

**Teachers Notes**  
**by Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright**

**SOLD**

**Patricia McCormick**

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Recommended for ages 16+

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Introduction .....	2
Story summary .....	2
Themes .....	2
Curriculum Topics .....	3
SOSE/HSIE .....	3
Literacy & language .....	6
Creative Arts .....	8
Maths .....	8
Health & Personal development .....	9
Questions for reading & discussion .....	9
Conclusion .....	10
Bibliography of related texts and other sources .....	10
About the writers .....	10



## INTRODUCTION

'Simply to endure,' she says, 'is to triumph.'(p 17)

This devastating story of child abuse tells of a young Nepalese girl being sold into child prostitution, and how she manages to survive.

It's a eulogy for all those who've lost their lives to such human trafficking.

It's a call for empathy for the plight of such women and children.

It's an urgent cry for help for these victims of human rights abuse.

It's a poem to suffering and survival.

## STORY SUMMARY

Thirteen-year old Lakshmi lives with her family in a tiny hut in the mountains of Nepal. They struggle to make a living, and both mother and daughter work hard to support themselves, the baby boy, and Lakshmi's stepfather. Much of what they earn is lost by the latter in gambling and they are nearly destroyed when rain comes, which briefly relieves a drought and then washes the rice crop away.

Lakshmi is sold by her stepfather to a woman who visits the village and ostensibly plans to take her to work for an employer as a servant in the city. But after a journey which includes many surprises, she soon realises that her plight is far worse than going into service. For at the Happiness House, things are anything but happy. And Auntie Mumtaz is anything but a mother.

Lakshmi has entered the bleak world of child prostitution and has no way of escaping. She fruitlessly tallies her earnings hoping to be able to repay the owner for her purchase so that she might return to her village, only to discover that she's been deceived and that the 'debt' is far greater than she can hope to repay, and that Auntie Mumtaz has no intention of allowing her to leave. She faces a bleak future which can end either in death or disgrace and she has only the flickering light afforded by her friendships both with her fellow workers and the occasional acquaintance.

But then a lifeline is thrown to her. Will she risk taking the opportunity offered to her?

How likely is it to succeed?

Will life outside the brothel be even worse than life within it?

These are the issues confronted by thousands of young girls in many countries throughout the world. But by personalising one young woman's story, Patricia McCormick has created both a searing indictment of the human impact of trafficking, and an uplifting story of human resilience and the power of hope, kindness and friendship.

## THEMES

Themes suggested by the novel which might be explored with class groups include:

- Innocence
- Freedom
- Resilience & Personal Strength
- Friendship & Kindness
- Cruelty
- Courage versus Fear

These themes could be considered in conjunction with the following topics of relevance to school curriculum areas.

## CURRICULUM TOPICS

- SOSE/HSIE – Studying society and societal issues, for example:
  - Human trafficking
  - Third world countries and subsistence economies
  - Treatment of women in society
  - City versus country values
  - Nepalese culture
- Literacy & language
- Maths
- Creative Arts
- Health & Personal Development

### SOSE/HSIE

In this curriculum area there are **five topics** you might explore with your students:

- 1 Human trafficking
- 2 Third World countries and subsistence economies
- 3 Treatment of women in society
- 4 City versus country values
- 5 Nepalese culture

#### 1. Human trafficking

Human Trafficking is a crime of international proportions, which has been called a 'global epidemic'. Research the topic by reading documents and visiting websites such as:

'Human Trafficking' a web source for combating human trafficking for up-to-date information on this subject.

<http://www.humantrafficking.org/countries/australia>

or

David, Fiona. 'Human Trafficking and Smuggling: An overview of the response at the federal level.' (Australian Government, Australian Institute of Criminology, Research and Public Policy Series, No. 24).

