of a farmer in a children's storybook (p. 15)
 - It's like putting my face in the freezer (p. 17)
 - We all pile in like popes in a Volkswagen (p. 17)
 - I still feel like I'm listening underwater though (p. 43)
 - Getting over jet lag is like having a bad flu – like I'm weak and dragging my whole weight around (p. 43)
 - His smile caused molten gold to run through my blood (p. 52)

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- A little bit of homesickness stabs me and the aftershocks echo with a feeling of creeping disappointment (p. 65)
- They are like a soothing balm four times a week (p. 87)
- Olivier lights his cigarette like he should be advertising them (p. 89)
- I feel crushed – heavy with expectation and dizzy with fighting against gravity. I feel magnetised. (p. 93)
- My heart! It smashes against my breastbone. (p. 97)
- I lie in bed and feel as though I am floating on a wide, calm sea (p. 128)
- You have to say hello to everyone here otherwise you belong on the top step of rudeness (p. 150)
- He has a delicate cream-coloured scarf knotted around his neck, looking like he has just stepped out of a Romantic painting (p. 150)
- When I arrive back at the house, the smell of coffee, laundry detergent, and even the musty elevator, envelops me and welcomes me home (p. 154)
- He leans into my touch like a cat nuzzling (p. 157)
- I feel his hand on my waist and hope I don't liquefy under his touch (p. 163)
- I am smitten like a kitten (p. 164)
- We ... look out over the watery dawn of Paris (p. 173)
- Why does Sofie say that 'Belleville is...certainly not the Cartier in the jewellery box in this city' (p. 18)? How and why does her view change by the end of the novel?
- Why does Sofie feel so elated after having her first breakfast in Paris? What does she mean when she says, 'I know it's just breakfast, but it's what the breakfast represents' (p. 24)?
- Although only appearing briefly at the beginning and again towards the end of the text, what role do the other exchange students play in *This One is Ours*? Why are they a necessary inclusion?
- Sofie says she 'can't formulate words to express the scope for [her] love for art' (p. 31). What words would you use to describe the place of art in her life? What do you love in this way? Why?
- Before meeting Delphine, Sofie already feels intimidated by her. Why is this?
- Sofie describes her feelings of being in Paris: 'My heart leaps again and again as I walk along the Seine, the Eiffel Tower just eiffeling away' (p. 35). Remembering a place that you have loved visiting, describe your experience.
- If you have visited Paris, what of Sofie's experiences can you relate to? If not, what about her story entices you to the City of Lights?

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- How does Sofie feel when submerged into French society so holistically? Why does she get frustrated when people speak English to her? Why does she secretly like it when the French make mistakes with their English?
- Why does Sofie feel ‘outside of [herself]’ after her first few days in Paris, being ‘excited and happy and disappointed, all at the one time’ (p. 40)?
- Sofie says that ‘the stone buildings cry out for me to touch them. To run my hand across their smooth surfaces and fall into history through them’ (p. 35). How does history embed itself into her story?
- Sofie decides to keep a journal to record her experiences, although instead of just words, she includes sketches, mind maps and labelled drawings. Keep a journal of Sofie’s experiences as you read *This One is Ours*.
- Sofie is homesick and reaches out to Crow for support. Have you ever felt homesick? Write a reflection to share.
- Discuss the importance of setting in *This One is Ours*. How is the ‘clichéd’ Paris contrasted with the ‘real’ Paris? Why is the distinction an important one to make? How has it been created?
- How are Sofie and Crow a perfect match for one another? How do they balance one another?
- Why is Sofie’s relationship with Olivier an important plot point to include in *This One is Ours*? Justify your thinking with evidence from the text.
- Sofie says that she feels ‘both worried I am wasting my time and impatient for the exchange to be over. And I’m confused at how I can even feel these two competing feelings at the same time’ (p. 65). Why doesn’t Sofie want her family to know about her ‘wobbles’ and feelings of loneliness? What advice would you give to Sofie about this?
- Why does her art teacher, Veronique, tell Sofie to ‘stop thinking so much’ and to ‘let [herself] fail’ (pp. 72–73)? How can you apply this advice to your own life?
- How does her visit to the Musée d’Orsay with Delphine awaken ‘something inside [Sofie’s] brain’ (p. 86)?
- After her day with Delphine, why does Sofie now see Belleville differently, ‘like the way people become better looking over time, as you get to know them’? In what ways is Sofie beginning to see and ‘love this real version of Paris’ (p. 86)?
- Why does Sofie feel ‘seen by [Olivier]...[and] beautiful when he looks at [her]’ (p. 92)? How does this relate to her tiny beautifuls?
- When the explosion occurs and the metro closes, Sofie thinks about Crow and her anger towards injustice. Why does it take the explosion for Sofie to better understand Crow’s point of view?
- Why does Delphine hide the fact she does volunteer work from her parents? What comment is the author making about the temptation for

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good deeds to become competitive among some members of the population?

