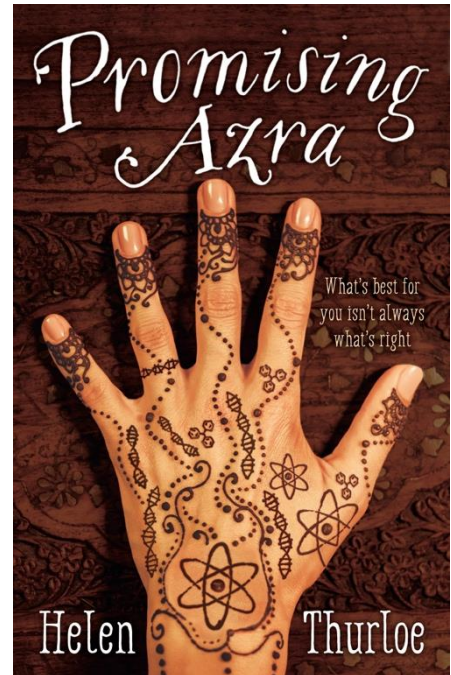


# Promising Azra

By Helen Thurloe

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## Summary

*Promising Azra*, Helen Thurloe’s strong and powerful novel for young adults, is topical and unafraid. Set in suburban Sydney, it’s about Azra, a sixteen-year-old girl, whose final years of high school are derailed when she learns she is about to be married to a cousin she has never met.

Helen Thurloe is an award-winning poet whose curiosity drew her even closer to this story when she taught creative writing at a Sydney high school. Talking to the sixteen- and seventeen-year-old girls at the school, she realised that being ‘promised’ in marriage is not always a welcome event, and that sometimes it can lead to a forced marriage.

*Promising Azra* is fiction, but based on extensive research with case workers, counsellors, lawyers, the police, chemistry experts, high school students and teachers. *Promising Azra* has been endorsed by Dr Eman Sharobeem, a leading national campaigner against forced marriage in Australia. The manuscript was trialled on the girls in Helen’s creative writing class—some of whom were from Pakistan like Azra, and all of whom connected with Azra’s story. *Promising Azra* is an important story but it’s also an engaging and compelling novel. While Azra’s plight sheds much-needed light on forced marriage in Australia, the story will resonate with all young people who question their parents’ plans for them.

## Links to the curriculum

*Promising Azra* is recommended for readers aged 12 to 18+ and is suitable for secondary classes in English, Humanities and Social Sciences and Health and Physical Education.

English	Expressing and developing ideas Literature and context Responding to literature Examining literature Interpreting, analysing and evaluating texts
Humanities & Social Sciences	Citizenship, diversity and identity
Health & Physical Education	Relationships and sexuality
Legal Studies	Family Law Legal age of marriage Human trafficking

The following General Capabilities could also be addressed: Critical and creative thinking, Personal and social capability, Intercultural understanding and Ethical understanding.

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## Themes & discussion points

### Choice & consent

- Is there really always a 'choice' when there is a clash between personal freedom and family expectations?
- Is it straightforward to identify 'consent' for a marriage, from a teenager who has strong cultural pressure to obey her parents?
- How binding is a 'promise in marriage', and who gets to make the promise?

### Differences within and between cultural groups in Australia

- Is there sometimes a gap between women's rights and expectations in mainstream Australian society and in those of families of more recently arrived migrants? Are there different expectations of sons in these families? How is this explored in *Promising Azra*?
- Families within cultural and religious groups can have quite different values/approaches. There is no such thing as a typical family in any culture: Australian, British, Lebanese, Indian, Chinese or Italian. What are the differences between the families and their expectations for their children, as described in *Promising Azra*?

### Girl power

- We like to think that in Australia girls can do whatever they want – including choose when and who to marry, and/or whether to study science at university. But is that always true?
- Science can be an important way to understand the world, as well as provide a career that is based on distinct attainment and authority, not fashion or taste. Why do you think fewer girls are choosing to study chemistry and physics at high school? How might that affect their careers?

## Discussion with the author

Read the following comments by the author and then discuss them using the questions below as prompts.

### ***Promising Azra* raises, and provides a context for, a contemporary issue – forced marriage.**

*Forced marriage is a marriage entered into without meaningful consent. It is illegal in Australia. A forced marriage is different from an arranged marriage, which relies on the free and full consent of both people. In 2012-2013, at least 250 Australian girls aged under 18 were forced into marriage. In many cases, girls are taken overseas and married there. Forced marriage is not advocated by any major religion; it is a cultural practice that occurs in many parts of the world.*

*My book raises discussion about girls' choices in certain cultural contexts in contemporary Australia. I deliberately chose not to sensationalise the issue. Media reports often highlight extreme cases, such as the recent case of an Australian 12-year-old girl who had a traditional wedding, and then was sent to have sex with her 26-year-old husband. However, much more frequent and realistic is that the girls are not so young (16 to 19), but they are still very susceptible to family pressure to marry a 'well-chosen' partner from their cultural group, about whom they may know very little.*

- What is the value of using fiction to discuss contemporary issues?
- Are there any dangers in fictionalising issues?