<http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/rpp/24/>

**Facts** include:

- The UN estimates that between 2 and 4 million people are trafficked worldwide each year.
- In the USA alone, the Department of Justice has estimated that 17,500 US women are victims of human trafficking. The USA is one of the top destinations for sex traffickers.
- Cambodia is reported to be Asia's sex trafficking capital.

- Reports show that human trafficking is the third largest crime scheme after drug and weapons trafficking, and the second most profitable after drug trafficking.
- In Australia, a report on human trafficking states that: 'At least a thousand women are kept in debt-bonded prostitution where they are raped, beaten and starved.'  
<http://humantrafficking.org/updates/8>
- In September 2006, the Australian federal government announced that it would provide \$21 million over five years in a bid to combat human trafficking in Asia.
- Punishment for sex traffickers varies. On June 24, 2005 a US court sentenced to 40 years in jail a Korean owner of a sweatshop factory staffed by people he'd trafficked, one of the harshest sentences to date. Research the punishments meted out in Australian courts, and other national judicial systems.
- Many children are sold not for sex but as 'child soldiers'.
- Some crimes have been committed by people employed by 'protective' agencies such as the United Nations and other peacekeeping forces, and efforts to thwart this are challenged by the difficulty of legislating punishment where more than one national government is involved.
- If you Google the term 'human trafficking' results will render over 4.1 million entries.

*Question:* In what countries is child trafficking a major problem?

*Question:* Are there child prostitutes in Australia, and what is the government doing to eradicate child prostitution?

#### **Outcomes of trafficking include:**

- Illness and infection
- Depression
- Poverty
- Disgrace
- Suicide
- Death

One of the most tragic outcomes is the fact that many women lose the will to escape and actually fear the unknown outside world which may prove even worse than their prisons. (p. 212)

Many women sold into such brothels bring up illegitimate children who become institutionalised.

Many are rejected as 'disgraced' women by their own families and communities if they manage to escape.

**Related forms of maltreatment** depicted in this novel which might also be researched include:

- Drug and alcohol abuse and drug trafficking [eg. Shilpa is an alcoholic.]
- Physical and mental abuse [eg. Aunty Mumtaz beats and starves Lakshmi; Anita has a badly damaged face because of such a beating by the 'goondas' who work for Mumtaz.]
- Wilful neglect of children and adolescents [eg. Pushpa's children and others in the brothel routinely go to the roof until late at night while clients visit their mothers, and so are exhausted for school the next day; when Pushpa's illness worsens Aunty Mumtaz threatens to take her baby daughter Jeena as well.]

- Health problems such as infection, STDs and AIDS [Read 'The danger of protection' (p. 130).]

*Activity:* Watch and discuss the recent television movie *Human Trafficking* (2005) starring Mira Sorvino, Donald Sutherland and Robert Carlyle, and directed by Christina Duguay and written by Carol Doyle and Agatha Dominik.

Actor Mira Sorvino has acted on behalf of Amnesty International to advocate against the practice.

*Activity:* Read a transcript of Mira Sorvino speaking on the subject by visiting Amnesty International USA

<http://www.amnestyusa.org/women/trafficking/>

*Research:* Find out more about human rights legislation and protection. Outline the different systems of international and national law and law enforcement. Explore the relationship between government and non-government organisations. [For example, the men who rescue Lakshmi are attached to a non-governmental organisation fighting for rights for these women.]

## 2. Third World countries and subsistence economies

*Thirty rupees. That is the price of a bottle of Coca-Cola at Bajai Sita's store. That is what he paid for me.* (p. 149)

The problems faced by Lakshmi's family are shared by many in countries like Nepal and India, and are contrasted here to consumer societies such as America, the 'land of plenty' (pp. 177-8), which is represented by the soap operas and movies which the girls watch on television. Lakshmi expresses her confusion when the girls watch *The Bold and the Beautiful* and then go off to meet their clients. She wonders why their world is so brutal while the television people seem to live in splendour.

