



RECKONING

MAGDA SZUBANSKI



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Fiction, C paperback

VCE English/English as an
Additional Language,
Units 3 & 4 or Unit 1 English



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TEXT VCE ENGLISH AND EAL TEACHING NOTES

- ▶ designed to meet the criteria of the Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority's *VCE English/EAL Study Design*
- ▶ scaffolded to help teachers and students gradually develop their knowledge and understanding of the set text
- ▶ cater to a range of student abilities and learning styles
- ▶ contain a variety of activities to enable individual and group work
- ▶ encourage oral and written responses to the text
- ▶ guide students to develop critical and supported responses to the text
- ▶ feature ICT-related tasks
- ▶ include suggested assessment tasks as well as supplementary resources



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Magda Szubanski is one of Australia's best known and most loved performers. She began her career in university revues, then appeared in a number of sketch comedy shows before creating the iconic character of Sharon Strzelecki in ABC-TV's *Kath and Kim*. She has also acted in films (*Babe*, *Babe: Pig in the City*, *Happy Feet*, *The Golden Compass*) and stage shows. *Reckoning* is her first book.

HONOURS

Winner, Book of the Year, Australian Book Industry Awards, 2016

Winner, Biography of the Year, Australian Book Industry Awards, 2016

Winner, Liberty Victoria's Voltaire Award: Magda Szubanski, 2018

Winner, Douglas Stewart Prize for Non-Fiction, NSW Premier's Literary Awards, 2016

Winner, Indie Award for Non-Fiction 2016

Winner, Victorian Community History Award Judges' Special Prize, 2016

'The writing, the story, the voice—all of it is beautiful.'

Christos Tsiolkas

'Every library should have it, every school should teach it.'

Weekend Australian

'Sensitive and searching, colourful and vividly composed...stylish and accomplished.'

Sydney Morning Herald

'It is impossible not to be moved.'

Guardian, *Best Australian Books of 2015*

'Magda's memoir is a moving exploration of her relationship with her Polish resistance hero father.'

Australian Women's Weekly



INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES

1. Watch the following video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ajjme5p7GVE> What inspired Szubanski to write her memoir? From her perspective, what is her memoir really about?
2. Consider the significance of the title. What does 'reckoning' mean to you? What do you think prompted Szubanski to call her memoir *Reckoning*?
3. Watch this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gkZ1M0aGL4> Initially Szubanski wanted to call *Reckoning*, The Stone of Madness. Explain what prompted her to change her mind. What explanation does Szubanski give for her choice of title?
4. Szubanski is a well-known public figure. Research her body of work. In what way is *Reckoning* a departure from her previous work? Szubanski has said that *Reckoning* is the 'shade to the 'light'. What do you think makes her say that?
5. What do you already know about non-fiction narratives? Can you list some of the different forms of non-fiction narratives? What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of non-fiction writing? What's interesting about non-fiction writing?
6. Szubanski describes *Reckoning* as a memoir and a family history. What do you think led her to this conclusion?
7. Define memoir and list its characteristics.
8. Create a vocabulary list which includes: reckoning and memoir. Add to this vocabulary list throughout the unit.
9. The SBS documentary *Who Do You Think You Are?* with Szubanski is excellent. Watch this video and take Cornell Notes on the following:
 - ▶ the names of Szubanski's two grandfathers
 - ▶ the background of each of her grandfathers
 - ▶ each grandfather's migration story
 - ▶ Nazi Germany's occupation of Poland
 - ▶ the Gestapo
 - ▶ the Polish resistance movement
 - ▶ the role Szubanski's father played in the Polish resistance movement
 - ▶ the Warsaw Uprising
 - ▶ Poland's relationship with the Soviet Union.
10. Read the opening chapter of *Reckoning*, 'The Stone of Madness'. You can also listen to Szubanski read this chapter here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aD9R-VwT4vs>
11. What purpose does the long list of her father's personal characteristics serve? What do you think the metaphor of the stone signifies? Based on your reading of this chapter, what conclusions can you draw about the significance of the stone for Szubanski?
12. Once you have answered these questions, write two paragraphs about the perspective Szubanski offers on trauma and the notion of 'reckoning' (page 2).

Other resources:

Access *Reckoning* book club notes by visiting the book page at textpublishing.com.au/reckoning and selecting 'Book club notes'.

