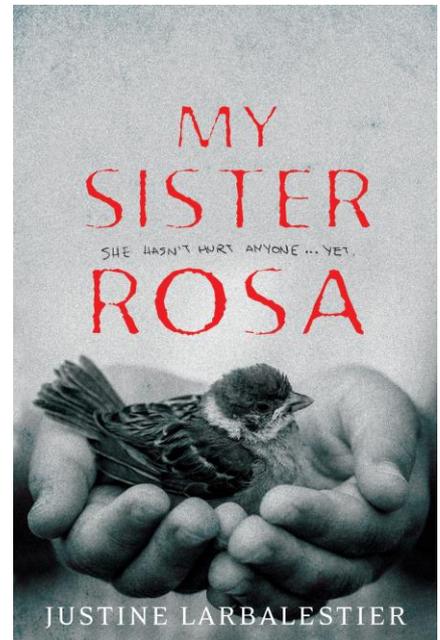


My Sister Rosa

by Justine Larbalestier

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Summary

Rosa had never made someone else kill before. At least, as far as I knew she hadn't. She'd never killed anything as big as a guinea pig. She was scaling up. That guinea pig had been three or four times the size of the sparrow. I didn't want to think about what was three or four times the size of a guinea pig.

Che Taylor's little sister Rosa is smart, talented, pretty and so good at deception that Che's convinced she must be a psychopath. She hasn't hurt anyone yet, but he's certain it's just a matter of time. It's up to Che to protect Rosa from the world - and the world from Rosa.

When their parents move them to New York City to launch yet another exciting new business, Che longs to return home to Sydney and his three best friends. But he can't leave Rosa behind - who else can keep her from unleashing her worst? And with so many opportunities in Manhattan for Rosa to play her increasingly complex and disturbing games, will his efforts be enough?

Use in the curriculum

My Sister Rosa can be used as an example of:

- Use of first person narrative in an unfolding mystery.
- The way a writer can use foreshadowing to build sustained tension.
- Differences between Australian and American English.
- The exploration of relationships between young adults and authority figures.
- Examination of moral issues such as honesty, violence, and loyalty.

Themes

- mental illness and normality
- family loyalty and responsibility
- truth, trust and honesty
- violence
- gender identity, sexuality, and love

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In the classroom...

My Sister Rosa by Justine Larbalestier

Discussion questions

1. "Don't dimple. I don't trust your dimples." (p. 98) Che describes Rosa as someone who "dimples" rather than smiles. What is the difference, and what does it tell us about Rosa's nature? What effect does describing Rosa in this way have on the reader?
2. "Everyone pretends that lying is bad but everyone does it... If I told people what I thought, I'd be in trouble all the time." (p. 124) Rosa makes a good point about lying. The morality of it is not necessarily clear-cut. Discuss as a class where the line might be between a good lie and a bad one.
3. Trying to teach Rosa about 'good' and 'bad' behaviour, causes Che to examine his own notions of these concepts. Discuss with reference to his decision to spar, and his attitude to violence.
4. "'Hey girl, you are fiine'
I turn to see a man leering at her." (p. 131)
Street harassment is a common experience for women. Why do you think this is so? Discuss with reference to ideas of feminism, the male gaze, and the patriarchy.
5. "Maybe Elon is a she?... Maybe he is a boy?" (p. 140) Do people necessarily need to have a gender? What does a person's gender say about them? How is Elon's refusal to be categorized as male or female a radical act?
6. "Did you know that Sid is afraid of heights?" (p. 242) What is the effect on the reader of learning that Rosa has discovered this piece of information about Sid?
7. "They've both been lying to me for years." (p. 330) Sally repeatedly asserts that honesty is a fundamental value of the family. Yet this turns out to be a lie in itself. How have each of the characters been dishonest? Whose lies have been the most dangerous?
8. "You're like me. You're just better at pretending you're not." (p. 361) Is there a fundamental difference between Che and Rosa? What is that difference?
9. What is the nature/nurture debate? Do you think psychopathy, or antisocial personality disorder, is a matter of genetics or environment? Why do you think this question would be of particular importance to Che? To Sally?
10. "You have to stop crying, Sally. It's annoying." (p. 454) By the end of the novel, Rosa is no longer hiding her nature from her mother. How do you think her future unfolds? Plot out a timeline of the remainder of Rosa's childhood, giving reasons for your speculations.
11. "David is a poker master. Rosa is his avid student." (p. 26) Once the outcome of the novel is revealed, the reader begins to see myriad clues as to how things truly were all along. Collect a catalogue of these clues, and use them to examine how Larbalestier cleverly laid the groundwork for the dramatic finale of the story.

Related texts/Further reading [NB: adult books with disturbing elements]

- *The Bad Seed*, by William March
- *The Psychopath Test* by Jon Ronson
- *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn
- *We Need to Talk About Kevin* by Lionel Shriver
- *And Then There Were None* by Agatha Christie
- *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote
- *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess
- *Dexter (TV series)* (For mature viewers, rated MA)



In the classroom...