*And so I consider a world so ugly that a child would be maimed for life to fetch an extra rupee or two. And another world full of brides and marigolds, rain machines and white horses.* (p. 171)

*Question:* How can problems like human trafficking be addressed when levels of poverty and need in such countries are so high? Are western nations partly to blame for such traffic?

## 3. Treatment of women in society

*On the mountain we mark time by women's work and women's woes.* (p. 11)

Women in this and many subsistence societies are expected to adhere to strict conventions of behaviour and to defer to the male members of their families, even where those men do not assist in family work. When Ama explains the rituals (pp. 15-7) to be observed with puberty, they largely entail subservience to men. Ama's marriage to the lazy abusive stepfather is also founded on the belief that a woman is better with a man than without one, and he clearly sees both women as his slaves or chattels. Despite her stepfather's failings, Lakshmi is already enticed by the idea of marrying Krishna, the boy she has been promised to, and has romantic dreams about him: 'We could eat riverweed and drink snowmelt and sleep under the silver-white light of the mountain.' (p. 18)

Other key quotes include:

*A son will always be a son, they say. But a girl is like a goat. Good as long as she gives you milk and butter. But not worth crying over when it's time to make a stew.* (p. 9)

*I ask Ama why. 'Why,' I say, 'must women suffer so?'*

*'This has always been our fate,' she says.*

*'Simply to endure,' she says, 'is to triumph.'* (p. 17)

*Question:* Are women in this Nepalese village society already abused even before they are sold? Or is such a view a biased western interpretation of a culture we don't fully comprehend or understand?

#### 4. City versus country values

*I am wary, knowing now how these city people cannot be believed.* (p. 117)

The novel contrasts the simple life of Lakshmi's past, and the connection she had with nature, to the closed, unnatural and unkind world in which she finds herself. Lakshmi never ventures out of the brothel and so her impressions of the city derive from only a brief glimpse of it, and the sounds, sights and smells from her window. She also gains her impressions from the men who visit. 'I am afraid of this city where the lying-down people look like the dead. And the standing-up ones, like the walking dead.' (p. 91) In contrast to the smells of the brothel, her old clothes smell comforting of the place she left behind, and she treasures her memories of that life.

*Questions:* What might Lakshmi's fate in the shelter be? Would she be likely to make her way home to her village? Would she be accepted back into her family? Is she destined to remain a city dweller?

#### 5. Nepalese culture

*At night low hearths will send up wispy curls of smoke fragrant with a dozen dinners, and darkness will clothe the land.* (p. 10)

Lakshmi's background is evoked in the opening scenes of the novel, and in her memories of the past. The novel contains **wise sayings** which derive from her spiritual and cultural origins. Eg. 'Instead, we linger over a luxury that costs nothing: imagining what may be.' (p. 32); or the Hindi sentence: 'Don't cross the cook or she will spit in your soup.' (p. 179)

*Activity:* Visit websites on Nepal which will give students some insights into Lakshmi's culture.

*Activity:* Lakshmi mentions knowing Hindi words (p. 173). In Nepal 89.5 % of people are of the Hindu faith. To find out more on this topic, Visit 'Hinduism in Nepal' *Wikipedia* [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hinduism\\_in\\_Nepal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hinduism_in_Nepal)

*Question:* What aspects of Nepal did this novel suggest to you?

### LITERACY AND LANGUAGE

This work can be used as a model for a range of **creative writing techniques and exercises**.

The story is **structured** in a series of scenes or vignettes which are briefly and poignantly described in spare but poetic language. Each scene is introduced with a title which is descriptive symbolically of the emotion evoked in this scene.

*Exercise:* Write a brief scene in this style describing Lakshmi's arrival at the shelter.

