'Small things give you happiness. He’d learnt that, above all else. In the labour camp, a smoke, a starry night, a thicker piece of bread could make them briefly happy as children. Was all happiness just a memory of childhood?'

Joan London, *The Golden Age*

**INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXT**

*The Golden Age* is a book about war, about loss, about letting go, about illness, about poetry. It is a book about love. These themes circle the book’s two young protagonists, Elsa and Frank, who meet in the polio ward of the Golden Age juvenile convalescent hospital (an historically accurate setting) and, to put it simply, fall in love.

Frank is the son of Hungarian refugees, Meyer and Ida. The family emigrated from Hungary to Australia out of desperation, rather than by choice. They have left behind their ruined country, but Ida has not left her suffering there. A talented pianist, she refuses to play the instrument that once brought her joy, her silence a penance. When life deals Ida another cruel blow, and Frank contracts polio, she is almost unsurprised. She holds her melancholy close, and it keeps her separate from her husband and son.

Meyer is deeply intuitive. He has adapted more gracelessly to their new life in Perth, though he still recognises that he is an outsider and, at times, longs for the comforts of his home country. Meyer is a man who believes in love. He has had mistresses, and there is a spark between him and Nurse Olive from the Golden Age, but he also has a deep, unwavering love for his wife. Meyer’s life is characterised by the continuity of hope, and by small gleaming moments of joy.

The Golden Age* is an ensemble piece, enacted with cinematic grace. Although Frank and Elsa are at the core of the narrative, this story is just as much about the other characters inhabiting the space. Whole chapters are devoted to secondary characters such as Nurse Olive; Elsa’s mother, Margaret; and other children at the Golden Age, including Albert Sutton. This gives depth to their appearances in Frank’s and Elsa’s lives, but perhaps more importantly it also gives depth to their own. None of London’s characters exist merely to serve the plot. They are each fully developed, with hopes and dreams and failings. A good example of this are Elsa's and Frank’s parents: Margaret and Jack, and Meyer and Ida. Their desires and relationships are explored far beyond their roles as parents, and they are more than merely representations of stereotypes.

Frank and Elsa are often oblivious to the changing tensions of the relationships outside their shared world. This is as it should be, as children’s awareness of adults tends to be filtered solely through their own perspectives. Frank, Ida and Meyer were separated during the war, and Frank’s memories of this time enhance his feelings of isolation and otherness. During the course of the book, he meets only two people whom he feels truly understand him: Sullivan, a once-promising rower who Frank stumbles across in his early explorations of the adult wing of the polio hospital; and Elsa, who he meets at the Golden Age and falls instantly in love with.

Frank is intrigued by Sullivan. Although there are only a few years between them, Sullivan comes across as far wiser and worldlier, and acts as a mentor of sorts. Frank visits Sullivan every day, and as the older boy lies inert inside an Iron Lung, his body crippled by polio, Sullivan teaches Frank about poetry. It is here that Frank discovers his vocation as a poet.
Sullivan teaches him about the meanings behind poems, explains that they need not necessarily rhyme, and on his deathbed charges Frank with the task of completing Sullivan’s final, unfinished poem, ‘On My Last Day on Earth’.

Sullivan’s premature death makes an everlasting mark on his young friend, but it is Elsa who finally gives Frank something to write about. He feels an affinity with her from the moment he sees her. Elsa is beautiful, possesses a silent wisdom, and is the same age as Frank. Their relationship is subtle but intense, as they find inspiration in each other and become increasingly intertwined. Their relationship signifies their transition from child to adult, and when they are found in bed together, it is seen as a sign that the Golden Age is no longer the appropriate place for them. When they are separated, Frank and Elsa wilt, each lacking the energy to live without the other. The Golden Age spans many years and lives. It is a testament to the author’s skill that she has achieved so much, while maintaining such a light touch. Students will find this book easy to engage with. The narrative around the nature of love is universal, and there is historical relevance to students interested in Australia’s recent history. There are a number of approaches that could be taken to studying this text based on the themes discussed above, and these are covered further in the notes below.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOAN LONDON is the author of two prize-winning collections of stories, Sister Ships, which won the Age Book of the Year in 1986, and Letter to Constantine, which won the Steele Rudd Award in 1994 and the West Australian Premier’s Award for Fiction. These stories have been published in one volume as The New Dark Age. Her first novel, Gilgamesh, was published in 2001, won the Age Book of the Year for Fiction in 2002 and was longlisted for the Orange Prize and the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. Her second novel, The Good Parents, was published in 2008 and won the 2009 Christina Stead Prize for Fiction at the NSW Premier’s Literary Awards. Joan’s books have all been published internationally to critical acclaim. The Golden Age is her third novel. It was shortlisted for the 2015 Stella Prize and the 2015 Miles Franklin Literary Award.

THEMES

Family
War
Polio
Love
Parenting
Isolation
Poetry

READING QUESTIONS

✦ In an interview, Joan London mentions being inspired by The Diary of Anne Frank, because it was an ‘awakening’ for her to read about the tragic experience of a ‘13-year-old, an amazing writer, and a brilliant girl’. In some ways, London’s own character Frank is similar to Anne Frank – he too is a child beset by the horrors of his time, drawn to writing, whose brilliance is infectious.

– What changes for the reader when historical horrors are explored through the perspective of children, rather than adults?
– Can you identify with Frank because of his age? How does this help you understand the parts of his story that are unfamiliar?

