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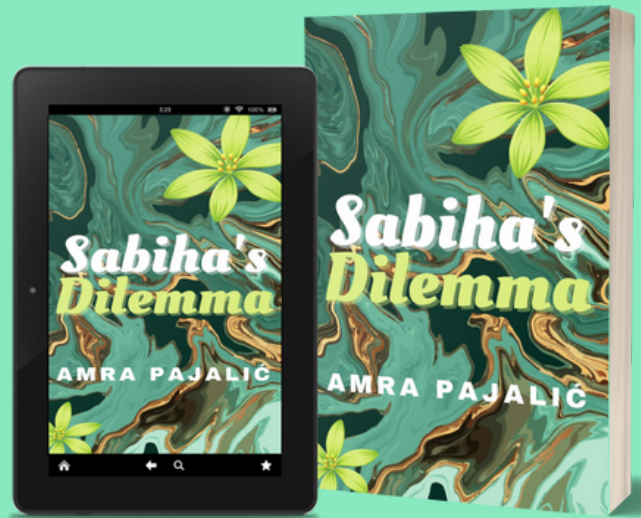
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Recommended for Secondary



Resource kit contains:

- Praise
- Synopsis
- Author information
- Author statement
- Pre-reading activities
- Reading activities
- Theme analysis activities
- Writing, research, debate and drama activities



Praise

'Funny, sharp and insightful.' Simone Howell

'A raw and honest story about duty and the desire to run free.' Melina Marchetta

'I love *Sabiha's Dilemma*. It had me in stitches. Hilarious, poignant, gutsy and real.' Randa Abdel-Fattah

Blurb

Sabiha and her mother Bahra are more than mother and daughter, they're best friends. It's been them against the world, with Sabiha being her mother's carer and confidante during her periodic bipolar breakdowns.

When their extended family comes to Australia, Bahra becomes a Born-Again-Muslim to impress them, and expects Sabiha to step in line as the perfect daughter. Can Sabiha play the part of the good daughter so that her mentally ill mother is accepted back into the Bosnian community?

With the heartbreaking twists of John Green's novels, and exquisite characters like those of Melina Marchetta's, you'll love this hilarious, poignant, gutsy and real book.

Author information

Amra Pajalić is an award-winning author, an editor and teacher who draws on her Bosnian cultural heritage to write own voices stories for young people, who like her, are searching to mediate their identity and take pride in their diverse culture.

Amra Pajalić won the 2009 Melbourne Prize for Literature's Civic Choice Award for her debut novel *The Good Daughter*, now re-released as *Sabiha's Dilemma*. The anthology she co-edited, *Growing up Muslim in Australia* (Allen and Unwin, 2014, 2019), was shortlisted for the 2015 Children's Book Council of the year awards and her memoir *Things Nobody Knows But Me* (Transit Lounge, 2019) was shortlisted for the 2020 National Biography Award. Amra Pajalić is available to deliver author talks and writing workshops in person or online.

Author statement

As a high school student I was always reading, but there seemed to be no books that represented my story about growing up. I'm talking about coming from the Western suburbs of Melbourne. About being from a migrant background and the family expectations placed on you to be a good ethnic girl, while at heart being Aussie and wanting to break out of this mould. So I wrote *Sabiha's Dilemma* for myself and for teenagers like me so they have something to read that speaks to their experiences and that will inspire them to fight for their 'outlandish' dreams.

Pre-reading activities

1. Amra Pajalic's novel is titled *Sabiha's Dilemma*. What is the dilemma that Sabiha is facing?
2. Make a list of things that are most important to your parents. Make another list of things that are most important to you. Are there differences? If so, how do these differences effect your relationship with your parents?
3. What makes a true friend? List the most important qualities to have in a friend.
4. Write a journal entry about a time a friend betrayed you. Write another entry about a time a friend supported you.
5. In pairs or small groups create a definition for the word 'identity'. What elements create a person's identity? Can someone's identity change over time or is it fixed?
6. What do you think makes up your identity at this point in time? Write a list or short explanation.
7. In *Sabiha's Dilemma*, Sabiha rebels against her mother and grandfather's insistence she adopt Bosnian cultural practices. Is there anything you have rebelled against and why?
8. Make a list of things teenagers sometimes do because of peer pressure.
9. Sabiha and Jesse love reading and enjoy recommending books to each other. Write a list of 5 books you would recommend to a good friend. Explain the reasons for your choices.
10. Write all the things you know about Muslim people. Re-visit this list after you read the book and again after you do Research Task 1 and/or 2. Have your views changed? What have you learned?