Key links:

<https://www.sbs.com.au/radio/video/737113155882/Who-Do-You-Think-You-Are-S3-Ep1-Magda-Szubanski>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ErSjc1PEGKE> (How to take Cornell Notes)



KEY PASSAGES FOR DISCUSSION

(Please note: students and teachers will need to look up the full quote or passage.)

'Remembrance is all I ask...But if it be a task...Forget.' (epigraph)

'I swear sometimes I can feel that stone in my head... That stone was my father's legacy to me...a stone made of calcified guilt and shame. I could feel it. I can feel it still.' (page 2)

'So, no priest, and no absolution.' (page 9)

'But the things people really need to say are almost never said. An act of interpretation is an act of love. And, in any case, I couldn't bear the sight of him carrying that cross, the whole fucking horror of it, to his grave all on his own. He needed someone to help bear the load, someone who would not misconstrue him or upset the delicate deal he had made with God. Someone who spoke his language.' (pages 9–10)

'God is the only true biographer,' the Polish priest says, 'because only He knows what is in our souls.' Isn't that what we all hope for? To be understood, finally? Do I know my father as well as God knows him? His friend Ryszard described him as trustworthy, 'a good man to steal a horse with'. He was solid, a good burgher, a reliable citizen. The priest knows the part of my father that is now, perhaps, preparing to face judgment. The part that needs forgiveness. He has chosen a reading from Luke's Gospel, the one about the Good Thief. Sin and redemption.' (page 11)

'My father wanted to forget history. He had lived through an awful lot of it; he had no desire to go back. But all the old warriors are dying, and their stories die with them. Someone has to be a witness. But am I the right person for the job? Do I have the stomach to gouge beneath the scabs and clean the wound? Is healing even possible?

We were tugboats in the river of history, my father and I, pulling in opposite directions. He needed to forget. I need to remember. For him, only the present moment would set him free. For me, the key lies buried in the past. The only way forward is back.' (pages 12–13)

'What is it like to be a boy at a time when your 'home' is the war...no dream of peace or safety... "I was an assassin."' (page 29)

'"You must understand, only the bravest of the brave were asked to do what your father did."' (page 12)

'Understand. So many Polish conversations begin with this plea.' (page 12)

'But as I listened more carefully I started to realise that this was not the homesick pride of an exile—it was a plea...It means: we are not barbarians.' (page 21)

'And so the occupation began, one of the most brutal in Europe...assassinated Poles who told the Gestapo where Jews were hiding.' (page 26)

'I never once..."assassin".' (pages 28–29)

'"Och, hen, no no no. No need to tell yer mother. This is oor wee secret."' (page 37)

'Something in my father needed to get as far away from bloodstained Europe as possible.' (page 40)

'"Cicadas."' (page 44)

'But the chance of a new life...the price was high.' (page 45)

'Croydon was an outrider suburb, the wild east. All bush, farmlands and orchards.' (page 49)

'So when the war ended he was like a contender...But for some reason he had decided I was smarter than he was.' (page 55)

'But when I was about seven...Humour. The life force.' (page 65)

'But still for a long time...it was probably the weirdest name ever heard in Croydon until that point.' (pages 66–67)

'I watched him and I learned...the art of clinical dissociation had begun.' (page 75)

'I redoubled my efforts to...into the Brady round hole.' (page 78)

'I was a half-Polish...truly good.' (page 95)

'But I have been playing...ever since.' (page 98)

'He beat me because...clear.' (pages 105–6)

'That was when I knew...over the net.' (page 107)

'"Ooh, Maggie...sorry."' (page 110)

'It was this wasteland...Melbourne.' (page 114)

'It was Kerry...relief.' (pages 123–125)

'By now...in the gang.' (page 128)

'For a long while she...of hope.' (pages 138–9)

'You come to dread...shunned me.' (page 141)

'Needless to say...caught.' (p.142)

'And the numbness...being.' (page 144)

'Year nine...Point made.' (pages 148–149)

'A plan began to hatch...actor?' (page 159)

'In terms of schoolyard politics...Seeger.' (pages 160–161)

'As the days grew longer and warmer...alone.' (pages 169–70)

'I didn't have a clue...study.' (page 173)

