

# Songbird

## INGRID LAGUNA

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Recommended reading age: 8+

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### CURRICULUM GUIDE

The following teaching guide has been designed to embrace shared curriculum values. Students are encouraged to communicate their understanding of a text through speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing.

The learning activities aim to encourage students to think critically, creatively and independently, to reflect on their learning, and connect it to audience, purpose and context. They encompass a range of forms and include a focus on language, literature and literacy. Where appropriate, they include the integration of ICT and life skills.

### SYNOPSIS

Back home in Iraq, Jamila was *Mutraba*—a girl who is always singing, a *Songbird*—but in Australia she struggles to find her voice. Jamila is worried about her Baba, still in Iraq, she fears for his safety and waits for news of when he will join them in Australia. She worries about school, where she might be called away from class at any moment to help her mother.

Jamila feels alone and out of place. But then she meets Eva, who becomes her first real friend at school, and joins the choir, where she rediscovers the comfort and confidence that music offers. Bit by bit, Jamila starts to feel that she might be able to build a life in Australia, but she grows increasingly frustrated with her mother's inability to do anything on her own.

Jamila finally finds two things that make her happy, and she's in danger of losing them if she keeps getting pulled out of school. Jamila feels stuck, until an unexpected offer of help changes everything.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ingrid Laguna is a writer, teacher and musician. She lives in Melbourne and teaches English to children and adults from all over the world, many of whom have refugee backgrounds. *Songbird* is her first book for children.

### BEFORE READING

1. Collect pictures of Iraq and make a poster or display for your classroom. Looking at a map of Iraq, find the capital city, Baghdad, and the Tigris River.
2. Read the author biography and the dedication aloud. Why do you think Ingrid Laguna might have chosen to write this particular story?
3. *Songbird* is a book about family, community and belonging. What do each of these words mean to you? Make a list of the people in your family, and the people in your community. How important is having a place to belong to you? What might it feel like to lose that?

### WHILE READING

1. In the first few pages of the book, Jamila 'felt different' from the other kids in her class (p. 2). Why do you think she feels this way? Do you think any of the other kids feel different? Write about a time you've felt different.
2. The author chooses to use a number of Arabic words in the story. Why do you think this is? Make a list of words you come across that are unfamiliar to you – next to the word write what you think the meaning might be based on the context. Check your responses against the glossary list on page 167.
3. How does Jamila describe Iraq? How is this similar or different from the way you imagined it? Why do



you think she is reluctant to share these memories with her classmates?

- Why does Jamila feel 'like a part of *her* was missing.' (p. 6). Which parts is she referring to? Will she ever get them back? Share a time that you have missed something.
- In Baghdad, Jamila was the best in her class at English, but in her school in Australia she fumbles her words. How do the kids in her class treat her because of this? Do you think they would describe her as clever? Why/why not? Would you describe Jamila as clever?
- What three things do you think Jamila wants most of all? What is standing in the way of her getting or achieving these things?
- Jamila makes a lot of effort to approach the kids in her class even though it isn't easy for her. What examples can you find of this happening in the text? What makes it difficult for Jamila to make friends? Should it be all her responsibility to make friends?
- Jamila wonders 'what kind of problems Miss Dana might have' (p. 17). Why does she wonder this? Does she believe that they might share the same problems? Why/why not? How can we use our own experiences to connect with other people?

## AFTER READING

### CHARACTER:

- 'My Mama goes to the market. She talks to people, makes friends. She brings home strawberries and cake. And she laughs, Always she laughs.' (p. 4) Jamila wants these statements about her mother to be true, but instead she tells us that they are lies. Why do you think Jamila's mother isn't the kind of mother Jamila wants her to be? Find evidence in the book that shows the kind of person she is in Australia, and the kind of person she was in Iraq. Why do you think she has changed?
- Mina is Jamila's best friend, but we only learn about her through Jamila's memories and descriptions. Pair up with a friend in your class and write a profile of them as if they were a character in a book. Give your character profile to your partners—would they describe themselves differently from the way that you have described them? How much can the person telling a story shape the way a character or person is seen?
- Most of the novel shows the way Jamila sees the world around her and the people in it, but how do you think they see her? Eva calls her brave. Beza might call her mean. How might other characters describe Jamila? How would you describe her? Use examples from the book.