Chapter 1 reading activities

1. As you read the novel, compare and contrast yourself with the main characters. Which one do you most identify with and why?
2. The opening scene of the novel shows a conflict between Sabiha and her mother over a dress. What does this scene reveal about Sabiha's character? What does it also reveal about her relationship with her mother?
3. Sabiha explains: 'For years I'd called myself Sammie...' Make a list of reasons people change their names. Why did Sabiha change her name to Sammie and why did she change it back?
4. Sabiha says: 'If you say you're Muslim most people assume the stereotype of the turban-wearing, bearded Arab man or the hijab-wearing, subjugated Arab woman'. Why does Sabiha say this stereotype is wrong?

Chapter 2 Reading Activities

1. 'Most of the Bosnians...freaked out when they heard that Mum was bipolar.' As you read the novel track people's reactions to Bahra's illness.
2. Why does Sabiha get upset that her grandfather introduces her as his Australian grand-daughter?
3. What does the conflict between Uncle Hakija and Sabiha's grandfather demonstrate about the Bosnian community's adherence to Islam?
4. Why are Gemma and Dina interested in hanging out with Sabiha at the oval?
5. What does the tradition of dacking and knackerling reveal about Sabiha's new school?
6. What is Sabiha's first impression of Brian and Jesse when she meets them in the library?

Chapter 3 reading activities

1. Who are Kathleen and Shelley and what is their connection to Sabiha?
2. Why does Bahra give Sabiha the pita-making lesson? Why does Sabiha react the way she does to Dido's comment?
3. '[We] were supposed to be one happy triangle.' Explain Sabiha's frustration with the situation between herself, Kathleen and Shelley. Do you think Sabiha is being reasonable? Why? Why not?

Chapter 4 reading activities

1. Who is Frankie and how has her relationship changed with Sabiha?
2. When a woman talks to Sabiha about her Greek neighbours on the train Sabiha thinks 'That woman would never have confided in Kathleen.' Why not? How do you think people's appearances affect the way others treat them? Can assumptions be made about people from their appearances? Why? Why not?
3. What does her mother's renovation of the living room symbolise about the change in their life?

Chapter 5 reading activities

1. What revelation do Dina and Gemma share about Brian? How does Sabiha react to this?
2. Why did Brian give up playing soccer? What does this reveal about attitudes to people who are same sex attracted?
3. What happens at the police station when Sabiha and her mother go to report the beating?
4. How does Sabiha's grandfather deal with the Twins' parents? Does Sabiha appreciate his intervention? Why? Why not?

Chapter 6 reading activities

1. After being attacked by the twins Sabiha says, 'I'm such a loser.' She believes she is alone in her experience of being bullied until Brian and Jesse reveal they have also been victims. List the different kinds of behaviour that can be described as bullying.

Chapter 6 reading activities-cont.

2. When Sabiha is walked home by Jesse and Brian, her mother receives a phone call that Sabiha was kissing boys. What does the interaction between Sabiha and her mother reveal about their relationship? What does it reveal about the community scrutiny Sabiha is subjected to?
3. What is Adnan's motivation in protecting Sabiha? What does this reveal about the gendered roles in the Bosnian community?

Chapter 7 reading activities

1. Is Adnan being helpful in teaching Sabiha to fight? Why? Why not?
2. Adnan describes 'The Price is Right' as 'the only show for ethnics.' What reasons does he give? This passage is written in a humorous way but has a serious point. Are there any other elements of Australian society that immigrants from non-English-speaking countries may find challenging?
3. Sabiha says, 'I was in no-man's-land. To the Aussies I was Bosnian, to the Bosnians I was Aussie.' Why does Sabiha feel like this?
4. What does Sabiha learn about the expectations of modesty for men and women in Islam? What are Sabiha's thoughts?
5. At parent-teacher interview time Sabiha tells Brian, 'My Mum never comes...' How does she feel about this? Why do you think Bahra doesn't attend Sabiha's interviews? List as many different reasons as you can.
6. We discover that Adnan's mum and sister are the breadwinners of his family because his father can't work. All the teenagers in the novel have difficult family situations. As you read, makes notes about the difficulties the following characters face in their families: Sabiha, Brian, Jesse, Adnan, Dina, Gemma, Shelley, Kathleen.
7. What is Sabiha's reaction when she finds out about Jesse's publication achievements? How does their relationship change?
8. When Sabiha and Adnan visit Brian's house Sabiha says, 'It felt weird wearing shoes in the house.' What customs or rules does your household have that may be different from other families'?