**Genres** used include two main forms. While **first person prose** is the obviously predominant form, the style of the novel is actually more akin to the **verse novel**. It includes brief **free verse vignettes or poems** describing emotions and characters, which are interspersed in a more conventional **prose narrative**. An example of a simple verse narrative is 'What I Carry' (p. 62), a description of what Lakshmi takes with her on her journey ending with a two line statement of feeling; 'Next' (pp. 68-9) is a longer poem which describes the things she sees from the back of the cart. McCormick has said that she resorted to writing the story in this way, as a 'story told in fragments because it portrays what is a fragmented—if not shattering—experience.'

*Exercise:* Use these two poems as models for writing exercises.

Language used in this novel includes **metaphors and similes**. Lakshmi's plight is made extremely powerful by using metaphorical expressions such as: 'And realise I am already buried alive.' (p. 151); 'I pretend I have a button I press to make everything go quiet. And another one that makes me disappear.' (p. 160)

*Exercise:* Write a sentence describing Lakshmi's situation, using a metaphor to describe it.

**Similes** often relate to her old life: eg. when describing the traffic she says: 'Some carts bleat like goats. Some whine like mosquitoes.' (p. 67)

*Exercise:* Describe the scene she is greeted with when she arrives at the brothel by using simile.

The choice of **narrative person** is important when constructing a narrative. *Sold* is told in the first person and so allows the reader access to Lakshmi's feelings and thoughts.

*Exercise:* Imagine the scene where Lakshmi is first brought into the home and is washed and her hair brushed by the two girls (pp. 103-4). Now describe Lakshmi through Shahanna's eyes.

**Characterisation** is central to this novel, in which the focus is on Lakshmi's personal struggle to resist depression and defeat in the face of trauma. **Personal strength and resilience** are characteristics denoted by her determination from the outset. 'Mumtaz, with her doughy waist and fat mango face, doesn't know the match she's met in me.' (p. 113). Although she's terrified, she's warned by Shahanna that: 'You are safe here only if you do not show how frightened you are.' (p. 118) Thereafter, she develops a will to survive. 'I will become Monica. I will do whatever it takes to get out of here.' (p. 233) Her resistance is aided by Shahanna's ability to take a realistic view of what she needs to do to survive in this place. But in contrast, we witness the reactions of Pushpa and Shilpa who each decline, although Anita and Monica resist their suppressors for a while. The plight of each character evinces the outcomes of trafficking listed above in these notes:

- Pushpa has a coughing illness which leads to her expulsion with her children Jeena and Harish from the brothel (pp. 202-3);
- Shilpa is an alcoholic (p. 175);
- Anita's face has been physically damaged;
- Monica is 'this thirsty vine woman' (pp. 152-3) who knows tricks to attract men. She is working to protect her baby at home (pp. 170-1; pp. 184-5), but she is rejected by the family she's been supporting (pp. 197-8) and is thrown out because she has the virus (pp. 214-5).

*Question:* How much longer might Lakshmi have survived in this environment? (In the space of one year she and Anita are the only ones left from the group who were there when she came.)

Characters are divided into the **innocent and fearful** and the **evil and manipulative**, and in Lakshmi's journey and her interaction with others, their influence is counterbalanced.

### **Evil**

Stepfather

Aunty Bimla

Uncle Husband

Aunty Mumtaz

Shilpa, Aunty Mumtaz's spy

## **Good**

Mother

Lakshmi

Shahanna

Anita

Harish

Street boy

Monica

American men

Although she suffers terrible cruelty, friendship and kindness help Lakshmi to endure her travails.

There are a number of **key characters and scenes** which represent **turning points** in her journey and help her to go on:

- **Shahanna** brings her a cup of tea and advises her to do what Mumtaz says (pp. 116-8) and remains her friend until she escapes in a raid (pp. 218-22);
- **Harish**, 'the David Beckham Boy' and son of Pushpa offers her his book (p. 161), teaches her to read (pp. 166-8) and gives her a pencil (pp. 186-7);
- the **Street Boy** who sells tea and soft drinks (p. 172) leaves her a cup of tea (p. 230) and a Coca-Cola (p. 241);
- '**The hugging man**' (p. 183) is a client who 'was young and clean and gentle (pp. 180-1) and who she hopes to see again;
- **Monica** gives her the rag doll as a comfort (p. 206) after Harish leaves;
- the **Pink American man** gives her a card to contact his organisation for help, and pays simply to talk to her (pp. 207-9);
- **Anita** is always kind and only hits her (pp. 225-6) in order to stir her from her despairing lethargy;
- **Another American man** promises rescue (pp. 251-7).

