

Teachers' Notes
by
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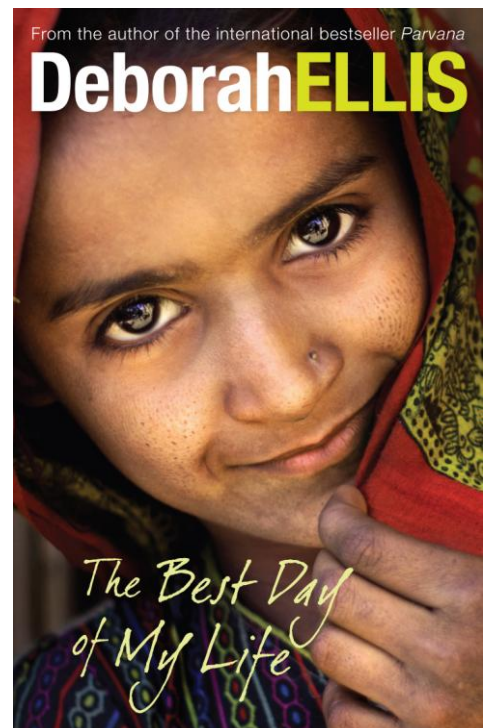
The Best Day of My Life
by
Deborah Ellis

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Recommended for ages 11-14+ yrs

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Introduction	2
Plot summary.....	2
Use in the curriculum	3
Themes	4
Study of literature.....	6
Activities	9
Preliminary	9
Organising information	9
Creative writing	10
Research	11
Discussion and debate.....	12
Reflection	13
Art, drama and creation	14
After reading	14
Resources and further reading	15
About the writers	17



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INTRODUCTION

PLOT SUMMARY

Valli is a happy girl. Even though she is poor and orphaned and spends her days picking up pieces of coal and fighting with her cousins, Valli never complains. She doesn't know any life other than this one. Valli lives in India, in a town called Jharia. She likes living here. The only bad thing about Jharia is the 'monsters' who live on the other side of the train tracks. These 'monsters' suffer from a disease called leprosy but Valli and her cousins don't know that. They think the monsters are cursed and that if they go near them they will become cursed too.

One day Valli's world gets turned upside-down when she discovers the aunt she's been living with is not her aunt at all. She was paid to adopt Valli. Valli is so hurt she decides to run away. She ends up in the bustling, crowded, colourful city of Kolkata.

Valli's life on the street is exciting at times, but other times it's hard. Valli has to find somewhere new to sleep every night and she is often hungry. But still Valli is happy. She discovers she really doesn't need much to live. And when she has to run away from people chasing her for stealing or sleeping in their property, Valli is happy to discover that even though her bare feet are cut and bruised, she somehow feels no pain.

But when she meets a doctor while begging by the River Ganges, Valli finds out she has leprosy. That's why her feet feel no pain. She is a monster like the ones who lived across the train tracks. The doctor puts Valli in a room full of more of these monsters. Valli is so scared and upset she runs away again to the streets.

Will she live there forever? Will she die there? Or will she go back to the kind doctor and find out she's not a monster after all?

The Best Day of My Life is a quick, exciting read that also addresses serious social problems, philosophy and morality. It will open the eyes of students to a very different world from the one they are living in. In addition to this, it is at times a very funny read and features a delightfully feisty narrator!

Reviews of the Canadian edition, titled *No Ordinary Day*

'The story highlights not only the overcoming of adversity, but also the importance of education and literacy. It also brings to light the issue of leprosy, which is misunderstood. An important, inspiring tale.'

- *School Library Journal*

'...solid and worthy of attention by both its intended audience and adults alike...Ellis continues to write what needs to be read...Recommended.'

- *CM Magazine*

'Ellis's straightforward language and uncompromising depictions of Valli's unimaginably harsh and gritty world combine with believable character development to create a strong and accessible novel.'

- *Publishers Weekly*

'A true-to-life portrait of a young girl's cheerful selfishness in this surprisingly optimistic novel of unrelenting poverty.'

- *Kirkus Reviews*

'Ellis is a passionate and respectful teacher...'

- *Quill and Quire*

USE IN THE CURRICULUM

Suitable for students aged 9+, particularly Years 6 to 8.

The Best Day of My Life is recommended for students aged 9 to 13. Consequently, these notes are aimed at upper primary and lower secondary classrooms (Middle School). The activities are designed to be used mainly as part of an English program, although given that the book tells the story of a young girl growing up in poverty-stricken India, there is also a strong SOSE component.

Key Learning Areas

English, Creative Writing, SOSE, Art, Drama. Also includes some areas that may be explored as part of a science curriculum.

Values

A sense of identity; belonging; social justice; doing your best; education and knowledge; inclusion; interpersonal and intercultural understanding; honesty and trustworthiness; care and compassion; family.