Chapter 8 reading activities

1. Explain Adnan's interest in circumcision. How were Bosnian-Muslims treated in the former Yugoslavia?
2. What happens when Auntie Zehra takes Sabiha home after parent—teacher interviews? What do you think will be the consequences for Sabiha?
3. Why did Sabiha's mother give away her lamp?
4. Dido says of Sabiha's mum: 'If she marries [Safet] she'll be with a Muslim. She would have stability and respect.' Explain why Dido thinks these things are important for Bahra. How does Sabiha feel about this?

Chapter 9 reading activities

1. What is Sabiha's reaction when she finds her mother's pill-box at home? What is her grandfather's reaction? Who do you agree with?
2. Why does her mother side with Adnan after Sabiha has a fight with him?
3. Her mother says, 'They shouldn't be talking about us....I'm doing everything right, but all they remember is what we do wrong.' Why does her mother feel like this? Do you agree with her? Why? Why not?
4. 'I didn't understand how we'd come to this. Mum and I used to talk to each other like girlfriends. Yet now she was turning into a dictator.' What does this reveal about the way their relationship has changed since they moved to St Albans?
5. 'I'd thought we were friends, but if Mum wanted to play the role of the traditional mother, that left me with the role of the rebellious daughter.' Why does Sabiha add salt to the coffee? Do you agree with her actions? Why? Why not?
6. Sabiha accuses Adnan of turning everything into a 'bargaining match' yet Sabiha often bargains with her mother to get her way. She also catches Adnan reading her diary but Sabiha is secretly reading her mother's old love letters. Have you ever acted in contradictory ways? Write a journal entry about a time where your actions contradicted your beliefs. Why did you do this? What did you learn from this?

Chapter 9 reading activities-cont.

7. Sabiha complains: 'I served Dido...I played the good daughter...what did I get in return?' Does Sabiha get anything in return for the things she does? Write a journal entry about a time you did something out of obligation or duty. Explain why you did it.
9. What does Sabiha know about her father?

Chapter 10 reading activities

1. When Sabiha catches her mother in a compromising position with Safet her mother explains her mistake by saying, 'All the days blur together.' Why do you think she feels this way?
2. What is a 'war of attrition'? Have you ever conducted a 'war' like this? Explain.
3. How does Sabiha's friendship with Jesse and Brian change after their trip to Highpoint?
4. 'Dina...was living a double-life.' As you read though the novel make a list of all the characters who are living a 'double-life'. Explain what they're hiding and why.
5. What happened to Dina's brother? What does this reveal about Dina's home life?
6. Why does Bahra says that 'It's better to stick to your own community?'
7. Why does Sabiha fight to avoid the Muslim tag? What are some of the stereotypes that she is subjected to?
8. Sabiha explains her mum's relationship with old boyfriend Darko as 'pretty much the same as your Romeo and Juliet scenario.' Explain how Bahra and Darko's situation is similar to the Romeo and Juliet story.
9. Bahra explains why she didn't marry her Serbian boyfriend: 'what would have happened to my children? To be half and half with their loyalties torn.' Has Bahra avoided this situation? How does Sabiha feel about her mother's statement?

Chapter 11 reading activities

1. What is Dina's proposal to Sabiha so that they can gain more freedom from their parents? What is Sabiha's response?
2. Both Sabiha and Jesse refuse to bow to peer-pressure when others are smoking. List other ways in which these two are similar.
3. Many characters in this novel have negative sexual experiences. Why do you think this is?
4. Why is Sabiha upset about Bahra wanting to supervise her homework? Do you think she is right to be upset? Why? Why not?
5. 'It was pathetic to see her bending over backwards to be the good mother in front of her family.' How does Bahra try to be a 'good mother?' How has she failed in the past in the eyes of her family?

Chapter 12 reading activities

1. When Kathleen comes to Sabiha's house with her boyfriend, what do we learn about their friendship? How have they each betrayed each other? Explain your opinion.
2. Sabiha thinks that she and Kathleen had '... promised each other to be best friends for life.' List some of the reasons friendships end. Do you think the end of some friendships is inevitable?
3. Sabiha thinks that, 'Grown-up parties [are] overrated.' Why does she believe this?
4. Sabiha says about Brian: 'I was so confused: I wanted him to like me but I...wasn't sure exactly what I meant by that.' What is Sabiha confused about?

Chapter 13 reading activities

1. Why does Sabiha refuse her mother's offer to have her hair dyed back to blonde?
2. When Sabiha explains her reasons for not caring about her patchy dye job she says, 'When you have a Mum like mine, public embarrassment is a waste of emotion.' What does Sabiha mean?