'The meetings were held...lesbians.' (page 174)

'Sometime around then...coming with me.' (pages 176–8)

'By the end of...book.' (page 180)

'It never crossed my mind...bottles.' (pages 181–2)



- 'But heads without hearts...fervour.' (pages 186–8)
- 'Because I wasn't in love...Jane.' (page 193)
- 'And although I didn't know it...bruised too.' (page 194)
- 'In one of our rare...never be a right time...' (page 196)
- 'I was twenty-one...craved.' (page 198)
- 'The truth was Poland...and no relief.' (pages 214–215)
- 'Then H-M's seventeen-year-old son...learning to walk.' (page 230)
- 'Later I was...depression lifted.' (page 233)
- 'The eighties were...to be.' (page 234)
- 'It was Helen-Mary...courage seeped away.' (pages 236 and 242)
- 'I called my father...move on.' (page 245)
- 'It was the mask...real life.' (page 250)
- 'I kept looking...in silence.' (pages 256–257)
- 'We had a lot of...recuperate.' (page 261)
- 'The twin pillars...a real girl.' (pages 268 and 270)
- 'The day of the interview...ever had to doubt it.' (pages 272 and 280)
- 'If not for my...Kim.' (page 281)
- 'The 1960s Australia...grown-ups.' (page 283)
- 'The freedom to...nobody changes.' (pages 284 and 285)
- 'Despite the fact...open that door.' (pages 288 and 290)
- 'It was another...them.' (page 297)
- 'Given what was...questions.' (page 305)
- 'In truth...father's legacy.' (pages 308 and 309)
- 'Gina and Jane...will prevail.' (page 310)
- 'Was this...for.' (page 312)
- 'I didn't want anything...surface.' (page 314)
- 'So here we were...kill him.' (page 315)
- 'I understand what...tornado.' (page 319)
- 'Most morality...exist?' (page 325)
- 'I needed...in a mad world.' (page 328)
- 'And, despite...Magda.' (page 332)
- 'Was this the gift...of my own.' (pages 339 and 340)
- 'That night I wrote...sensation.' (page 343)
- 'I was about to tell...genes?' (page 344)
- 'I am part of...yourself.' (page 347)
- 'Would I be able to...thing?' (page 353)
- 'Finally, like a pregnant...fears.' (pages 354 and 358)
- 'Now in our fifties...rest.' (page 360)
- 'I am on the phone...of us.' (pages 365 and 368)
- 'No one...out.' (page 369)
- 'It took me years...world.' (page 370)
- 'I wish he could...did.' (page 371)



CLASS AND HOMEWORK ACTIVITIES

SUBJECTS

Magda Szubanski

1. Consider the perspective Magda offers of herself via her first-person narrative voice.
2. What words does she use to describe herself during the course of the memoir? (Consider personality, physical appearance, etc.)
3. How would you describe the tone she uses to describe herself? Does it shift at any time?
4. Does she include details of her behaviour/actions? Are these important in shaping the reader's view of her?
5. Does she include examples of particular things she has said or written to others/to herself? Discuss the picture of Szubanski these examples create.
6. Which anecdotes does she include to illustrate her story? (Consider anecdotes about family, education, interests, work, relationships, turning points, struggles, travel etc.)
7. Does she influence the reader to approve or disapprove of her character, behaviour and attitudes?
8. What role does the cover of *Reckoning* play in constructing Szubanski's character?
9. What conclusions does she draw about her values, views and sense of self? How does this influence your perception of her?
10. Does Szubanski's view of self change over the course of the memoir? How do you know? Does your view of her change as the memoir progresses? In what way?
11. Do you think she presents as a reliable narrator? What leads you to this conclusion?

Other subjects

Consider the perspective Magda offers of others via her first-person narrative voice.

Apart from Magda, the following people are the principal subjects of her memoir. (Add 'subject' to your vocabulary list. Non-fiction doesn't have characters, it has subjects.)