Themes

Culture and identity; isolation; homelessness; understanding each other; tradition and heritage; other cultures; poverty; disease; philanthropy; right and wrong; the treatment of women; the treatment of children; the philosophy of happiness; family; the importance of physical beauty; self-sufficiency and independence; survival; overcoming adversity; what is 'important' in life.

Students can achieve outcomes in the following areas:

- Reflecting on text
- Shared reading
- Creative responses to text
- Speaking and Listening
- Research
- Debate
- Visual exploration of story

The Best Day of My Life is suitable as a class text, being a novel which has the potential for enriching students' lives and expanding the scope of their experience and knowledge. It can lead to in-depth discussions about poverty, disease, life in contemporary India and also, on a more general level, appreciating the good things in the lives that we lead.

- Students can learn new vocabulary through the use of Indian words throughout the novel.
- They can also use Valli's experiences as a catalyst to think about their own life and memories.
- They can use key scenes in the book as a catalyst for their own creative writing, drama and art.
- They can debate the ethics behind key scenes in the book.
- They can also learn about the diseases suffered by characters in the book, and the sciences of medicine and biology.

- They can come to a greater understanding of the psychology and philosophy of happiness.
- The book can also lead to philosophical discussions on right and wrong, and good and evil.

Note to teachers:

Sections of this book may be distressing to young readers, in particular, the descriptions of Valli's injuries, and the injuries of the other leprosy sufferers she encounters. There are also scenes which involve sex-workers and hints of 'off-stage' sexual abuse. Though these scenes are treated very delicately in the novel, this is something to consider when selecting this book for discussion.

Sample discussion, research, art, drama and creative writing activities are available below.

THEMES

The suggested research activities later in these notes can be used to explore many themes of *The Best Day of My Life*, including the following:

DISEASE

Either before or after reading the text have your students do some research into leprosy and communicable diseases. They might like to research one disease in-depth or look at how communicable diseases affect people in Australia. They might like to focus on a disease such as Meningococcal to see how communicable diseases are treated in Australia.

Researching attitudes to 'lepers' throughout history could be useful.

A good place to start understanding modern approaches to leprosy is <http://www.leprosymission.org.au> .

POVERTY

Talk to students about issues of poverty. Find examples of current famine and extreme poverty situations in the news and invite students to comment on their reaction to these articles.

Particularly relevant are the TV ads placed by aid agencies which sponsor children in underdeveloped countries. The protagonist, Valli, subverts these images to some extent: she decides her own destiny and, initially, that means refusing the aid she is offered.

India is a large country with a huge population. Can we even call it 'underdeveloped' when current affairs programs repeatedly refer to it as one of the coming giants of the world economy? India presents an opportunity to discuss the way social and political structures influence the redistribution of wealth in a country.

At a time in Australia's history when poverty was prevalent, we developed an egalitarian national identity and a welfare system supported by taxation. Many students will be shocked and make moral judgements about India when they learn of the great disparities in living conditions and education among Indians. But is Australia moving away from egalitarianism? Trends towards paid domestic help (= servants?), limited special visas for certain foreign workers, increased use of private education and changes to welfare provisions might argue we are. Poverty can be found in very rich countries such as USA and Saudi Arabia.

- Reviews of the novel call it a 'surprisingly optimistic novel of unrelenting poverty' and refer to its 'uncompromising depictions of Valli's unimaginably harsh and gritty world'. Do students agree? If so, discuss which parts of the story shocked them, and why.

A poverty-stricken childhood has been the basis of numerous fairy and folk tales as well as modern novels and autobiographies written for young readers. The necessity for poor children to be independent and contribute to their family's livelihood makes for feisty protagonists and exciting adventures in the world outside the family. Students could explore this literature, using the bibliography in these notes under '**Resources and Further Reading – Poverty**'. It could be interesting to trace differences in the locale and historical period of the books' settings, in the moral 'lessons' drawn in different books, and differences between 'fantasy', 'historical' and 'reality' genres.

HAPPINESS

At the beginning of the story, it is clear that Valli is not bowed down by her poverty, although she frankly admits that sometimes she cries when she is confused or upset and she certainly doesn't like being hungry. Leaving Jharia is not a happy decision. Rather, it is an impulsive choice to leave a place that she now has no reason to value. When she arrives in Kolkata, she says, 'I'm nothing. I come from nothing, and I have nothing, and I'll always be nothing.' But she has the great fortune to meet the old man who tells her, 'The burden of my sorrow is lightened when I laugh at myself' and shows her that she need not be nothing: in fact, she is already rich with many gifts.

In Kolkata Valli takes her life one day at a time: this is what survival demands from a street kid. Her sturdy attitude is partly the result of acceptance of her lot: there are many like her, why should she expect anything different? But she has also found the old man's advice liberating. She happily gives away what she has and 'borrows' what she needs. She often finds things to laugh at or to marvel at or ponder. She makes each day an adventure and dares to think that she might one day 'do something great'.