Chapter 13 reading activities-cont.

3. Brian tells Sabiha 'No, you're cool Sabiha. Because you don't give a shit about what those idiots think of you.' What is the accepted definition of 'cool' in your school or friendship group? What is your definition of 'cool'? Are there any differences? What kinds of things do you think should be seen as cool?
4. Sabiha's publication success is overshadowed by Adnan's TV appearance. How does she feel about this?
5. How does Jesse and Sabiha's relationship change after her publication success?

Chapter 14 reading activities

1. 'She'll make an excellent wife.' What is Suada's definition of 'excellent wife'? What is your reaction to her views?
2. What is Sabiha's plan to manipulate her mother into giving her money for a dye job? Why does this work?
3. When Sabiha does not have enough money to pay for the dye job she thinks 'When you're poor, you don't want anyone to know you're poor.' What does this reveal about her life with her mother?

Chapter 15 reading activities

1. Why is Safet warning Bahra not to encourage Sabiha's interest in Edo? What does this reveal about attitudes towards gypsies?
2. When Sabiha's mother lets her get out of *mejtef* to go Highpoint to see Edo, the Bosnian male hairdresser, she thinks 'Her willingness to do anything that manoeuvred me with a Bosnian was scary.' Why does Sabiha's mother think it so important to mix with Bosnian boys?
3. Why does Sabiha feel guilty about hurting Jesse because of her crush on a new boy?
4. When Bahra physically lashes out at Sabiha, she describes her mother's violence as being out of character. What does it signify?

Chapter 16 reading activities

1. When Dido talks to Bahra about not taking her meds she tells him that 'I pray to Allah and I won't get sick.' Do you think Dido is right to believe that prayers will help Bahra? Do you think Sabiha is right that she needs to see a doctor?
2. When Sabiha attempts to enlist Frankie's help with Bahra's medical condition Frankie says that 'Your Mum and I were friends, but when she moved to St Albans she chose to have a life that I'm not a part of.' What does Frankie mean by this? Why did Bahra make this choice? Do you think she was right or wrong in doing this?
3. When Sabiha sees Shelley in front of Kathleen's house what does she discover about Shelley's cousins?
4. What do Jesse's handouts titled 'Symptoms of Bipolar disorder' reveal to Sabiha and what effect does this information have on her?
5. Jesse explains: '...people who come from overseas don't know how to translate the jargon.' What other kinds of challenges do non-English-speaking immigrants encounter in everyday life?

Chapter 17 reading activities

1. What does Brian and Sabiha's fight reveal about the change in the friendship dynamics between the friendship group?
2. On the night of Brian's party, Sabiha meets Jesse's mum for the first time. Describe her. What do their mothers have in common?
3. Sabiha observes: 'Jesse's whole body was a portrait in pleading.' What does this mean?
4. Sabiha explains why she wants to drink alcohol: 'I wanted to forget all the betrayals and all the things I'd stuffed up.' Describe what happens when Sabiha gets drunk. Do you think she feels better or worse? Why?
5. What happens when Jesse and Sabiha dance to U2s With or Without You? Why does Sabiha react in this way?

Chapter 18 reading activities

1. Why is Gemma angry at Sabiha? Do you think she has a right to be?
2. What does Gemma mean when she says 'You can only be friends with your own kind?' Do you think she really means this?

Chapter 19 reading activities

1. When Sabiha discovers Brian and Adnan she was taken by surprise. Why do you think she missed all the clues?
2. Sabiha says: 'I wanted to return to my state of innocence.' Describe a time you felt like this.
3. When Sabiha visits Dina after her grandfather's death she realises why she developed feelings for Brian. What was it about Brian that appealed to her and why?
4. What do we learn about Muslim burial practices from Edin's funeral?
5. What does Bahra discover about Safet that further contributes to her breakdown?
6. What does her aunt Zehra reveal about why her relationship with her sister is so tense? Do you think she was right in the actions she took about Bahra's relationship with Darko?

Chapter 20 reading activities

1. Why does Sabiha think the police officers are at her house? Why are they actually there?
2. How did Adnan's fight lessons benefit Sabiha? Do you think her response to Adnan was justified?
3. How does Sabiha react to her mother's hospitalisation and the changes after her life? Why does she feel like this?
4. What does the 'Sassy Saints' as the name of their friendship group signify?
5. On the last page Sabiha realises: 'Since we'd moved to St Albans I'd spent all my time complaining about what I'd left behind, and hadn't noticed what I'd gained.' What has Sabiha gained?