Justine Larbalestier on writing *My Sister Rosa*

The initial idea for writing a Young Adult take on William March's *The Bad Seed* (1954) came from one of my favourite novelists, Tayari Jones. She was tweeting about the book -- or was it the movie? -- and got me thinking about evil children. What would it be like to be the older sibling of a psychopathic child? I reread the book, which was as good as I remembered, (I also watched the movies which were even worse than I remembered) and made me wonder how much the research on psychopaths has changed since the 1950s.



At the same time I was noticing people using the term *sociopath* as if it were not a synonym for *psychopath*. What was that about? I wondered How did it connect to the third synonym *antisocial personality disorder*, which is the term used to refer to the condition in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diagnostic_and_Statistical_Manual_of_Mental_Disorders

I've been thinking about psychopaths for a long time. For as long as I've been reading True Crime books. When I was eleven or twelve I read a battered paperback of *Helter Skelter* by Vincent Bugliosi and Curt Gentry about Charles Manson and his murders. It ignited my fascination with psychopaths. Soon afterwards I was reading Ann Rule's *The Stranger Beside Me* about Dahmer and working my way through her other books. I read all of Brian Masters' books about serial killers as well as the obvious classics like Truman Capote's highly fictional *In Cold Blood* and *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. More recently I have inhaled books like *The Man in the Rockefeller Suit* by Mark Seal and *Under the Bridge* by Rebecca Godfrey.

Closer to home, I read Julie Clarke and Richard Neville's *The Life and Serious Crimes of Charles Sobhraj* just as Sobhraj escaped from an Indian jail and was all over the news again. I hadn't really thought about there being psychopaths in Australia. My reading had made me think they were more of an American thing. Next I read *Who Killed Leigh Leigh?* by Kerry Carrington. A book that was even closer to home as it looked closely at a brutal murder in my own state of New South Wales.

Psychopaths, I was beginning to realise were everywhere.

At the same time I was inhaling fiction about psychopaths, especially the novels of Patricia Highsmith. I won't list the many, many other novels because none of them are as good as Highsmiths.

Then there were all the bad seed novels. I was obsessed with William March's book as a kid. How could a child be so evil? Was it real? Were there other kids like that? As a child I encountered a few kids I thought were evil incarnate. But I was a pretty hyperbolic child so they were probably run-of-the-mill mean not burn-the-janitor-to-death evil. Other bad seed books that kept me up at night were Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*, Iain Banks' *The Wasp Factory*, Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* and the novelisation of *The Omen* by screen writer David Seltzer.



In the classroom...

As I started to write *My Sister Rosa* I read *The Mask of Sanity: An Attempt to Clarify Some Issues About the So-Called Psychopathic Personality* by Hervey M. Cleckley. First published in 1941, it was one of the most important books on the subject of the twentieth century and has been through many editions. I read the one that's been made available free online. http://www.cassiopaea.org/cass/sanity_1.Pdf Cleckley's work was with upper class psychopaths committed usually by their families into his care at a posh asylum. Their crimes were not usually violent. Many of his patients were fraudsters and confidence tricksters. Later definitions of psychopaths stemmed from work that was largely done with prison populations where the psychopaths were usually poor and violent.

I also read *The Handbook of Child & Adolescent Psychopathy*, Edited by Randall T. Salekin and Donald Lynam. Not an easy read for anyone who hasn't studied psychology or psychiatry, like me. I soon turned to popular non-fiction books on psychopathy, including *The Psychopath Inside* by James Fallon, *Without Conscience* by Robert D. Hare and all his other books, *The Sociopath Next Door* by Martha Stout and *Confessions of a Sociopath* by M. E. Thomas.

After all that reading I was left with the conclusion that the answer to nurture versus nature is BOTH. Psychopaths, like all humans, are a product of their genes, their environment and their brain morphology. None of those things are fixed. The shape of our brain changes as we grow and can be shaped by our environment, by malnutrition, by accidents. Recent research in the field of epigenetics is showing us that our genes aren't fixed either: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epigenetics> And, of course, no one's environment is fixed. We are affected not just by the obvious stuff like where we live, our family, school, friends, but also, it turns out, by where we travel, what we read, and so many other variables. Which is how two siblings growing up in the same family can be radically different despite their shared environment and genes.

Lili Wilkinson and Anna Grace Hopkins sent me down the path of reading about empathy. I read all of Bruce D. Perry and Maia Szalavitz's books on empathy, starting with *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog*. I also looked into some of the various philosophical debates around empathy. (Philosophy –just as hard to read as psychiatry/psychology text books.) My reading of the case studies of deprived children left me amazed at how resilient humans are. Children can grow up under horrific circumstances: abused, neglected, brainwashed and unloved yet still develop empathy and grow up to be loving, caring adults. It's remarkable that the majority of people emerging out of such horrific conditions aren't psychopaths.

Lastly, I was inspired by watching my fantabulous niece learn to laugh, walk, talk, and become a little empathetic, loving person. Watching Lyra helped me imagine all the ways in which Rosa is nothing like her.

Curriculum notes and discussion questions prepared by Esther O'Rourke-deGraaf.