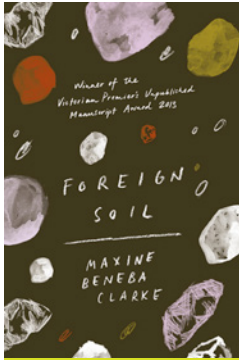


Foreign Soil by Maxine Beneba Clarke

HACHETTE



'Wondrous as she seemed, Shu Yi wasn't a problem I wanted to take on. Besides, with her arrival my own life had become easier: Melinda and the others hadn't come looking for me in months. At home, my thankful mother had finally taken the plastic undersheet off my bed.'

Maxine Beneba Clarke, *Foreign Soil*

INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXT

This collection of short stories won the Victorian Premier's Award for an Unpublished Manuscript in 2013, and was subsequently published by Hachette Australia. It went on to be critically recognised and appear on the shortlists for numerous awards.

Like all of Maxine Beneba Clarke's work, this collection reflects an awareness of voices that are often pushed to the fringes of society, and frequently speaks to the experiences of immigrants, refugees and single mothers, in addition to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people. In *Foreign Soil*, Clarke captures the anger, hope, despair, desperation, strength and desire felt by members of these groups, and many others. This extraordinary collection experiments with language, dialect and structure to capture the perfect form for each of the narrative voices it contains. *Foreign Soil* is in many ways challenging reading material, but it is an important work in that it forces us to confront our prejudices and assumptions in regards to what we believe books, and people, can be and do.

This book can and should be enjoyed as a whole, with each of the stories adding something new to the collection's chorus. However, for schools wishing to look at specific issues, or to avoid particular themes, the stories can easily be studied in isolation or selected groups. There is much scope to compare and contrast these pieces with current affairs, and to link them to issues raised in the Australian Curriculum.

These notes are divided into individual stories to allow teachers to select those they feel are most

suitable for study. A short synopsis and series of reading questions are allocated for each story, along with any themes that are not included in the general list of the book's themes below. Following this breakdown are activities that can be applied to the book more broadly.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MAXINE BENEBA CLARKE is an Australian writer and slam poetry champion of Afro-Caribbean descent. She is the author of the poetry collections *Gil Scott Heron is on Parole* (Picaro Press, 2009) and *Nothing Here Needs Fixing* (Picaro Press, 2013), the title poem of which won the 2013 Ada Cambridge Poetry Prize. Her debut short story collection, *Foreign Soil*, won the 2013 Victorian Premier's Award for an Unpublished Manuscript, the ABIA Literary Fiction Book of the Year, and the Indie Award for Debut Fiction; was shortlisted for the 2015 Stella Prize, the Glenda Adams Award for New Writing at the NSW Premier's Awards, and the Matt Richell Award; and longlisted for the Dobbie Award. Maxine was named one of 2015's Best Young Australian Novelists by the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

As a spoken-word performer, Maxine has delivered her work on stages and airwaves, and at festivals across the country, including the Melbourne Writers Festival, Melbourne International Arts Festival and the Melbourne Jazz Fringe Festival, as well as at the Arts Centre.

Maxine's short fiction, essays and poetry have been published in numerous publications, including *Overland*, *The Age*, *Big Issue*, *Cordite Poetry Review*, *Harvest*, *Voiceworks*, *Going Down Swinging*, *Mascara*, *Meanjin*, *Unusual Work* and *Peril*.

She has been poetry editor of the academic journal *Social Alternatives*, and spoken-word editor for *Overland* literary journal.

Maxine has conducted poetry classes and workshops for many organisations, including RMIT, the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English (VATE), Writers Victoria, Kensington Neighbourhood House and the Society of Women Writers (Vic).