- To what extent could this be an example of 'Ignorance is bliss'?
- Can a person who is very preoccupied with themselves ever be happy?
- Can you make yourself happy just by laughing? (cf. The park where people meet to laugh. p.83)

STIGMA AND PREJUDICE

The briefest investigation of the history of leprosy will reveal its extreme stigma in all societies at some time. A language investigation of the terms *social leper* or *pariah* could be instructive and students could well have encountered the (nowadays comic) use of the cry, 'Unclean! Unclean!'

Valli has some knowledge of Christianity, and students will quite likely encounter websites of Christian charities while researching leprosy. Paradoxically, historical European prejudice against lepers was justified by reference to the Old Testament:

The leper in whom the plague is, his clothes shall be rent, and his head bare, and he shall put a covering upon his upper lip, and shall cry, Unclean, unclean...He shall dwell alone; without the camp, shall his habitation be. (Leviticus 13:45-46)

- Find occasions when Valli encounters prejudice because she is poor and dirty.
- Find occasions when Valli expresses her own fear of the 'monsters' and discuss how fear and ignorance are so often the basis of prejudice.

KNOWLEDGE AND EDUCATION

Leprosy is a disease which can be managed with modern medicine. However, in many parts of the world (including our own until recently) leprosy has brought forth fear and revulsion and led to the ostracizing of its sufferers. Here we have a clear case of the value of the kind of knowledge that is beyond personal experience – it is only learned through education.

There are a number of situations in the book which students will recognise could be improved by knowledge and education, for example the coughing miners, or basic hygiene practices.

Valli's journey through the novel is from ignorance to knowledge. Her struggle is with the understanding that she is a 'monster', knowledge she initially rejects. But it is the nature of knowledge that, once it is learnt, it cannot be unlearnt. Valli now knows exactly what fate her ignorance is leading her towards.

The kind and intelligent Doctor Indra gives Valli the knowledge of her condition and the options for treatment but does not make any decisions for her. Valli must make her own decision: Dr Indra just wants it to be a decision based on fact and an understanding of Valli's real options, not one based on superstition and fear.

Valli is intrigued by the science she observes in the hospital. It is clear that she has an opportunity to better herself through education, as symbolised by the biology book that Dr Indra gives Valli. However, education does not have to mean a rejection of her earlier life and the wisdom of happiness she learnt from the old man. This is shown in the exchange on p. 161:

'This book is yours to keep...That's what a present is...I'm giving it to you because I like you.'...

'I'll just borrow it. And when I know everything in it, I'll pass it to someone else who needs to know.'

- Discuss the importance of literacy in self-determination of individuals and communities. E.g. If the Jharia miners could read and write and understood the health implications of their work, what might they be able to do?
- What is the difference between wisdom and knowledge?

THE STATUS OF WOMEN

The novel raises important issues about the status and rights of females. Encourage students to discuss the status of women in Australia today and in other western societies. How do they view their own gender in relation to the opportunities they will have in life?

Encourage students to examine the treatment of women in India not only in comparison to the treatment of women in Australia, but also to compare the differences between Indian women of different castes and class.

STUDY OF LITERATURE

THE CHARACTER OF VALLI

Valli is the kind of heroine often described as 'feisty'.

- Give examples of her behaviour to support this description.

A prominent US review of this novel refers to Valli's 'cheerful selfishness'. Do students agree with this description? It can be 'unpicked' by referring to:

- The opening line: 'The best day in my life was the day I found out I was all alone in the world.'
- p.5: 'I didn't care as long as they stayed on their side of the tracks.'
- p.6: teasing the cemetery guard
- p.71: hitching a ride on a bicycle cart
- p.79: stealing from others
- p.108: waking Mr Vishwas at the railway station

Valli is clearly bright and values education. In Jharia she snuck into lessons and was befriended by the travelling teacher. She is proud of what knowledge she has and always open to learning more. But she initially refuses to accept the knowledge that she has leprosy. In the period after leaving the hospital, Valli returns to the streets but, as she says herself, she is now 'mean'. It is as if the knowledge that she is a 'monster' makes her *behave* like a monster.

But Valli also has integrity. It is her own character that makes her able to accept this new knowledge, which in turn looks set to put her on a path to even higher learning.

Valli has a good sense of self-preservation. She has heard of children who 'disappear' and so initially refuses to get into a taxi with Dr Indra.

- List other examples of Valli's good sense and 'street smarts'.

Valli likes adventure. Examine this exchange on p.49:

'You are lucky,' the old man said. 'You are on an adventure.'

'I'm scared.'

'If you were not scared, you would be having just an ordinary day.'

- Chart the plot directions that are determined by Valli's sense of adventure.

FORESHADOWING

The Best Day of My Life provides an excellent example of the use of foreshadowing in literature. Ask students at what point they realised that Valli might have leprosy. How did they know this?

p.19 'I could see a hot piece of coal smoldering red against the bottom of my foot.'

p. 21 'I had magic feet...'

p. 43 the scene when Mrs Mukerjee examines Valli after she has been washed

p. 62 'I could see the rusty barbs from the wire sticking into my feet, but I didn't feel anything.'