### STYLE AND STRUCTURE:

- The author uses imagery of things that Jamila is familiar with to reinforce her feelings of loneliness

and isolation. One example is when 'Jamila had so much to say, but sometimes her mouth would open and close without a sound, like the fish caught by the boys on the Tigris River.' (p. 12). What does this image tell us about how Jamila feels? Think about a time when you have felt stuck for words. Can you think of an image from your own life to describe the feeling?

- Jamila's story is written in present tense, which means that the author tells the story as it is happening. But the author makes use of memory to contrast Jamila's life now with her life in Baghdad. Use a page in your notebook to make a list of Jamila's memories of life in Baghdad. How does she feel in these memories? How are these feelings different from the way she feels now? How does the writer contrast the two to tell the reader something about Jamila's emotional state. What is she trying to say?
- Songbird* is a work of fiction. Consider how this makes you read Jamila's story—do you feel that there is truth in her experiences? What passages from the novel support your argument? Compare Jamila's story to any non-fiction accounts you can find of life in Iraq. What is the difference between reading a non-fiction or memoir piece and a novel or short story?

## THEMES

### Family and community

- Jamila and her mother feel isolated because they miss their family and community. Make a map of your community—you could think of this like a geographical map, or like a family tree. Who is a part of your community? How do you know them? Is anyone excluded from your community? What could you do to make them feel welcome? Design an activity that your community to reach out to new people and help them feel welcome.
- Community can make us feel like we belong, but feeling that we have been excluded from a community can make us feel hurt and upset. Find three examples in the text where Jamila is deliberately excluded from her school community. How might the characters in these scenes have behaved differently to include Jamila instead of exclude her from these moments?
- At the end of the book Jamila's mother tells her that she should skip the school to go to the airport because 'family is number one' (p. 147). Is Jamila being selfish? Is her mother? How does Jamila choose between her family and her community in this situation? Are family and community automatically the same thing? Is one more important than the other?

### Music:

- Music brings Jamila both literal and symbolic comfort to Jamila—the act of singing relaxes her,



but it also reminds her of people and places that made her happy. One example of this is when she sings to herself to 'stop the worry humming in her chest' (p. 25). Can you find three examples where Jamila finds comfort through singing, and three where it symbolises something else that makes her happy?

2. 'I want to hear my language everywhere, like music all around me' (p. 26). Consider how important music is to Jamila. If her language is like music, how must she feel to be without it? Why do you think the author includes Jamila's language in the book?
3. 'Mama would remember Jamila had a gift' (p. 33). Jamila sees music as something to help solve her problems. Is she right? In what ways does music make Jamila's life better? What does her involvement with the choir bring to her life? Does music make anything bad happen in the story?

#### Anxiety and fear:

1. What calms Jamila down when she is feeling scared, sad or worried? Do you have something that brings you comfort when you feel sad or anxious? Share your techniques with the class and run through the meditation exercise that Jamila's teacher guides her through. Does this help you let go of any worries or not? As a class make a poster of things that might make people feel anxious, and another list of things that help overcome anxiety.
2. When Jamila is worried, she 'hardly listened' to Georgia speak (p. 10). What is Jamila worried about? Why does she worry about this? Think about the things that happen in your body when you are worried or afraid. How might you write this into a story? Try to write about a time when you have felt worried or afraid, using descriptions of how your body responded to the emotions as a starting point.
3. What is Jamila's mother scared of? Why do you think she's unable to overcome this fear?

of those around her—Beza and her mother in particular. Why do you think Jamila is initially blind to their struggles? Write a letter to Jamila as if you are one of these characters. Explain to her how you are feeling, and tell her about something that has happened recently (use examples from the book) that you hope will help her understand your character better. What insights does this exercise give you into the life of your chosen character? Do you like them more or less now?

3. Jamila is given a happy ending to her story, but life isn't always so happy. Are you satisfied with the ending? Are there parts that you would have written differently? Why do you think the author has chosen to end this book on a happy note? Choose a scene from the end of the book and rewrite it so that it has either a sad or an ambiguous ending. Write a paragraph about why you chose to rewrite this scene the way you did. Discuss the differences in the two endings—how much do your choices change the book?