*Question:* Which character had the most impact on Lakshmi's survival in your opinion?

Lakshmi has just gone through **puberty** when she arrives at the brothel, so the time there represents a loss of her childhood and her adolescence. 'Some days I see a girl who is growing into womanhood. Other days I see a girl growing old before her time.' (p. 182)

*Question:* Is this a rite of passage story in the tradition of many teenage or YA novels?

## **CREATIVE ARTS**

Choose and dramatise a scene from the novel in class.

Create an improvisation expressing the emotions conveyed in this scene.

Listen to Nepalese music.

Create a poster calling for a stop to Human Trafficking. Use a collage of images to illustrate it.

Design a leaflet to advertise the problems outlined in this novel and in these notes.

Write your own blurb for, and design a cover for this book, to entice a reader to buy or borrow it.

## **MATHS**

Several maths activities might be generated by this novel, which constantly refers to numbers, to mathematical calculations, and to the concepts of selling, buying, bargaining and bartering.

'Mathematics' is the title of one section (pp. 150-1) which details Lakshmi's calculations concerning how much she'll need to make in order to pay Mumtaz back for her purchase.

*Question:* Lakshmi was originally bought for 800 rupees. Convert this to Australian dollars.

The 30 rupees which clients pay for each girl is equivalent to the cost of a can of Coca-Cola.

*Question:* What else, other than a can of Coke, could you buy for that sum? Write a list of items.

Harish has 'heard they pay children 50 rupees a week... to break stones at the roadside.' (p. 203)

*Question:* How much is that in Australian currency?

How many other titles of sections refer to numbers?

*Question:* What other calculations are contained in this text?

## HEALTH & PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

The novel suggests a range of personal development and health issues which might be discussed with students.

The novel mentions obliquely a number of **illnesses** which are suffered by the girls, such as the coughing illness, the fever, and the virus.

*Question:* What might these be? Research the major illnesses likely to be suffered by women in this situation in the Indian region.

Lakshmi is only 13 and her **sexual and reproductive health** is severely jeopardised by the rapes she endures.

*Question:* How might they impact on her?

Her **psychological health** would be damaged as well.

*Question:* How difficult would it be to recover from the trauma of these abuses?

The spread of **HIV and AIDS** is one of the tragic outcomes of sex slavery.

*Question:* How are governments addressing this issue?

Lakshmi refuses to eat as a protest in her first days at the brothel.

*Activity:* Experience what she went through, by conducting a class 'hunger strike' to raise funds to donate to an organisation which is combating human trafficking.

## QUESTIONS FOR READING AND DISCUSSION

1. Conduct a class study of Patricia McCormick's works. Read both *Cut* and *My Brother's Keeper* and compare them to this novel.
2. Research the theme of people trafficking. How widespread is it? How much or how little are governments doing to stamp it out?
3. What is the main thing which sustains Lakshmi while she's in the brothel?
4. Although this is set in a third world country, such trafficking also occurs in Australia and the US. What are the main causes of it?
5. Patricia McCormick has said that she likes to write from the point of view of an outsider. In what ways is Lakshmi an outsider?

6. Happiness House (p. 69) is a deeply ironic title for this brothel. Were there other such ironies in the novel?
7. Write your own story but make Harish the central character and describe what it's like for the child of a sex slave in one of these brothels.
8. Although this is a very grim story, the author uses a number of devices to make it an entertaining book to read. What are they?
9. Examine the titles of each of the small vignettes in this novel. Each is a suggestive phrase akin to a saying or metaphor. Discuss the meanings of some of them.
10. This was written by a US writer who researched the story by visiting the Maiti Nepal shelter for women and children in Katmandu, the village of Goldhunga in the Himalayas, and the red-light district of Kolkata in India. How does she make Lakshmi's voice and story so convincing?