The final line of chapter 5 is 'They (her feet) did not feel anything.' By making this the final, short line of a chapter, the author draws attention to it.

Another, more literal, foreshadowing is the prediction of the fortune teller that '...you will soon have many friends.' p.67.

KEY PHRASES

The original title of the Canadian edition of this book was *An Ordinary Day*. This phrase is used by the old man:

'If you were not scared, you would be having just an ordinary day.' p. 49

and by a weary woman that Valli encounters in the street:

'It's a lousy day,' I said to her.

'It's just...' She eased herself down onto the curb. Then she said, 'It's just an ordinary day.' p.128

At the moment that Valli decides to stay in the hospital for treatment, she notices that

'The nurses drank from the cups, talked and wrote. To them it was just another ordinary day.' p.139

- How does the author play with the notion of 'an ordinary day'?

The Australian title, however, is taken from the opening line of the novel:

'The best day of my life was the day I found out I was all alone in the world.'

- Discuss the different implications of these two titles.

FIRST PERSON NARRATIVE – DECEPTIVELY SIMPLE

Using Valli as the first person narrator enables the author to use the straightforward language of a young person describing her direct experience. Valli's matter-of-fact way of speaking often makes what she is describing more shocking for the reader.

She generally uses very concrete language, but Valli can also cut straight to our heart when she uses more poetic similes drawn from her simple life:

'Then the smile left her face. It wilted away like a weed drooping in the dry season.' p.15.

'(The rain) flowed over my head like a blessing.' p.51.

- Recall a scene that really struck you when you were reading the book. Find that section again and study the language used.
 - Are the sentences and words short?
 - Is the reader aware of knowing more than Valli?
 - Are the words and sentences concrete or poetic, using similes and describing words?

Valli tells her story using simple action verbs: 'I looked', 'I ran', 'I gave'. One verb occurs frequently – 'I decided'. This invests Valli with *agency*: she sees herself as controlling her own destiny and we see her as brave and smart.

SYMBOLISM / EPIPHANY

The Best Day of My Life provides a simple introduction to the concepts of symbolism and epiphany in literature.

The book can be divided into four parts:

- Life before Valli discovers she has no family;
- Life as a street kid, owning nothing but basically happy with the adventure of living day to day;
- Life as a mean street kid after she discovers she has leprosy;
- Life in the hospital accepting treatment.

The transitions between these parts are marked by significant events. Their significance is sometimes underscored by the use of symbolism, which in turn can highlight an event as a type of epiphany.

p. 20. 'I watched her (Auntie) go down the steep pathway until she got so far away that I could no longer pick her out from the other ladies with saris and baskets. I was looking at my future.'

Auntie has become indistinguishable in a crowd of unknown women.

p. 51. 'Water poured down from the heavens...I let it stream down on me. It ran over my face and down my arms. It flowed over my head like a blessing.'

Valli is 'washed clean' of her previous doubt and fear. Her understanding of the old man's message is an epiphany for her. 'I laughed and laughed.' Henceforth, she lives by his precepts of 'giving and borrowing', laughing at oneself to lighten sorrow, and, maybe, doing something great in Kolkata, the city of the gods.

p. 112. At the conclusion of chapter nine, where Valli is mean and nasty because she is inwardly fleeing the bitter knowledge of her leprosy, Valli smashes open a melon to eat. 'The

melon was unripe and bitter. I ate the whole thing anyway...I chomped and swallowed, chomped and swallowed until my stomach was aching and full of bitter melon. Then I threw up in the gutter. I didn't feel any better.'

Similarly, she can get no satisfaction from her own bitter meanness. She comes to the realization that, 'I had been given a chance, and I threw it away.'

But Valli again makes a positive but difficult choice.

p. 129. 'I walked away. I kept walking. I had a long way to go.'

ACTIVITIES

PRELIMINARY ACTIVITIES

1. When you think of India, what are the first five words that come into your head?
2. *The Best Day of My Life* is set at Christmas time. What is the meaning of Christmas to you? What is your favourite thing about Christmas?
3. In *The Best Day of My Life* Valli has to grow up very quickly. Are you looking forward to being a grown-up? Why or why not?
4. Looking at the cover and title of the book, what do you think the book will be about? What genre of book do you think it will be? Do you think it will be a funny book or a serious one?
5. Read the blurb of the book. Does the blurb make you want to read more? Do you think you will enjoy this book? Why or why not?
6. *The Best Day of My Life* is partly about family. Use ten describing words to describe your family.

The setting

Show students a world map and point out India. Explain its relationship to other countries that border it and are close to it (including Pakistan, Afghanistan, China and Nepal). You might like to talk a little bit about general problems in this area of the world. Point out the location of Kolkata on the map. Using a relief map from an atlas identify the features of the landscape of India and its neighbouring countries.