Taken from the author's website
www.slamup.blogspot.com.au

THEMES

Family
 Class
 Race
 Prejudice
 Identity
 Gender
 Stereotype
 Language
 Motherhood
 Privilege
 Human behaviour

David

A young mother is wheeling her new bike home when she is stopped by an older woman. Both women are Sudanese, but have very different life experiences; they are from different generations and come from different parts of Sudan. They are united not by their skin colour, but by their shared need to escape, and the bike is a symbol of freedom for both. The younger fights the expectations of her elders, and the restrictions of her circumstance as a young Sudanese woman in Australia and a single mother. The older, Asha, struggles to reconcile her new life with memories of her old, and in particular of her son, David. This devastating story within a story intersperses Asha's final memory of David with the meeting between the two women. It is a story of

strength, survival and hope, resting on a shiny red bicycle.

- ◆ When and where is the story set?
- ◆ What is the story within the story?
- ◆ What is the significance of the red bicycle to each of the women?
- ◆ How does Asha's final memory of David change when she rides the bicycle?
- ◆ What connects the two women? In what ways are they different? Do they understand each other?
- ◆ How do the two communicate with each other?

Harlem Jones

Harlem Jones is angry – filled with the kind of anger that builds up with nowhere to go but outwards. He's the sort of kid who is known to police. Harlem is looking for trouble, and he finds it with his friend Toby. With the volatile setting of the 2011 Tottenham Riots, this is a story that addresses those who are failed (or perhaps deliberately ignored) by the system. The author references the riots and Mark Duggan as the catalyst for Harlem's rage. Harlem's helpless, desperate anger may be familiar to many readers, but in him these feelings are amplified, and become explosive.

In this *Overland* magazine podcast, Maxine discusses and reads aloud from 'Harlem Jones'. <https://overland.org.au/2013/10/the-overland-podcast-maxine-beneba-clarke/>

- ◆ What are the riots about?
- ◆ How has Harlem been failed by the system?
- ◆ How is Harlem an outsider? How does this inform his actions?
- ◆ What does Harlem want?
- ◆ How does the author maintain the story's pace through its language?
- ◆ What forms do power and helplessness take in this story?
- ◆ How do the different attitudes adults have toward Harlem shape and affect his behaviour?

Hope

Millie has grown up in Cidar Valley, a small town in Jamaica. She is nicknamed ‘Banana Girl’ by her younger brothers and sisters after the plot of sugar bananas her father has planted in their backyard in the hope of funding a brighter future for his eldest daughter. For Millie, opportunity comes in the form of an apprentice position in Willemina’s sewing shop in the city of Kingston.

Millie is resilient, but a dreamer. She falls in love and becomes pregnant to a man, Winston, who is about to leave the city for work. He promises to come back to her but, as time passes, and Millie doesn’t hear from him, she grows heartbroken, and increasingly sure that she won’t see him again. ‘Hope’ describes the tug of war between several characters, each of whom rests their own hopes on Millie as she tries desperately to live up to their expectations.

- ◆ What are the banana plants a testament to?
- ◆ What do each of the characters in this piece hope for?
- ◆ Why doesn’t Willemina tell Millie that Winston has written to her?
- ◆ Does the story end with hope for Millie?
- ◆ How is Millie’s life in Kingston different from her life in Cidar Valley?

Foreign Soil

In the story that gives its name to this collection, Ange is a hairdresser who is convinced that there is something more to her life. When Mukasa walks into the salon and flirts with her over his haircut, she’s sure that he’s it. But their relationship in Australia is inverted when Ange travels with Mukasa to his home country of Uganda. Once there, Mukasa is no longer the doting man he was in Australia. He becomes violent and aggressive, and Ange feels increasingly cut off from the world, both literally and metaphorically.

This brutal and subtle story explores the horrors faced by victims of family violence who have no safe place to turn to. By setting the story in Uganda, rather than Australia, Beneba Clarke forces readers to go on the journey with Ange. There is no space for questions

such as ‘Why not just leave?’, and the story addresses the claustrophobic horrors of abuse without respite.

- ◆ How might this story be read differently if it was set in Australia?
- ◆ How does Mukasa’s behaviour change when he and Ange get to Uganda?
- ◆ How is Ange alienated? How might this apply to women in Australia?
- ◆ Why does Ange conceal her pregnancy?
- ◆ What image does the author finish the story with?
- ◆ What emotions does this last paragraph convey?