✦ What draws Frank to Sullivan?

✦ What does Sullivan teach Frank about poetry?

✦ What does Frank mean when he says that he’s found his vocation?

✦ What is the difference between a vocation and a career?

✦ What are Sullivan’s poems about?

✦ How does Sullivan’s approach to poetry differ from that of Frank’s parents and teachers?

✦ Shortly after he meets Frank, Sullivan says, ‘Once you get used to your condition […] your imagination becomes free again.’ What does he mean by this?
Considering the quote above, in what ways are each of the characters in the book both liberated, and trapped, by their conditions?

How does Frank describe Elsa when he first sees her? Is this description accurate? How does she change over the course of the book?

In what ways does polio shape the children at the Golden Age? How does it set them apart from the other people in their lives? How does it change the way they are treated?

How does Ida feel about music? Why does she stop playing? Why is she nervous when she plays at the concert at the Golden Age?

What does Sister Penny feel is lacking in her relationship with her own daughter?

How is motherhood portrayed in the book? Think about characters who are biological mothers, as well as those who take on maternal roles. How do these depictions conform to or differ from common conceptions of mothers in the 1950s? How do their fears and dreams differ from those of their children? How are their lives shaped by their children in both positive and negative ways? How and why does the author show this?

When was the polio vaccine introduced? When is the book set in relation to this?

What happened in Hungary that forced Ida, Meyer and Frank to emigrate?

How is their life in Australia different from their life in Hungary?

How are attitudes to Meyer and Ida similar to attitudes towards current refugees or immigrants in Australia?

Do Frank and Elsa find happiness at the end of the book?

**EXTENSION ACTIVITIES**


In *The Golden Age*, Frank is given his first writer’s notebook by Sullivan – a prescription pad that he writes his poetry in.

What is the significance of this?

What does Frank write in his notebook?

Carry your own notebook for a week. Use it to write down anything of interest to you. Don’t worry about being clever, just write whatever catches your eye – the beauty of this kind of observation is that it will help you discover your unique voice. What do you notice that no one else does, what are you drawn to, what interests you?

You might not feel comfortable sharing your notebooks in class so, instead, at the end of the week, write a paragraph or so describing the experience. Has carrying a notebook changed the way you see or think about things? Do you feel inspired to write, or to create something from the notes you’ve written? Will you continue to use your notebook?

2. The book opens with Frank finding his vocation as a poet, and closes with him talking about this same topic. It is an important theme in the book, as Frank’s discovery that poetry doesn’t have to be bound by rhyme reflects the liberation he feels in being able to express his identity through language. Dorothy Porter is one of Australia’s most famous poets, and her work speaks to the ideas that Sullivan shares with Frank – the idea that poetry doesn’t have to rhyme, that it can focus on mundane topics and yet is still able to reveal a universal truth about the human experience. Using the following website, choose at least two of Dorothy Porter’s poems to study. http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/porter-dorothy

What are the themes of the poems?

How are they structured?

Do they speak to your experiences? Do you understand them?

What objects or references does Porter use to ground the poems in reality?

How does Porter use language to show emotion?
Using your analysis of Porter’s poems, and drawing inspiration from Frank’s and Sullivan’s ideas about poetry, write your own poem in a contemporary style. Write about things that matter to you, using language that is meaningful to you. The poem should have structure, and use evocative language, but you should be at the heart of it. If your school has a blog, this would be a good place to display students’ poems, or they could be turned into a zine and distributed throughout the school.

3. *The Golden Age* is very much a book about desire – about what each of the characters wants the most. Make a list of characters in the book.

✦ What do they want?
✦ Do they manage to achieve this?
✦ Does the object of their desire change from the beginning of the book to the end?
✦ Will getting what they want make each of them happy? Why? Why not?
✦ What is preventing them from getting what they want?
✦ What is it that makes them want this thing more than anything else?
✦ Try to answer these questions in relation to yourself. Does understanding the characters in this way make you relate to them better? How can you see yourself in them? In what ways are you different?
✦ How has the author explored the outcome of desire and the way it influences our actions and behaviour?

FURTHER READING

On Joan London and *The Golden Age*

An Interview with Joan London: The Sydney Morning Herald

Review by Geordie Williamson: The Australian: ‘Joan London’s *The Golden Age* is written in the poetic language of love’

Review by Tegan Bennett Daylight: Sydney Review of Books: ‘Fully Present, Utterly Connected’
http://www.sydneypreviewofbooks.com/golden-age-joan-london/

Review by Brenda Walker: The Monthly

Review by Jim Morgan: The Daily Review: Crikey

Video Interview with Joan London: The First Tuesday Book Club
http://www.abc.net.au/tv/firsttuesday/s4214221.htm

The Stella Interview: Joan London

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

Digital Writers’ Festival 2015: Presenting the Stella Prize Longlist (Joan reading from *The Golden Age*)
26:38–31:20
http://digitalwritersfestival.com/2015/event/stella-longlist/

On contemporary poetry and free verse

Modern Australian Poetry

Free Verse: The Hidden Rules of Free Verse Poetry

On the historical elements of the book

Australian Polio History

History of Polio
Polio Figures Show Upward Trend (historical reference to the Golden Age Convalescent Hospital)

Hungary Declares War on Germany: On This Day in History
http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/hungary-declares-war-on-germany