Find current population statistics for India and begin a discussion about how the demographics of India might also lead to some of Valli's negative experiences. Compare the population and land size of India with that of Australia. Have students in groups use the Internet and other sources to research aspects of India, e.g. geographical features, social organisation, religion and history, literacy levels. Allow time for presentation of the information that students find and for discussion of issues that are raised by it.

ORGANISING INFORMATION

1. As you read *The Best Day of My Life*, make a timeline of all the events of Valli's adventure. Every time something important happens in the book, mark it on this timeline. You can use pictures or words to mark out the events on the timeline.
2. In the book there are lots of descriptions of things you may not see in everyday life in Australia, like *tuk tuks* and *banyan trees*. An explanation for some of them can be found in the glossary on pp. 67-8. Whenever you encounter one of these Indian objects or descriptions, use the Internet to find a picture of them. Make these pictures into a vocabulary poster for the classroom. Make your poster colourful and fun.

3. Make a list of words and their meanings to add to the glossary.
EXTENSION: Which meanings could be worked out from the context of the story? Is it necessary to understand every single word in a story to enjoy and appreciate it?

CREATIVE WRITING

1. p. 1. What was the best day of your life? Write a short story about your memory of it.
2. pp. 2-3. Do you remember any nasty shopkeepers from your childhood? Write a short story about them. Take your inspiration from Roald Dahl and make them as nasty and villainous as possible. If you can't remember a nasty shopkeeper, make one up.
3. p. 5. Do you have a nickname? How did you get the nickname? What does it mean? Write a short story or a poem based on that nickname. It could be a superhero story where your nickname is the name of your superhero. Or it could be a poem about how your nickname started or what it means to you.
4. pp. 20-22. Have you ever dreamed of running away? Where would you go? Write a story about your running-away adventure.
5. p. 61. Are you frightened of graveyards? Write a short story about sleeping in a graveyard. You can make it as scary or fantastical as you like.
6. p. 76. Valli believes she has a superpower. Do you have a superpower? Your superpower could be something like always guessing the next song that will be played on the radio, or being able to find your mum's car keys. If you do have a superpower, write a short story where this power helps to solve a crime or a big problem or save the world! If you haven't discovered your superpower yet, what superpower would you like to have? Write a short story about it.
7. pp. 81-82. 'Jesus wept.' There are many reasons someone might cry. Write a story about someone being very sad.
8. p. 104-109. Write a scary short story about Valli's lie. Valli says ghosts enter your body if you see a dead person's face. Pretend this is the truth and write a horror story based on it.
9. pp. 127-129. Write a short story from the perspective of the woman with the baby. What was her day like? Write a story about everything that happens to her from the time she wakes up to the time she goes to bed. Is it the best day of her life? Or the worst? Or just 'an ordinary day'?
10. pp. 89,90,134-163. Write a short imagined biography of Dr Indra. Where did she come from? What is her story?
11. p. 136 Write a list of pros and cons for Valli staying in the hospital.
12. pp. 153-158. Have you ever done something that required a lot of energy and found you only got tired when you finally rested? Write about this experience. If you can't remember this happening to you, imagine a situation where this might happen. Maybe your character just climbed a mountain or fought in a battle.

Poetry

1. p. 17. Go outside and look at the colour of the sky. Is it blue? Write a poem about the real colour of the sky.
2. p. 23. Imagine you are seeing nature and colour for the first time after living in a grey city. Write a poem about how it makes you feel.
3. p. 46. 'The burden of sorrow is lightened when I laugh at myself'. Write a poem with this as the first line.

4. p. 48. Continue the line of reasoning the old man uses on Valli. Think of some things you have that some other people might not have; things that make you a 'millionaire'. Make a list of five of these things and write a poem using your examples.
5. p. 48. 'Poetry is life'. Give *your* definition of poetry. Don't look at a dictionary or encyclopaedia! Just write the first thing that comes into your head.
6. p. 82. Write a poem about tears.
7. p. 151. Write a poem comparing a heart to a train station.
8. pp. 161-162 Write a poem describing a hug.

RESEARCH

The Indian setting

1. Where is Jharia? Colour it in on a map of India. Do some research into the city. What is it most famous for?
2. What is coal? What is it used for?
3. Do some research about coal mining in India.
4. What is a paisa? What countries is it used in? What does a paisa look like?
5. Where is Kolkata? Do some research about the city. Make a poster using facts about the city – like its climate and population and prominent industries.
6. Find out some facts about The Ganges. What significance does it have to the Indian people? Write a report based on what you find out.
7. Why do people throw coins in The Ganges? What are some other places around the world that people throw coins in? Are there different beliefs about why they do it?
8. Why do people cover up the faces of the dead? Do some research and see if you can find the answer. Do a presentation to your class about what you discover.
9. What is Bollywood? Go to the video shop or the library and see if you can find a Bollywood video to show to your class.
10. What is a banyan tree? Do some research into its history and significance. Make a poster with a picture of a banyan tree in the middle and facts you have discovered around the sides.