Shu Yi

Ava lives in the suburban town of Kellyville in Australia, which she describes as ‘the typical everyone-knows-everyone-else’s-business-and-can-I-borrow-a-cup-of-milk-for-the-kids’-breakfast-please suburban blond-brick Australia’. Ava is used to being the odd one out, used to dealing with the casual and the not-so-casual racism of her peers. When Shu Yi arrives at her school, Ava thinks she is captivating and beautiful. But although she knows what it’s like to be bullied and ostracised, Ava is reluctant to make herself even more of a target by aligning herself with the new girl. She ignores Shu Yi, grateful for her own reprieve from the attention of schoolyard bullies, and hopes the attacks on the new girl will pass. When Ava’s mother and teachers suggest to Ava that she watch out for Shu Yi, she has the chance to make a difference, but is too afraid of the consequences for herself.

This is an astute narrative about fear and bullying. Both Ava and Shu Yi are sympathetic characters, targeted by their peers because their nationality marks them as ‘other’. The author has perfectly captured the nuances of how and why people act in these situations and, in doing so, forces the reader to question the hows and whys of their own behaviour.

- ◆ What image is evoked by Ava’s description of her Australian town? What does that tell you about the types of people who might live there?
- ◆ How does Melissa use her parents to justify her behaviour?

- ◆ What is wrong with the attitudes of Mr James and the principal in this story? How might they have acted differently?
- ◆ What is significant about Shu Yi's line at the end of the story?
- ◆ Why does Ava reject Shu Yi?

Railton Road

Railton Road is set in a rebel squat in England in the 1960s. Solomon is in line for a promotion from his current position running the Black History Classes at the squat, to Minister for Culture with the London Panthers. He can taste the rebellion in the air, and detects its imminent arrival with De Frankie, one of the leaders of the Black Panthers. De Frankie is aggressive and unforgiving, initiating action against women he believes have betrayed their race. The story ends with a woman in shackles, a painful and humiliating symbol of the revolution to come.

- ◆ What is the tension at the heart of this story?
- ◆ What does Solomon feel about the coming revolution?
- ◆ How are De Frankie's and Solomon's attitudes different?
- ◆ How is the woman at the end of the story not what Solomon expected? How does this make him feel about what the London Panthers are doing?
- ◆ What does the treatment of the woman represent?

Gaps in the Hickory

The longest story in the collection, 'Gaps in the Hickory', is about Delores, an old woman who moved to New Orleans from America's Deep South, and is mourning the death of her good friend Izzy. Delores' kindness is shown in her treatment of her young neighbour, Ella, while she secretly worries for the safety of Izzy's grandson, Carter. Mississippi isn't a good place for a boy like Carter, who feels more comfortable in his sister's dresses and beads, particularly without Izzy around to keep him safe.

- ◆ What is it about Carter's behaviour that makes Delores worry for him? How does she know his secret?

- ◆ Why does Delores feel that she might be responsible for Carter's sexuality? What did she keep a secret from Izzy?
- ◆ Do you think Carter's dad is acting solely out of prejudice? What other emotions might he be feeling?
- ◆ Why did Izzy leave her house to Delores?
- ◆ How does Carter feel when he puts on Lucy's clothes?
- ◆ At what point in the story do you realise the truth about Delores' past identity? What does holding this information back at first mean for your reading of the character? How might your interpretation of the story have changed if you knew this from the very beginning? How might the author be playing on traditional prejudices and stereotypes to encourage readers to consider their own attitudes beyond the book?

Big Islan

In 'Big Islan' Nathaniel's wife teaches him the alphabet, letter by letter. 'A is fe ackee.' Nathaniel is happy with his life, happy with what he knows. He doesn't want to labour over these meaningless letters. But one morning, looking at the newspaper and seeing the reception of the West Indies cricketers in Australia, the letters take on new meaning. 'A is fe Owstrayleah.' 'E is fe envy.' 'R is fe restlessness.'