- ▶ Peter (Zbigniew) Szubanski
 - ▶ Maggie Szubanski
 - ▶ Barbara Szubanski
 - ▶ Chris Szubanski
 - ▶ Magda's grandmothers, Meg and Jadwiga
 - ▶ Magda's grandfathers, Luke and Mieczyslaw
 - ▶ Her extended Polish family: Danuta, Andrzej, Magda, Jan and Rajmund
 - ▶ Her extended Scottish family: Auntie Kathleen and Uncle Dominic
 - ▶ Elaine
 - ▶ Jane
 - ▶ Gina Riley and Jane Turner
1. What words does she use to describe them? (Consider personality, physical appearance, etc.) How would you describe the tone she uses to describe them? Does it shift at any time?
 2. Does she include details of their behaviour/actions? Are these important in shaping the reader's view of them?
 3. Does she include examples of particular things they have said (or written) or photos of them? What pictures do these create of each character/her relationship with them?
 4. Which anecdotes does she include to illustrate their story and her relationship with them? (Consider: family, education, interests, work, relationships, turning points, struggles, travel etc.)
 5. Does she influence the reader to approve or disapprove of their character, behaviour and attitudes?
 6. What conclusions does she draw about their values and views? Does this marry with your views of them?
 7. Does Szubanski's view of any of the people in her life change over the course of the memoir? How do you know?
 8. Do you think the way Szubanski presents others actually tells you something about Szubanski herself? What leads you to this conclusion?



STRUCTURE, LANGUAGE AND STYLE

Reckoning is a collection of special memories which have been carefully arranged. Consider why the text is sequenced in the way it is and how Szubanski uses language to create meaning.

Questions for discussion

- ▶ Is there an epigraph? What is special about the quote in the epigraph, as well as its context? What role does it play in establishing the memoir's chief preoccupations?
- ▶ How are the memories organised? Does it include chapters? Why does one chapter precede another? Do these have titles? Do these titles seem significant?
- ▶ *Reckoning* begins and ends the memoir by examining the metaphor, the 'stone of madness'. Why does Szubanski use this structuring strategy?
- ▶ *Reckoning* has a non-linear structure. What ideas does this structure reinforce?
- ▶ What do you notice about the style of the memoir? Is it formal or informal? Is the narrative voice self-critical or self-deprecating? Reflective? Perceptive? Incisive?
- ▶ Does it contain strong assertive opinions? About what kinds of things?
- ▶ What role does humour play? What does it expose or underline?
- ▶ Szubanski often uses metaphor and analogy to impart meaning. Compile a list of metaphors and analogies used by Szubanski.
- ▶ Is it written from Szubanski's point of view?
- ▶ How much detail is included? What kind of detail is included? Consider her use of descriptive detail and hard historical evidence. What impact is the detail/evidence designed to have on the reader?
- ▶ Consider the role Polish words and names play in the memoir, as well as her evocation of her Granny's Scottish accent and her father's hybrid Polish/Scottish accent. Does this use of language give her writing an authenticity?
- ▶ In what way does the memoir obey the conventions of memoir/family history? Does it include important birth dates and places of birth; details of her family's background and her place in family? Details of her early life, education, significant events, key achievements and turning points? Her adult life and work history?
- ▶ In what ways is *Reckoning* also a history of Poland?
- ▶ Does her memoir have a specific focus/theme?

THEMES

Trauma, loss and reckoning

Szubanski comes to understand that her struggles are interwoven with the trauma and loss her family has suffered over generations. She often refers to this as 'intergenerational trauma'. *Reckoning* invites the reader to consider how we can inherit the pain and misery of our family and ancestors. It also invites us to consider how the self survives in the wake of unspeakable and unrelenting trauma.

Ultimately it is a celebration of Szubanski's ability to change things for her family. Where those who experienced trauma and unimaginable loss are unable to face the horrors of the past, she does the work for them and in doing so, breaks the cycle of trauma for them. She does this by honestly confronting the realities of her past, as well as her family's, and seeking to understand via careful process. In doing so, she gives a voice to those who have gone beforehand and helps her family begin restoring their psychological integrity.

Task: Compile a table which provides an overview of the distressing events individual members of her family experience (on both sides). Include examples of the different ways the individuals responded, as well as how the family (as a system) responded to these experiences.

Over time, Szubanski feels that the only way she and her father can confront their 'stone of madness' is through the process of 'reckoning'. Szubanski was eventually able to develop insights into her own behaviour and identity by talking and writing about her past and her family's past and by undertaking therapy. Note the importance of narrative and storytelling to her experience of 'reckoning'. Szubanski eventually feels a sense of wholeness; she has been able to integrate the different parts of her identity, rather than splitting them up or compartmentalising them.