Hinduism

1. What is the *Namaste*? What does it mean? Where is it used? Do a presentation to your class about what you find.
2. Valli says a prayer to 'all the gods and goddesses'. Pick one Hindu god or goddess and research them. Make a poster about that god and then present what you have discovered to your class.
3. What is the *Durga-puja*? Do some research and write a report about what you find out.
4. What is a *burning ghat*? Why do Hindus cremate their dead? What do they believe happens in the afterlife? Do some research and write a report about what you find out. Find a picture of a *ghat* and use this to illustrate your report.

Disease and Hygiene

1. Why would Elamma's father cough up blood? Research some diseases that affect miners. Using mainly pictures and simple language, create a poster to alert them to some of the dangers they face and steps they should take to protect their health.

2. What is a latrine? What different kinds of latrines are there and where might they be used? Create a public health poster from the government, explaining the importance of latrines, and the right and wrong ways to build them.
3. What do the white patches on Valli's skin mean? Is there more than one disease that could cause this? Pretend you are a doctor and write a report on the possible causes of white patches on the skin of one of your patients.
4. What is tetanus? Do some research and write a report for your classmates about the importance of vaccination and having regular tetanus 'boosters'.
5. Create a chart of all the major vaccinations that Australian children must have and when. Interview your class and create 'roti' diagrams to show the percentage of students who have suffered such diseases as chicken pox, measles, mumps, rubella (German measles), whooping cough.
6. Who invented the microscope? When was it invented? What is it used for? Do some research and include a labeled diagram of the parts of a microscope in your report.
7. What is a cell, in biological terms? Are there different kinds of cells? Who discovered that we have cells? Create an information poster about cells.
8. Research leprosy. Why is it called Hansen's Disease? What are its major symptoms and how can it be treated? What do we know of its origins? Have we had cases of leprosy in Australia?
9. Where does blood come from and where does it go? Do some research and make a poster describing the path of blood around the body.
10. What is the *Hippocratic Oath*? How did it originate? Is it still used? Has it changed over time? Find a transcript of the oath and read it to your class (there might be some tricky words in it that you'll need to look up or ask your teacher how to pronounce).
11. Do some research into skin grafts. What are some of the most recent developments in skin graft technology? See if you can find a news article about skin graft success and tell your class about it.
12. Do some research into nerves. How do they work? Why can't they be repaired? Write a report based on your findings.
13. Valli eats from garbage bins. Do some research into food wastage. What are some solutions to throwing food away? Do a presentation to your class about what you discover.

Status of Women

1. p. 139 How common are 'accidents' like burns by acid in India? Why do they happen? Are they really accidents? Do some research and write a report about what you find out.
2. p. 139 What is a 'dowry'? Do some research and write a report about what you find out.

DISCUSSION AND DEBATE

The following propositions can be discussed, formally debated in 'for' and 'against' teams, or made the subject of a 'Just a Minute' game, where students pull a topic out of a hat and extemporise on it for 60 seconds.

Students could locate other pages in the novel that prompt similar debatable propositions. A proposition must always be phrased as a statement, not a question.

p. 2	Mining is a dangerous profession.
p. 2	Children under the age of fifteen should not be allowed to get jobs.
p. 6	Valli should not have thrown the rock.
p. 12	Hitting a woman is never okay.
p. 53	'Nobody really owns anything'.
p. 65	It is possible to predict the future.
p. 118	It's okay to waste food. If you don't want to eat it you shouldn't have to.
p. 120	You should not give money to beggars as it only encourages them.
p. 121	Holidays with no cultural significance to a particular country should not be celebrated in that country.

REFLECTION ACTIVITIES

The following topics suit short reflective answers, for instance in a reading diary.

1. p. 6. Have you ever done something you regret because of peer pressure? Write a short reflective piece on this memory. Do you regret what you did? Would you do it again?
2. p. 9. Would you like it if you were too poor to go to school? Think about it carefully and the impact it would have on your life if you had no education.
3. pp. 15-22. Would it matter to you if you found out your parents weren't your real parents?
4. p. 20. Do you think friends and family are the only reason to stay in a place? Write a short reflective piece on the conclusion you come to.
5. p. 40. Valli doesn't know how old she is. How important is it to you to know your age? Why is it important in our society to know how old you are? (This topic may involve some research into the laws in Australia that concern age.)
6. p. 57. Have you ever seen a beggar on the street? How did it make you feel?
7. p. 86. Would you like to be a doctor. Why? Why not?
8. p. 102. What do you feel when Valli runs away from the hospital?
9. p. 104. If you went through everything Valli went through, do you think you'd be mean too?
10. p. 105. Why do you think Valli doesn't want Bharati staying with her forever?
11. p. 110. Do you think what Valli says about Bharati's brother being a crybaby is sexist? Do you think it's okay for boys to cry? Have you ever encountered sexism when you've cried, or seen a boy being treated badly when he cried? Write a short reflective piece on your reaction to what Valli says and to whether it's okay for boys to cry.
12. p. 114. The things Valli wants are very simple. If you had nothing, as she does, what would be the five things you'd wish for, and why?
13. pp. 117-118. Would you prefer a market or a shopping mall? Write a short reflective piece on your choice, balancing the pros and cons of each.
14. p. 123 'I look like that inside. So do you'. Write about your reaction to this line.
15. p. 129. Would you give your last piece of pizza to a woman with a baby? Why? Why not?