## **Promising Azra is based on extensive research**

*The story is a hybrid of true stories, based on extensive interviews with students (from a range of nationalities including Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Palestine, Egypt, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Syria, India, South Sudan, Somalia), most of whom attended a girls' high school in Sydney. The school is in a very multicultural area, with 95% of its students coming from non-English-speaking backgrounds, including some recently arrived as refugees. Over two years I visited the school and spoke with the students, about their lives, and about the challenges of reconciling their cultural practices with attendance at a state high school. I also asked them whether they would raise their own children with the same rules as they had to abide by.*

*Several students (15 and 16 year olds) read the third draft of my novel, and they all provided very positive feedback about the authenticity of the characters and the situation. They also identified with Azra trying to do the right thing, but being misunderstood by her family as being disobedient.*

*I did a huge amount of research into legal cases where girls challenged the forced marriages they were facing, read every report about forced marriage available in Australia, and spoke with case workers, academics, lawyers, police, counsellors and teachers. For prevalence data I referenced the Forced Marriage Unit in the UK, which reported in 2015 that 44% of all cases where people were being removed from the country for a forced marriage, were headed for Pakistan. However, 69 different countries were destinations for forced marriages overall. You can read more about my research here: <http://www.helenthurloe.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Hyperlinks-for-behind-Promising-Azra.pdf>*

- Why do you think the author is keen to give so much detail about the research she did?
- Have you ever tried to do the right thing, but been misunderstood as disobedient?

## **Promising Azra is a brave book**

*Several people questioned my sanity for tackling this issue, especially as it is not my own story. Unlike Azra, I am not Muslim or Pakistani. However, my strong feeling is that teenagers who are pressured into forced marriages (whatever their background) are not in a position to tell their stories, or to warn others. If those of us that can do the research, and write about it in a compassionate and balanced way, are prepared to bear witness, then how is that a bad thing? Besides, I wrote this book because I wanted to understand how it could come about. Why does it happen, and how does it feel? What are the complications and complexities?*

*I encountered two responses to this project: (1) most people showed enormous interest in better understanding the issue and how it plays out in contemporary Australia, and (2) some people said that my book would stir up unhelpful criticism of the Muslim community that is already facing so much negative media.*

*This book is not about religion; it is about culture. Azra could have come from India or Africa or Canada, but I chose to portray ethnic groups where forced marriage has occurred (and probably continues to do so) in Australia. I would like to think this book will help give a voice to (and helpful information for) those girls who presently feel they have no options. And provide better understanding for other readers as to why these*



# In the classroom...

*practices have come to exist, and why they make sense in certain contexts. I hope the story also gives an empathetic window into Azra's world for those who are quick to judge the other cultures, and helps explain why girls, and their families, might make the decisions they do.*

- Do you think *Promising Azra* is a brave book?
- Should you only write stories about your own life and culture? Why? Why not?
- Discuss the differences between religion and culture. Is it always possible to distinguish between the two? How is this explored in *Promising Azra*?

## **Promising Azra shows girls can enjoy studying science and be good at it**

*There is presently a 20-year decline in Year 12 science and maths participation in Australia, yet no shortage of jobs for good science graduates. And there is a great gender imbalance for high school study of most science subjects (with girls only outnumbering boys studying science/maths subjects in Biology). At a time when many of the challenges facing our time are science-based—climate change, coal seam gas, GM crops, disease prevention and treatment—individuals in Australian society are less able to understand the technical issues that underpin these debates. As a society we are less scientifically literate than we were 30 years ago and swayed by opinions we've lost the ability to understand.*

*Another notable aspect of the book is the positive portrayal of girls studying high-level science at school. A background in science is not subject to taste or fashion, it allows girls to establish distinct attainment and authority in difficult, but important, fields of knowledge—that transcend any specific cultural heritage.*

*Most of all, I hope this book validates those girls who are game for the challenge of studying science at high school, and encourages those who could be interested to have a go—whatever family background they have.*

- Is the positive portrayal of girls studying high-level science at school just as provocative as the portrayal of a contentious cultural practice? Why/ Why not?
- If it is true that 'as a society we are less scientifically literate than we were 30 years ago', why do you think that is? Is it a problem if the citizens of a country are not very scientifically literate?

## About the author

Helen Thurloe is an Australian writer and poet. Born in Perth, Western Australia, Helen moved to Brazil as a baby and learnt to speak Portuguese to the locals, and English to her parents. Later she grew up in Sydney, reading all of the fairy story and science fiction collections in the local libraries. Her mother told her, 'There's more to life than books', but clearly she was wrong.

In her final year of school, Helen studied lots of English, some Ancient History, and plenty of Physics, Chemistry, Biology and Mathematics. She remembers the lab pracs as the most fun you could have in the classroom, and the science teachers as being the craziest.