Task: Create a timeline of the key events which led to Szubanski's 'reckoning'.

Reckoning is about confronting and honouring the past in order to move forward in the present. Szubanski writes to understand herself and her father but she finds her desire to unlock the past is often at odds with the wishes of her mother and father.

Task: Compare the different attitudes her mother and father have to the past, in comparison to Magda. Why do you think their views are so different? Do any of their views change over time?

Szubanski's experience of 'reckoning', though intertwined with her father's, occurs through her writing many years after his death. The degree of his 'reckoning' is very different to hers. Consider why this is the case. What insights does her father's experience provide into the elusiveness of healing and forgiveness when there has been so much horror and loss? What role did Peter's religious beliefs play in helping him achieve a 'reckoning of sorts'. Do you think he really ever experiences a type of absolution?



Identity and family

- ▶ Migrating from England and growing up in Croydon meant that Szubanski often felt like an outsider when she was growing up. What did she do to try and fit in with others?
- ▶ Szubanski's relationships with particular groups also shape her sense of who she is and what's important to her. What role do the Sharpies play in her teenage years? The tennis club? The Dominican nuns and teaching staff from Siena College? (pages 160–1)
- ▶ Szubanski's struggles with her weight and depression have a profound influence on her self-esteem. How does writing this memoir help her uncover a personal truth about these struggles?
- ▶ Comedy, acting and writing all help Szubanski define who she is in new and more comfortable ways. Explain the role they play in promoting growth and maturity.
- ▶ Szubanski's understanding of self deepens when she compares herself to her family. From her perspective, how is she like specific family members? How is she different?
- ▶ How did social attitudes towards homosexuality challenge Szubanski's emerging sense of self when she was growing up? What impact did hiding, eventually embracing, her sexuality have on her self-esteem, wellbeing and identity?
- ▶ Humour plays a central role in Szubanski's life. What role has it played in connecting herself to others?
- ▶ What insights does Szubanski provide about what helped her deal with these challenges?

ASSESSMENT ADVICE

VCE English and English as an Additional Language assessment

Reckoning is on the 2019 VCE English and English as an Additional Language (EAL) Text List and can be used for the following Outcomes/Examinations:

Unit 4, Outcome 1: Reading and comparing texts and Section B of the VCE English final examination

In 2019, VCE English students who study *Reckoning* will need to compare it to Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*.

VCE EAL assessment

Reckoning is also on the 2019 VCE English and English as an Additional Language (EAL) Text List and can be used for the following Outcomes/Examinations:

Unit 3 EAL Outcome 1: Reading and creating texts

Unit 4 EAL Outcome 1: Reading and comparing texts

For further information and final clarification, please consult the English/EAL Study Design on the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority's website: <http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Pages/vce/studies/english/index.aspx> and the VCE English and English as an Additional Language (EAL) Text List for the year of study you wish to study *Reckoning*.



SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES

Video:

<https://www.wheelercentre.com/broadcasts/magda-szubanski>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aD9R-VwT4vs>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ajjme5p7GVE>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gkZ1M0aGL4>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ulsG9UFhQI> (7:30 Report)

<https://www.sbs.com.au/radio/video/737113155882/Who-Do-You-Think-You-Are-S3-Ep1-Magda-Szubanski>

Audio (podcasts):

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/magda-szubanski-on-her-newly-released-memoir/6797354>

<http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2015/10/14/4331386.htm> (Conversation with Richard Fidler)

Print:

<https://theconversation.com/magda-szubanskis-reckoning-a-memoir-48309>

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/23/magda-szubanski-my-father-memoir-reckoning>

<https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/m17booksrev2-20151008-gk4e1o.html>

<https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/magda-szubanskis-memoir-reckoning-finds-its-place-in-the-world-of-winners-20160518-goyd8h.html>

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/magda-szubanskis-memoir-reveals-a-woman-of-substance/news-story/023cf36199ab61155a4f96e631f693f1>

<https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/reckoning-review-how-magda-szubanski-became-the-comic-genius-she-is-today-20151012-gk6xdt.html>

All links in this document can be accessed via the digital version of these notes at textpublishing.com.au/reckoning

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