16. p. 137. Do you or your family contribute any money to a charity? Write about that charity and why you choose to contribute to it.

ART, DRAMA AND CREATION ACTIVITIES

- Write and perform a scene with Dr Indra talking with the other doctors about Valli after she leaves.
- Perform a mime scene of Valli on the streets of India.
- Draw a *tuk tuk*.
- Draw Valli in her red jacket.
- Pick your favourite scene from the book and act it out.
- p. 10. What is *dal*? Find a recipe and cook some for/with your class.
- p. 10. Imagine being so poor you couldn't even afford a notepad and pencil. As a challenge, spend a whole lesson outside using a stick and mud instead of paper. How difficult is it to get your work done?
- p. 47. What is a *lungi*? Where is a *lungi* used and why? See if you can make your own *lungi* and show it to your class.
- p. 70. Draw or paint a picture of a rickshaw or build a model.
- pp. 141-142. Draw a picture of how you imagine Usha to look.
- p. 163. Write a monologue describing what happens next in Valli's life. Present this monologue to your class. You might use props and costume to make your presentation more entertaining.

AFTER READING

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Was the ending of the book a good one? Why or why not? What would you have changed about it?
2. In North America, this book is called *No Ordinary Day*. Discuss the two titles and what impressions each give. Which do you prefer? Can you think of a new title that you'd prefer?
3. After reading the book, compare your initial reaction to it based on its cover and blurb with your reaction after reading it.
4. What is the most important thing you learned from the book?
5. Who was your favourite character and why?
6. What was your favourite scene and why?
7. Would you read another book by this author and why?
8. What do you think the book's 'message' was?

RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

LEPROSY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The Leprosy Mission Australia:

<http://www.leprosymission.org.au>

"Dr Karl's Great Moments in Science: Leprosy" - Dr Karl Kruszelnicki on ABC Radio. Includes an audio download:

<http://www.abc.net.au/science/articles/2007/08/02/1994304.htm>

"You'll Have to Go Away: The Leprosarium on Peel Island". Episode of ABC Radio National's *Hindsight* program. First broadcast 5 September 2010. History of an Australian 'Lazarat' or leprosarium where lepers were confined and isolated until 1959. Longer audio download available.

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/hindsight/youll-have-to-go-away-the-leprosarium-on-peel/3026646>

International Association for **I**ntegration **D**ignity and **E**conomic **A**dvancement (IDEA). NGO that advocates for leprosy sufferers worldwide.

Click on the 'IDEA Human Rights Brochure' link for a downloadable brochure.

<http://www.idealeprosydignity.org/>

International Leprosy Association: Global Project on the History of Leprosy – Oral History Project, created with assistance of IDEA (above):

<http://www.idealeprosydignity.org/OralHistoryWeb/OralHistory-Main.html>

An Australian NGO, New Hope India Relief Australia Inc

<http://www.newhopeaustralia.org/index.html> specialises in assisting women and children and has an online photo album of leprosy patients in their care:

<http://www.newhopeaustralia.org/photo-gallery.html>

INDIA

Staples, Suzanne Fisher. *Shiva's Fire* Farrar Straus Giroux, New York, 2000.

Coming-of-age novel for 12-16 yr olds set in India and featuring Hinduism. A poor girl's life is changed by her ability to dance in the worship of Shiva.

Vijayaraghavan, Vineeta . *Motherland* Soho Press. USA, 2003.

For 12-16 yr olds. Life in a southern Indian family, as seen through the eyes of an American girl returning to visit the extended family she has never known. *Maggies' The Source* says, 'The narrative is carefully woven around the customs and practices of a traditional middle-class southern Indian family. Readers will be fascinated by everyday things like clothing, correct eating procedures, sleeping arrangements, the running of the household as well as more obvious cultural differences such as arranged marriages, the way the local hospital functions, and of course, Grandmother's funeral.'

POVERTY

A poverty-stricken childhood has been the basis of numerous fairy and folk tales as well as modern novels and autobiographies written for young readers. Some award-winning and highly praised examples are:

Australia

Farrer, Vashti *Plagues and Federation: the diary of Kitty Barnes, The Rocks, Sydney, 1900.* My Story series. Scholastic Australia, Gosford NSW, 2000.

Story of family poverty for 10-15 yr olds. The family's hardships include time spent in the North Head quarantine station due to the Sydney plague outbreak.

Greenwood, Kerry. *The Long Walk* Hodder Headline Australia, Sydney, 2004.

