

MY PLACE

SALLY MORGAN

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YEAR LEVEL: Y10+

CROSS-CURRICULUM PRIORITY: OI.INDIGENOUS

ABOUT THE BOOK

In 1982, Sally Morgan travelled back to her grandmother's birthplace. What started as a tentative search for information about her family, turned into an overwhelming emotional and spiritual pilgrimage.

My Place is a moving account of a search for truth into which a whole family is gradually drawn, finally freeing the tongues of the author's mother and grandmother, allowing them to tell their own stories.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sally Morgan was born in Perth in 1951. She has illustrated, written or edited books for both adults and children, including the Waarda series for young readers, and *Speaking from the Heart* and *Heartsick for Country* – both with Tjalamina Mia and Blaze Kwaymullina. Her acclaimed autobiography *My Place* has sold over 700,000 copies since it was first published in 1987. Sally has also established a national reputation as an artist and has works in many private and public collections. Sally Morgan has won many awards for her work, including the Human Rights Award for Literature (1987); the Order of Australia Book Prize (1990); Notable Book, Children's Book Council (1998); Notable Book, Children's Book Council of Australia (2012); and a shortlisting in the New South Wales Premier's Literary Award (1987).



An Australian Classic



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STUDY NOTES

Character

1. Gladys in particular pushes Sally and her siblings to do well in school, and invests the act of reading with a good deal of importance. What might be the reasons behind this?
2. Conversely, Nan is happy to let the children stay home if they express a reluctance to go to school. What are some possible reasons for Nan's ambivalence towards schooling?
3. In what ways do you think Sally's childhood experiences inform her behaviours and orientations as an adult?
4. *I felt different from the other children in my class. They were the spick-and-span brigade, and I, the grubby offender.* (p. 28) What makes Sally feel this way about her relationship to school?
5. Discuss Sally's relationship with her father. How would you define her attitude towards him? Are there potential differences between the child's perspective and the adult Sally looking back? What kind of a father and husband is he? Does Sally's mother's disclosure of his traumatic wartime experiences change your perception?
6. Why do you think that Arthur, Gladys, Daisy, and even Sally devote such extensive narrative space to explorations of their childhood?
7. How does Sally's understanding of gender and womanhood evolve over the course of the text?
8. Why do Gladys and Nan decide to keep their Aboriginal identity hidden from the children?
9. Compare Sally's awareness of racial difference as a child and young adult with that of her mother's.
10. Discuss Sally's motivations for collecting her family's stories and reproducing them in book form.
11. Enumerate the important features of character that seem to be shared by the members of Sally's family.

12. How do you think the prohibition of the Indigenous language impinges on the characters of Arthur and Nan?
13. Evaluate Nan's statement: 'you can't put no lies in a book' (p. 407). What does this say about her conception of text and narrative? Why has she developed such an understanding?
14. What is her brother Arthur's attitude to, and definition of, history?
15. Discuss the ways in which major world events shape the experiences and attitudes held by the various characters in the text, particularly Arthur, Nan, and Gladys.
16. What do you think lies behind the fear of authority shared, in varying degrees, by Gladys and Nan?
17. In what ways does Sally recognise this reticence in herself and how does she overcome this?
18. Discuss the assertion Nan seems to make about the identity of Gladys's father. Why do you think the text leaves the accusation ambiguous?
19. Compare the conclusions to Arthur's, Gladys's and Daisy's stories. What hopes do they share? What advice do they provide for future generations of Australians, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous?

Style and Genre

1. At several junctures in the text, Sally, Jill, Gladys and Nan each have experiences or visions that have a mystical, spiritual or transcendent quality. What do you think about these episodes in the text? Do you think your own cultural context influences the way in which you evaluate these moments? How would you characterise your own cultural context?
2. How do you think understanding of Indigenous experience may have changed since the publication of *My Place* in 1987?
3. Is it fair to say that *My Place* is a multi-generic work? Enumerate the different genres to which it belongs. Does this hybridity change your reading experience in any way? If so, why?
4. Arthur's, Gladys's and Daisy's stories are represented in the text as if the reader is listening directly to their narration. Why do you think Morgan highlights the oral qualities of these stories? How does it influence your reception and understanding of these narratives?
5. What is an epiphany? Do you think there are any moments of epiphany in this text?
6. Compare and contrast the structure and style of Arthur's, Gladys's and Daisy's respective stories. What might account for the similarities? The differences?
7. At times the narrative becomes recursive, revisiting events that have already been covered in the text through the perspective of a different character. Do you think this recursive technique is effective? How does it change your reading experience?
8. Look up the literary term *metafiction*. Do you think *My Place* has metafictional qualities? If so, how do they affect your reading experience and understanding of the text?
9. Do you think Morgan may intentionally conflate literary and historical forms and conventions in *My Place*? If yes, then why? Do you think it is possible to ever fully distinguish between literature and history?
10. What is the power and value of memoir and recorded oral history as a contribution to our understanding of national identity? What is the value of having informal and formal histories side by side?

Theme

1. Discuss the role that silence and/or refusal to speak plays in the narrative.
2. What is the power of secrets?
3. What is the power of knowledge?
4. Discuss the representations and conceptions of truth and falsehood – at both the individual and social levels – that are offered in *My Place*.
5. Discuss the idea of 'belonging' as it occurs in *My Place*. Why is the book called *My Place*?
6. Evaluate the various ways that ownership is represented in the text.
7. Discuss the manner in which geography informs identity in the text.
8. Compare and contrast the ways in which children and adults are aware of differences in socio-economic and racial difference in the text.
9. Why is it important to know where you come from?
10. Why is it important to know to whom you belong?
11. Explore the various iterations and representations of religion and spirituality in *My Place*.

12. Does *My Place* change your perception of public institutions and frameworks? How, and why?
13. How does *My Place* represent fatherhood?
14. Discuss the various ways in which shame is manifested in the text. Does your understanding of the concept change after reading?
15. The threat of sexual violence is darkly recurrent across the stories and timelines in *My Place*. Discuss how this affects the various characters, as well as the ways in which it is bound up with racial identity in the text.
16. What is the relationship between language or expression and self-determination in *My Place*?
17. How does this text inform or change the way you think about how historical narratives are constructed?
18. How do the characters in *My Place* approach death? Are their perspectives different from what you might expect? How so? What do you think about their attitudes towards the end of life?

Research and Activities

1. Construct a timeline incorporating the significant events for each of the principle characters in the text as well as major events in Australian and world history.
2. Locate Corunna Downs on a map. Research the contemporary situation for Indigenous Australians living in the Marble Bar area. Discuss your findings as a class. Does your reading of *My Place* change your attitude towards this situation?
3. What information can you find about the Parkerville Children's Home and the Swan Native and Half-Caste Mission? How do your findings compare with Gladys's and Arthur's descriptions?
4. Is Parkerville still in operation? If so, who attends Parkerville now?
5. How do homes and institutions reflect more broadly different aspects of social need or dysfunction?
6. Do we need places like Parkerville? What alternatives are there to institutionalisation? What are the strengths and weaknesses of such alternatives?
7. What was the Western Australian *Aborigines Act 1905*? What is the legacy of this piece of legislation?
8. Who was A.O. Neville, and why does Arthur say about him, 'any blackfella that had dealings with Neville got no good word to say about him' (p. 266)?