Themes



Mental Illness

The Bosnian community has no understanding about mental illness and as a result Sabina's mother Bahra is subjected to stigma and prejudice.

- How does this impact Sabiha and Bahra?
- Sabiha only gradually discovers information about her mother's mental illness and we, as readers, make these discoveries with her. When you have finished the novel go back and find where the author has given clues about (or foreshadowed) Bahra's impending breakdown.
- Why do you think the reader paralleled these discoveries with Sabiha's discoveries?



Friendship

In the novel many types of friendships are explored between various characters.

- What is the friendship between Dina and Sabiha's grandfathers?
- How and why did Sabiha's relationship with Kathleen, and Bahra's relationship with Frankie come to an end?
- How do Sabiha's friendships with Jesse and Brian evolve and develop?
- How and why do Dina become friends?



Family

Sabiha's mother Bahra suffers from bipolar and as a result Sabiha has to take on a caregiving role.

- How does this dynamic disrupt the traditional mother-daughter relationship?
- Sabiha's mother migrated to Australia because of conflict with her parents about her Serb boyfriend. When her extended relationship came to Australia due to Balkan war they struggle to bond. How does this theme of familial conflict play out?

Themes-continued



Romance

Sabiha is in a love triangle where she has feelings for Brian, but these are complicated by Jesse having feelings for Sabiha.

- What is Sabiha's basis for being attracted to Brian?
- Why is she attracted to Jesse?

There are other romantic relationships that are both positive and negative.

- What is Gemma's relationship with her boyfriend Rob based on?
- How does Dina's relationship with Tony evolve?
- Who is Brian attracted to and why?
- What romantic relationships does Adnan experience in the book and how do these impact him?
- Discuss Safet and Bahra's relationship and the reasons they are attracted to each other?



Multiculturalism

Sabiha is a girl caught between competing loyalties between the country of her birth and the expectations of her family to follow tradition. She explains that:

- "What Adnan said made me feel odd, like I was seeing my country for the first time. I was in no man's land. To the Aussies I was Bosnian, to the Bosnians I was Aussie. In the inner city I'd been Sammie Omerović, second generation Aussie. Now I had all this Bosnian baggage to drag around and I didn't know how to carry it."
- Why does Sabiha feel like this about her Bosnian and Australian identity? Identify moments in the book when this conflict is prominent.

Themes-continued



Prejudice

Sabiha's extended family migrates to Australia after the Balkan conflict. They are firmly committed to their traditions because of the prejudice that they experienced.

- What are some of the traditions that they hold onto that they were persecuted for?
- In what are they are prejudiced themselves?



Coming of age

To come of age means to reach 'the age or occasion when one formally becomes an adult.'

- What are some of the decisions that Sabiha makes in the novel that characterise her as an adolescent and that are questionable?
- What is Sabiha's official occasion where she is becoming an adult and making an adult decision?

Creative writing activities

- Re-write a crucial scene in the book from the point of view of another character: Bahra, Dido, Brian, Jesse, Adnan, Dina or Kathleen.
- Write a letter from Bahra to Sabiha explaining some of her decisions and actions.
- In the novel Jesse writes a short story which is 'a string of vignettes, scenes from the perspective of a high school student.' Write your own story comprising of vignettes about student or family life.
- Imagine what happens when Sabiha visits her mother at the end of the novel. Write the scene. Include direct speech.
- Write a short piece which shows a character of your invention living a double-life.
- Write a story about a teenager trying, and failing, to be a 'good' daughter or 'good' son.

Research activities

In pairs or small groups research one of the following and report back to class:

- Bosnian-Muslim traditions and customs
- Muslim traditions and customs from a range of countries around the world
- Yugoslav wars (1991–1995) and immigration
- Bipolar disorder
- Hypothyroidism
- Romani people ('gypsies')
- Historical, religious and cultural reasons for circumcision
- Voiceworks magazine contact and submission details. Submit a short story or poem.

Debate topics

- Use evidence from the novel, as well as wider research, to support your arguments.
- Friendship has a used-by date
- Teenagers should do everything their parents ask them to do
- 'You can only be friends with your own kind.'
- It is necessary to lead a double-life in order to be accepted by others
- The most important factors to consider in choosing a marriage partner are stability and the respect of others
- Stereotypes are always true
- Tradition and cultural heritage are not relevant to this generation
- Family is everything

Drama activities

Choose a character from the following list:

- Bahra, Dido, Brian, Jesse, Adnan, Dina, Kathleen, Shelley. Write and deliver a monologue from their perspective. Use props and costume.
- Enact an interview-style TV show where the characters are questioned by the presenter about their actions, feelings and motivations.