For 10-13 yr olds, Isa, a thirteen-year-old Melbourne girl recounts the hardships of a divided family in the 1930s.

Zusak, Markus. *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* Omnibus Books, Norwood, SA, 2000.

CBCA Honour Book for 12-16 yr olds. Brothers Rube and Cam are conscripted into a boxing 'racket' operating in Sydney suburbs. *Magpies' The Source* says, '...brutal, cruel but exhilarating...A world away from oranges at half time and the eccentric or caring coaches in most young novels with a sporting theme'.

North America

Hesse, Karen. *Out of the Dust* Scholastic Press, New York, 1997.

Newbery Award winning verse novel for age 12 and over. A story of the Oklahoma dustbowl.

Patron, Susan. *The Higher Power of Lucky* Atheneum Books for Children, New York, 2006.

Newbery Award winning family drama of hardship in California for 9-12 yr olds.

Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath, Of Mice and Men, Cannery Row.*

Classic tales of the Depression for older readers. All have been adapted for film.

Wilder, Laura Ingalls. *The Little House on the Prairie* series

United Kingdom

Howker, Janni. *The Nature of the Beast* Walker Books, first published 1985 by Julia MacRae, London.

Highly commended for the Carnegie Medal and winner of the Whitbread Children's Novel award and *Observer* Teenage Fiction Prize. For 11-15 yr olds. A boy, his father and grandfather in a Northern mill town when the mill closes. *Magpies' The Source* says, 'A grim novel full of pain - the characters seem to walk off the page.'

Livi, Michael. *The Whispering Road* Penguin, London, 2005.

For 11-14 yr olds. The Industrial Revolution with a touch of fantasy.

Turnbull, Ann. *Pigeon Summer* Walker Books, London, 1992.

For 10-13 yr olds. An unemployed miner's family at the time of the Great Strike of 1928. *Magpies' The Source* says, 'Turnbull has a flair for showing the pain and anger resulting from the sundering of family and a life led in constant hunger and worry about survival.'

Developing countries

Mankell, Henning. *Playing with Fire* Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2002.

YA novel for age 12 and over about a young girl's life in Mozambique, where poverty, exploitation, HIV/AIDS and the legacy of war are constant problems.

Desai, Anita. *The Village by the Sea* William Heinemann, London, 1982.

Winner of Guardian Children's Fiction award. For 11-14 yr olds. Modern kids in a poor Indian family find ways to cope with environmental and social change.

Whelan, Gloria. *Homeless Bird* HarperCollins, New York, 2000.

Story for 12-16 yr olds about a 13-year-old Indian bride virtually enslaved to her husband's family after his death, then dumped in a 'city of widows'. Rescued from the streets, she gains the chance of economic independence and a future.

Fantasy

Stewart, Paul. *Fergus Crane* Doubleday, London, 2004.

Illustrated fantasy adventure for 9-12 yr olds. *Magpies' The Source* says, 'Riddell's fabulous black and white pen illustrations bring alive this story of greed, friendship, cruelty, love, lost fathers, amazing inventions and re-found relatives. It's imaginative, beguiling, full of hope and thankfully another adventure looms.'

ABOUT THE WRITERS

DEBORAH ELLIS

Deborah Ellis was raised in a small town called Paris in southern Ontario. She finished high school there, then lived for a while in Ottawa and Toronto. A long-time feminist and anti-war activist, her hobbies include riding her bike, poking around in the woods, and exploring new places and ideas.

Deborah works as a mental health counsellor in Toronto and is also an award-winning author. She began writing the *Parvana* books, about a young girl living in Afghanistan, after visiting refugee camps in Pakistan. All of the royalties from the sale of the books are donated to Women for Women in Afghanistan to support educational projects for Afghan girls in refugee camps in Pakistan. Since then, she has travelled the world to meet with and hear the stories of children affected by poverty, war, racism and illness. Her fiction and non-fiction books give us a glimpse into the lives of children from Afghanistan (*The Parvana Trilogy*), Bolivia (*Diego, Run!, Diego's Pride*), the Middle East (*Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak*) and Southern Africa (*The Heaven Shop*). *Off to War: Soldiers' Children Speak* and *Children of War* are collections of interviews with children of Canadian and American soldiers serving in Afghanistan and Iraq. Her companion book is *Children of War: Iraqi Children Speak*.

In 2010 Deborah Ellis received The Ontario Library Association President's Award for Exceptional Achievement.

An interview with Deborah can be found at

www.allenandunwin.com/uploads/documents/DeborahEllis.pdf

KATE GORDON

Kate is a former children's librarian and currently manages the children's and YA section at Fullers Bookshop, Hobart, where she is also 'Miss Cackle', fearless leader of the Fullers Ferrets.

Kate trained as an actor and is now a writer. In addition to writing her own novels, Kate has written teachers notes on a wide range of topics for primary, middle years and secondary classrooms and has worked with children from all of these age groups in her librarianship and book-selling careers.