## CONCLUSION

'I am Lakshmi. I am from Nepal. I am fourteen years old.' (p. 218)

Despite enduring a year of rape and other abuses, she maintains her strength of character, curiosity about the world around her, a thirst for learning and, most of all, her ability to feel love, and hope.

*Sold* is a story of survival against extreme odds.

This novel is an extraordinary example of the will to live which sustains people in their bleakest hours.

Lakshmi is a survivor in a world where very few survive.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY OF RELATED TEXTS AND OTHER SOURCES

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## ABOUT THE WRITERS

### PATRICIA McCORMICK

**Patricia McCormick** is an award-winning journalist who has written for *The New York Times*, *Readers' Digest*, and *Parents* magazine. Her first young adult novel was the US bestseller *Cut*, which was chosen as an ALA Book of the Year. She also wrote *My Brother's Keeper*, a Bank Street Best Book of the Year selection. She holds a master's degree from Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism as well as a master's degree in creative writing from the New School. Since completing her studies in creative writing, she has dedicated her time exclusively to writing young adult fiction.

In 2004 she was named a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellow, an award which she used, in part, to underwrite a trip to Nepal and India to research *Sold*. She lives in NY with her husband and two children. For more information visit <http://www.pattymccormick.com> Or Read an interview with Patricia McCormick *Children's Bookshelf Bulletin* September 7, 2006 <http://www.publishersweekly.com/article/CA6369325.html?nid=2788>

#### **DR ROBYN SHEAHAN-BRIGHT**

Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright has operated **justified text** writing and publishing consultancy services since 1997. She teaches writing for children and young adolescents at Griffith University (Gold Coast) where she gained her PhD for a thesis entitled *To Market To Market: The Development of the Australian Children's Publishing Industry*. She also conducts an online course on publishing and technology for USQ and has a Master of Letters in Children's Literature (Distinction) (UNE). From 2000-2003 she was a Member of the Literature Board of the Australia Council, and in 1999, 2004 and 2006 has been Project Manager, Residential Editorial Program (REP) funded by the Literature Board, the APA and the publishing industry. She is an Honorary Life Member of the Qld Writers Centre, of which she was founding director from 1991-1997, and has been a Director of Jam Roll Press (1987-94) and President of Children's Book Council of Australia (Qld) (1991-3). Her latest publication is *Paper Empires: A History of the Book in Australia 1946-2005* co-edited with Craig Munro (UQP, 2006). She was co-editor with Stuart Glover of *Hot Iron, Corrugated Sky: 100 years of Queensland Writing* (UQP and QWC, 2002); editor/compiler of *Nightmares in Paradise* (UQP, 1994), *Original Sin* (UQP, 1996), *Paradise to Paranoia* (with Nigel Krauth, UQP, 1995) and *School's Out* (with Colin Symes, QUT, 1998). Widely published in literature journals, she reviews for the *Australian Book Review* and *The Courier-Mail*, has entries in the *Cambridge Guide to Children's Books in English* (edited by Victor Watson, CUP, 2001), and chapters in *Something to Crow About: Perspectives in Literature for Young People* (edited by Sue Clancy, Charles Sturt University, 1999), *Children's Literature Matters* (edited by Robin Pope, ACLAR, 2001) and *Crossing the Boundaries* (edited by Geoff Bull and Michele Anstey, Pearson Education Australia, 2002). She has been coordinating judge for the *Penguin Somerset College National Novella Writing Competition for School Age Writers* from 2000, and a judge since its inception a year earlier. She is also a member of the *Qld Premier's Literary Awards* judging panel.