This is a small story that addresses big ideas about education, place and happiness. Written entirely in Nathaniel's dialect, the story is in some ways challenging to read, but readers are rewarded with the experience of really being inside a character's head, if only for a moment.

- ◆ Why does Nathaniel's wife want him to learn the alphabet?
- ◆ How does the way Nathaniel views his life change from the beginning of the piece to the end?
- ◆ How do the descriptions of place in the story reflect Nathaniel's emotional state?
- ◆ How is the alphabet used to demonstrate Nathaniel's inner thoughts?

- ◆ Is Nathaniel better off with an education?

The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa

'The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa' is the story of a young refugee boy trapped in Sydney's Villawood detention centre and an Australian woman struggling to make anyone care about him.

The bulk of this story belongs to Asanka, a young boy seeking refuge from the horrors of his homeland. These horrors are sharply drawn alongside those he experiences upon his arrival in Australia. No more than a teenager, Asanka has already endured torture at the hands of the Tamil, and been dragged, half dead, through the salty ocean towards a dream of a safe place, only to be locked up indefinitely before even reaching Australian shores. His only friend was Chaminda, an older man who saved him more than once on the long ocean voyage. After Chaminda's death, Asanka paces the corridors, restless, helpless and alone.

Loretta has left her job at the Asylum Seekers' Support Centre because of pressure from her husband. In this story, she is the outsider, the helpless 'other' who lacks the language to explain who she is or what she can possibly offer. Chaminda was certain Loretta could help Asanka, but as she sits in front of him, sizing up a boy who has lost all hope, she knows that she cannot. Asanka can see it in her. He knows there is no hope, and so all he asks of her is a gift, of some toiletries. What harm could there be? What harm, until a hairpin becomes a needle and dental floss, a thread.

This piece ruthlessly drags the reader's attention towards issues that are often suppressed and ignored in Australian society. Based on conversations the author had with refugees, Asanka is faithfully created and authentic. His journey is not idealised or diluted and, like the other stories in this collection, 'The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa' asks readers to question their own attitudes and responses.

- ◆ Why does Asanka count?
- ◆ How does the author demonstrate Asanka's feelings of helplessness and disconnection from the world? Why does he feel this way?

- ◆ How do Chaminda and Asanka become friends? What unites them?
- ◆ What does Asanka hope for? Is this likely to happen?
- ◆ Why might this story be difficult to read? What ideas does it challenge?
- ◆ For Asanka, what is real?
- ◆ Why is Loretta unable to help?
- ◆ Why is she frustrated with her family and friends' lack of understanding? How could she explain it so they would understand, and would they listen?

The Sukiyaki Book Club

The final story in *Foreign Soil* brings the collection full circle, and, like 'David', is a story within a story. In this heavily autobiographical piece, a young black single mother sits at her desk writing. She is stuck on a scene where her character, Avery, is hanging from the monkey bars, alone, with no way down. The young mother asks herself: is there any way to bring the child down safely?

She wonders if there is hope for her, her children, or Avery. The rejection letters pile up on the desk next to her. Her writing is good, they say, but not hopeful enough, not light enough. The young mother is desperate for a happy ending, but she can't find her way to one.

Her despair grows. Her children are bored. Hungry. Avery doesn't have the strength to hold on. She lets go. Drops.

And in the middle of the air, Avery's body takes over. She flips. Lands safely. And in the young mother's dilapidated apartment, her children dance together, carefree and happy.

- ◆ What control does the protagonist of this piece have over the other characters? What happens when she gives it up?
- ◆ Why does her work keep getting rejected? How important is hope in writing? Can a piece be sad and hopeful at the same time?
- ◆ How does the author show these characters to be more than just 'poor'? What else are they?

- ◆ How does this story reflect the author's life? Why do you think the author has chosen to finish with another story within a story?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Discuss in class the following words in relation to *Foreign Soil*:

- Power
- Hope
- Refuge
- Racism
- Privilege

Find examples of how each is used in the text, who is affected by them and in what way, and consider how the story might change if it had been used differently. How is it used for and against the character/s in your example?