At Sydney University Helen was uncertain whether to study Science or Arts, so she did a bit of both to start with. She dissected many rats, and even kept a couple in the freezer at home for practising on. This freaked out her housemate—though they are still friends today. But after a while her interest in stories won out, so she mostly studied Government, and English Language and Literature.

In her early adult years Helen travelled widely in Europe and America and then, later, extensively through Asia. She has always been interested in how culture influences choice, particularly for women, and in regional food and textiles.

She returned to Australia and worked in Public Relations for government and commercial companies, got married and had two children. She trained in the Alexander Technique (an Australian invention which helps people establish good habits of body use to avoid injury, especially important for writers) and, with her husband, set up an ergonomic furniture business. During this time, Helen started spending more time writing, and produced poems, essays, and then *Promising Azra*...

## Why I wrote this novel

### Helen Thurloe says:

In 2012 I read an article in the *Australian* about the forced marriage of teenagers in Australia, and I wondered what it would be like to be facing that predicament. I also wondered how, in the cultural context of their own family, these young people would describe the situation and what choices they might feel they had—especially in a world of Facebook and mobile phones and well-meaning teachers who say that 'girls can do anything'.

I wondered about those girls' teenage years. I remember as a teenager myself spending a lot of time thinking about boys and potential romantic liaisons, and I wondered how it would be if you weren't allowed to do that. We all have the same hormones after all.

I also wanted to find out what it might be like to be brought up to expect to have an arranged marriage. And maybe discover there to be some advantages to it, in certain contexts, that I didn't appreciate. Also to acknowledge that romantic love doesn't always have a happy ending, because being in love isn't the only important ingredient in making a successful life partnership.

Ultimately I wanted to find answers to questions about how some kinds of arranged marriage fit into contemporary Australia, and whether any of the people involved miss out on the normal rights enjoyed by Australian citizens because of a reluctance to 'judge' cultural practices. In the case of *Azra*, this also has a feminist dimension, although I personally know young men who have been coerced into marriages they didn't want. It's not only a problem for girls. And then there's that perennial challenge for many second generation migrants, of being caught between two worlds.

My intention with *Promising Azra* was to give a voice to, and frame the context for, girls who are unable to perceive, or properly articulate, the choices they could make. As well as to give them some practical ideas about how they might go about creating an alternative future for themselves, if that's what they want.



## Related texts/Further reading

***Does my head look big in this?* Randa Abdel-Fattah, 2005, Pan MacMillan**

*Promising Azra* may appeal to a similar demographic in profiling the experience of a Muslim girl at an Australian high school. However, *Promising Azra* explores the more serious issue of forced marriage. *Promising Azra* is largely about how culture influences marriage negotiations, and is not about any particular religion. Forced marriage is a cultural practice that occurs in many parts of the world, and is not advocated by any major religion.

***Looking for Alibrandi*, Melina Marchetta, 1992, Penguin Australia**

*Promising Azra* is about a young woman trying to find her path in life, despite cultural expectations that compete with her own dreams. It features a Pakistani Muslim girl, who like Josie in *Looking For Alibrandi*, is unsure how to form relationships with young men outside her cultural group, and struggles with reconciling family expectations with the other opportunities that are opening up for her. *Promising Azra* and *Looking For Alibrandi* are both set in Sydney (though in different locations and with different ethnic profiles), and pitched at about the same age group.

***Parvana*, Deborah Ellis, 2002, Allen & Unwin**

*Promising Azra* shows a girl that steps outside the cultural expectations of her family, as does *Parvana*. *Promising Azra* is set in Australia, and not in a war zone, but both books illustrate the different expectations for (and difficulties facing) girls in some cultures. *Promising Azra* is for an older reader than the *Parvana* books.

***Deranged Marriage*, Sushi Das, 2012, Random House**

*Promising Azra* negotiates some of the same territory as *Deranged Marriage*, with a daughter who is expected to go along with to a family's marriage plans for her. *Promising Azra* is fiction, not memoir, and is targeted at both a YA and adult readership. *Deranged Marriage* is about an Indian (Hindu) family, not a Muslim one, however the family tensions around a suitable marriage are very comparable.

***Loving Richard Feynman*, Penny Tangey, 2009, UQP**

*Promising Azra* profiles a teenage girl who is deeply interested in science and in the way it helps her understand the world. Azra is however challenged by family expectations that will effectively prevent her from pursuing her studies. *Promising Azra* explores how your interests tend to shape your life, even though other people can get in the way. This has parallels with *Loving Richard Feynman*. *Promising Azra* also presents the study of science in an accessible way for those not familiar with it, with some satisfying details for those with an inner geek.

***I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*, Malala Yousafzai and Christina Lamb, 2013, Little, Brown and Company**

Of course this is memoir, yet both *Promising Azra* and *I Am Malala* highlight the importance of education for girls. Both girls were born in Pakistan, though the fictional Azra emigrated to Australia, and has had a much easier life than Malala!

***Allen & Unwin wishes to thank the author, Helen Thurloe, for providing these notes on the writing of Promising Azra***