#### RESPONDING

1. Jamila is torn between trying to fit into her new home in Australia and trying to remember her old home in Iraq. How does it feel to remember a place that you can no longer go? What stays with you? How would you describe it to someone who has never been there?

Think of a place that was important to you as a child and try to write a description of it for someone who has never been there. Think about the things that you remember—the smells, the sounds, the colours. Were there particular plants or animals there?

A particular spot that was special to you? What did you do there? A good way to approach this might be to make a list of all the things you remember before you start writing.

2. Jamila is struggling to find her place, and yet she sometimes fails to empathise with the struggles



# Radical Empathy

## Songbird Activity Pack

by Ingrid Laguna | visit [textpublishing.com.au](http://textpublishing.com.au)



Name

Year

Age

### Imagine you are leaving Australia

*She remembered the goodbyes...watching the ground grow distant as the plane flew her away from everything and everyone she knew. (Songbird p.36)*

Imagine you have to leave Australia forever, very suddenly, because it isn't safe to stay. If you could only pack 5 things, what would you take?

1. ....
2. ....
3. ....
4. ....
5. ....

You are going to a country you don't know much about. What questions do you want answers to? For example, will the people be friendly? Think of three other questions.

1. ....
2. ....
3. ....

### Create a character of your own

Jamila is a made-up (fictional) character. Think of a character of your own. Give him or her a name, then answer these questions:

What is your character scared of? .....

What has happened to your character that he or she will never forget? .....

Who is your character's hero? Who do they look up to? .....

What does your character want most in the world?.....

### Author bio

Ingrid Laguna is an author, teacher and Education Advisor for the Melbourne Writers Festival. She lives



in Melbourne and has worked with new migrant and refugee children for many years. *Songbird* is her second book. *Sunflower*, the companion novel, will be released in August this year. Ingrid is available for school booking via Booked Out Speakers Agency or [www.ingridlaguna.com](http://www.ingridlaguna.com)

### Author note

I love teaching. In my classroom we do a range of activities to create a trusting, relaxed and inspiring environment so that we feel safe to take risks together and dig deep into our imaginations. We do meditation and play simple drama games. We learn songs and we do some body percussion (fun!). I am passionate about engaging with young readers and meeting other teachers. So here are a list of activities drawn from my classroom that will help you to explore themes of belonging, identity and the refugee experience. They might help with understanding my main character's choices, struggles and experiences.

## Coping with fear and worry

*It would be late afternoon in Baghdad now. Jamila wondered what Baba was doing. Was he on his way? He said he would come soon. But what did that mean—three days? Three weeks? Three months? (Songbird p.3)*

When Jamila is scared or worried, singing helps her to feel better. What makes you feel better when you are worried about something?

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## Interview someone who has moved to Australia from a different country

Here are some questions you can use or you can make up your own questions:

1. Where were you born?.....  
.....
2. What is your first language? .....  
.....
3. Where did you go to school? .....  
.....
4. When did you come to Australia? .....  
.....
5. How did you feel about leaving your home country?  
.....  
.....
6. Why did you come to Australia? .....  
.....  
.....
7. What do you like about Australia? .....  
.....  
.....
8. What do you miss about your home country? .....  
.....  
.....

## There is a new kid at your school

They have come from a different country and they don't know anyone. What can you do to make them feel welcome?

1. ....  
.....
2. ....  
.....
3. ....  
.....

## Describe Australia

Jamila talks to her class about her country:

*'Iraq is a beautiful country. There are mountains, lakes, rivers. There is a golden mosque. And Baghdad...it is a big city. On hot nights, people eat ice-cream in the streets, and boys swim in the canal. There is a fun park with a big wheel covered in lights. There is music...drumming and singing. (Songbird, p.9)*

If you moved to another country, how would you describe Australia to the people there?

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*When Jamila had sung at school in Baghdad, Baba, Mama and Mina were in the audience and she had seen herself as they did—a brave girl with a beautiful voice. Baba said Jamila had a voice like bells. Mama said Jamila's singing made her remember things. (Songbird, p.145)*

Jamila is a good singer. What are you good at?

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## Relax

In Jamila's classroom, Miss Dana does meditation with the students. Meditation can help you to feel relaxed. Close your eyes and listen for sounds that are far away. Write down what you hear.

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Then close your eyes again and listen for sounds that are close. Write down what you hear. ....

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How do you feel after doing this activity? .....

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