- Discuss the following statement: 'Whether we know it or not, all art is political' (p. 127).
- When her grandfather's home is lost to the bushfires back home, Sofie begins to question whether she is 'just as culpable as those who perpetuate this devastation' (p. 136). What does she mean? Do you agree with her? Why? Why have issues such as the Amazon fires, Great Barrier Reef bleaching and Bezos's Amazon workers been included at this point? What prompts Sofie to want to stop '[covering] up reality' by turning to 'something pretty'? Is she justified in questioning if 'remaining ignorant about those truths [is] damaging the world' (p. 137)? Discuss.
- What is the significance of Sofie saying 'I am older than I was this morning. I am different. I have cracked open' (p. 140)?
- What does Sofie mean when she says 'distractions come easily when you live in pursuit of beauty' (p. 145)? Why does she wonder if 'we [are] doomed to make the same mistakes on a loop'? To what mistakes is she referring?
- After reading further about the Situationists and their views on capitalist greed, create your own pamphlets and posters about current issues that should be the target of change.
- Explain in your own words what Guy Debord means by the 'Spectacle' (p. 149). What are your views of this theory? What evidence is there of the Spectacle in modern society? How do social media platforms such as Instagram feed into the notion of the Spectacle? How has the author used Sofie's Instagram posts to comment on the dangers of social media in perpetuating the Spectacle? How do we break the cycle of the Spectacle?
- What do you learn about French culture and customs by reading *This One is Ours*? How are these different from in Australia? Why is it important to understand and respect such differences when abroad?
- Discuss Sofie's question: 'Just because something is nice to look at, does that mean it's worthy of the looking?' (p. 156). How is this reflected in her relationship with Olivier?
- In the role of Sofie, complete a journal entry about your *dérive* with Olivier and the others.
- Study images of the posters from the 1968 protests showing the iconic factory with the fist. Why does Sofie see these as 'historical documents [and] creative expressions of the time' (p. 176). Discuss whether you agree that they are worthy as art.
- Why does Sofie want to start seeing less of Olivier?
- Explain what Sofie means when she continually says 'the world is ending'.

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- Why does Sofie describe standing with the locals as they sing ‘the cathedral down’ as ‘beautiful’ (p. 181)?
- What point is the author making when Sofie’s photo of Notre Dame burning becomes her most liked and shared Insta photo?
- Sofie wonders ‘how do you decide what cause is worth fighting for the most’ (p. 185). Discuss as a class.
- Discuss the importance of Sofie’s realisation that she too is privileged, even though she has had to scrimp and save for her trip to France. Why does Hana say ‘we might be privileged, but we’re also smart enough to know it ... we also have perspective’ (p. 188)? What message is the author conveying to her audience?
- Why is Sofie concerned that ‘by 2030, the richest one percent will own two-thirds of global wealth,’ yet Olivier seems unfazed (p. 191)? What point is the author making?
- How does Sofie’s visit to Versailles verify her opinions even further?
- What is the significance of Sofie, Crow and Delphine having their own *dérive*? Why does Sofie come away thinking of her friendship with Crow, ‘I am in love with how our friendship has grown’ (p. 202)?
- Why does Sofie take so much heart from the supermarket growing its own tomatoes on the roof (p. 203)? In what ways does this offer positive and future-oriented solutions to modern problems?
- Locate and discuss examples of ‘culture jamming’. Create your own satirical posters to reflect the themes of *This One is Ours*.
- In what ways does Sofie take Hana’s advice to go ‘headfirst’ (p. 222)?
- Write and present a persuasive piece responding to Sofie’s realisation that ‘Time is cyclical. It’s time to learn from our mistakes’ (p. 230).
- After reading *This One is Ours*, answer the question asked by Sofie: Is art important?
- Why has Sofie used a 1968 slogan for her exhibition piece: *I Have Something To Say But I Don’t Know What* (p. 242)?
- Discuss the symbolism of Sofie leaving her cigarette to burn itself out at Deux Magots (p. 250).
- Why, on her last day in Paris, does Sofie feel ready to go home (p. 252)? What is the significance of her spending time on this day in the Montparnasse Cemetery?
- How, according to Sofie, is both Paris, and indeed the whole world, like an onion (p. 255)?
- Discuss the concluding line of *This One is Ours*: ‘The world might be ending, but we’re only just beginning’ (p. 256).
- How important is finding one’s voice? How can this be achieved? Discuss.

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- In groups of four, play your own version of the 'exquisite corpse game' (p. 91), either through drawings or as a story.
- Discuss how the yellow vests, French Revolution and 1968 Paris protests come together to show the importance of a collective voice.
- In the role of Sofie, use details from the text to create a scrapbook that reflects your time in France.
- How has the author used the motif of light throughout the text to reflect Sofie's journey?
- Discuss the significance of the title, *This One is Ours*? How is this reflected in the themes and concepts of the novel?
- What do you think is the author's main message in this text? How does the book's cover tie the elements of this message together?

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

In my undergrad years I was completely taken by the May '68 student riots that we covered in my twentieth-century French history course. The barricades, the anger, the poster art, the way the students' rebellion sparked industrial action across the country. My interest hasn't really gone away, and over the years I've looked at it this way and that, and my perspective has changed and deepened. Each year on 10 May – the anniversary of 'the night of the barricades' – I take as a ritual reminder to think about what I believe is worth fighting for.

I began writing the story that would eventually become *This One is Ours* way back in 2006, the year I lived in France. But it wasn't until the past few years that the fully formed character of Sofie turned up and demanded her story to be told. It was Greta Thunberg and the global School Strike for Climate movement that breathed life and determination into the book. The art and the imagery from 1968 still captivates me, but the action we're seeing now – especially from young people – around the world is more inspiring. Now more than ever we need real social change.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kate O'Donnell is a writer, editor and bookseller specialising in children's and young adult literature. She has a BA in History and French from the University of Melbourne and studied Professional Writing and Editing at RMIT. Her first novel, *Untidy Towns*, was shortlisted for the Indie Book Award and the Readings Young Adult Book Prize in 2018. *This One is Ours* is her second novel.