2. What do we mean by the word 'stereotype'? Choose one of the characters in *Foreign Soil* and discuss how the word stereotype could be applied to them.

- Do they conform to a particular stereotype?
- If someone were to meet this character, how might stereotyping influence that person's thoughts or behaviour toward the character?
- How is the character stereotyped by others in the story?
- How does the character resist or break away from their traditional stereotype? How has the author achieved this?
- What is the connection between prejudice and stereotype? How can this be applied to your character?
- Describe a character as if you're meeting them for the first time.
- Now imagine you're the character and write a paragraph describing yourself.
- How do these two paragraphs differ, and what does that say about the way we stereotype people?

3. Coming from a slam poetry background, it is perhaps unsurprising that Maxine has a great love and respect for the way the sound of words can influence how they are read. In this *Guardian* piece ([http://](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/17/stella-prize-2015-six-australian-authors-on-the-stories-behind-their-books)

www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/17/stella-prize-2015-six-australian-authors-on-the-stories-behind-their-books), Maxine says the following in reference to the book:

'Stylistically, I was very concerned about voice while writing this book. Spoken word has always been my first love – I've performed on stages and airwaves across Australia and internationally for almost a decade now. When I was writing the stories in *Foreign Soil*, I set out to replicate what I would do at the microphone – to transcribe the sounds, accents, rhythms of speech on to the page.

'The story 'Gaps in the Hickory', set in Mississippi and New Orleans, is written in a distinct southern vernacular so that the reader cannot elect to escape the accent and its histories. The story 'Big Islan' is written in a distinct Jamaican-accented English. Part of the story 'David' is written in English as a second language. The way we speak, our choice of words, our rhythms, our pauses, tell so much about who we are, where we've been, and sometimes even where we're heading.'

- What do you think Maxine means when she says 'the reader cannot elect to escape the accent and its histories'? How does this relate to your emotional responses to the stories written in dialect?
- How does the way we speak express who we are? What does the way you speak say about you? What kind of language do you use (e.g. formal, informal, slang, swearing, dialect)? Do you speak fast or slow? Is your voice monotone or singsong in tone? Do you use particular words often? Answer these questions about yourself, and also ask someone else to answer them on your behalf. How do their answers compare to yours?
- How does the author capture all of these things in her writing, and what insights does this offer into the characters?
- Using your description of the way you speak, and other points you've discussed during this activity, try to write a short piece (creative or straightforward), that focuses on capturing the way you talk.

FURTHER READING

On Maxine Beneba Clarke and *Foreign Soil*

Digital Writers' Festival 2015: Presenting the Stella Prize Longlist (Maxine reading from *Foreign Soil* 'Big Islan') 16:47–21:38

<http://digitalwritersfestival.com/2015/event/stella-longlist/>

'At first her work was rejected, but then she won an award': *Sydney Morning Herald*

<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/maxine-beneba-clarke-20140501-37iro.html>

'Listen': Review by Fiona Wright: *Sydney Review of Books*

<http://www.sydneyreviewofbooks.com/foreign-soil-maxine-beneba-clarke/>

(and response to this review by Maxine Beneba Clarke

<http://www.sydneyreviewofbooks.com/listen-correspondence/>)

'Maxine Beneba Clarke delves into foreign soil': *The Herald Sun*

<http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/maxine-beneba-clarke-delves-into-foreign-soil/story-fni0fiyv-1227040359468>

Review by Lou Heinrich: *Newtown Review of Books*

<http://newtownreviewofbooks.com.au/2014/07/22/maxine-beneba-clarke-foreign-soil-reviewed-lou-heinrich/>

Review by Martin Shaw

<http://www.emergingwritersfestival.org.au/tag/maxine-beneba-clarke/>

The Stella Interview: Maxine Beneba Clarke

<http://thestellaprize.com.au/2015/03/the-stella-interview-maxine-beneba-clarke/>

'Stella Prize 2015: the shortlisted authors on the stories behind their books': *The Guardian*

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/17/stella-prize-2015-six-australian-authors-on-the-stories-behind-their-books>