



The Half-Child

ANGELA SAVAGE

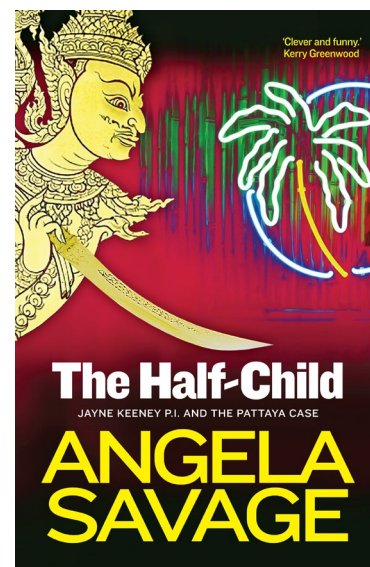
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RECOMMENDED SCHOOL YEAR LEVEL: 10–12

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OVERVIEW

The crime fiction novel *The Half Child* by Australian author Angela Savage can be studied in a variety of ways to address both the **language** and **literature** requirements of the Australian Curriculum (English). The teaching and learning activities presented in this overview address learning outcomes, including those specified below:

- Understand that people's evaluations of texts are influenced by their value systems, the context and the purpose and mode of communication (ACELA1565)
- Understand that Standard Australian English in its spoken and written forms has a history of evolution and change and continues to evolve (ACELA1563)
- Compare the purposes, text structures and language features of traditional and contemporary texts in different media (ACELA1566)
- Analyse and evaluate the effectiveness of a wide range of sentence and clause structures as authors design and craft texts (ACELA1569)
- Compare and evaluate a range of representations of individuals and groups in different historical, social and cultural contexts (ACELT1639)
- Reflect on, extend, endorse or refute others' interpretations of and responses to literature (ACELT1640)
- Analyse and explain how text structures, language features and visual features of texts and the context in which texts are experienced may influence audience response (ACELT1641)
- Evaluate the social, moral and ethical positions represented in texts (ACELT1812)
- Analyse and evaluate text structures and language features of literary texts and make relevant thematic and intertextual connections with other texts (ACELT1774)

- Analyse and evaluate how people, cultures, places, events, objects and concepts are represented in texts, including media texts, through language, structural and/or visual choices (ACELY1749)
- Identify and analyse implicit or explicit values, beliefs and assumptions in texts and how these are influenced by purposes and likely audiences (ACELY1752)
- Use comprehension strategies to compare and contrast information within and between texts, identifying and analysing embedded perspectives, and evaluating supporting evidence (ACELY1754)

The Half Child—in terms of its genre, content and style—is accessible to mature students in Year 10 studying in a teacher-directed learning context. However, the novel is arguably better suited to English students in Years 11 and 12, especially those studying crime fiction genre or undertaking humanity studies in Asian Studies, Geography or Modern History.

It is significant to note that a study of Savage's *The Half Child* will enable students to satisfy the Cross-curriculum priority **Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia**. The Australian Curriculum acknowledges the relevance and importance of this Cross-curriculum priority in the lives and learning experiences of contemporary students. This reasoning is outlined:

- The Asia region exerts enormous influence globally and in Australia. Asia is the most populous region in the world, being home to two-thirds of the world's people. Some of the world's most dynamic, varied and complex societies are in the Asia region. It will soon also be both the largest producer and consumer of goods and services in the world.
- In 2014, 11 of Australia's top 15 export markets (goods and services) were in the Asia region,



making up nearly 71 per cent of all exports. As well, approximately 58 per cent of Australia's two-way trade occurred with countries of the Asia region. The economic importance of successful Australian engagement with Asia is undeniable.

- Australia is increasingly looking to Asia strategically, politically and culturally as well as economically. Correspondingly, Asia literacy is going to be a key requirement of our young people, as Australia seeks to strengthen its ties in the Asia region and be an effective contributor to the wellbeing of the region as a whole. For this, young people will need broad insight into the histories of the countries of the Asia region, including their shared history with Australia, its complex and diverse cultures and an understanding of the contemporary challenges and opportunities that exist for the region. By knowing something of Asian societies, cultures, beliefs and environments, they will deepen their intercultural understanding, enrich their own lives and increase the likelihood of successful participation in the 'Asian century', for themselves and Australia as a whole.

Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia

The **Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia** priority provides a regional context for learning in all areas of the curriculum. It reflects Australia's extensive engagement with Asia in social, cultural, political and economic spheres.

Many Asian nations are growing rapidly and are regionally and globally influential. Immigrants from all these countries have historically contributed to Australia's development and will continue to do so in the future. An understanding of Asia underpins the capacity of Australian students to be active and informed citizens working together to build harmonious local, regional and global communities, and build Australia's social, intellectual and creative capital. It also builds understanding of the diversity of cultures and peoples living in Australia, fosters social inclusion and cohesion and is vital to the prosperity of Australia.

This priority will ensure that students learn about and recognise the diversity within and between the countries of the Asia region. Students will develop knowledge and understanding of Asian societies, cultures, beliefs and environments, and the connections between the peoples of Asia, Australia and the rest of the world. Asia literacy provides students with the skills to communicate and engage with the peoples of Asia so they can effectively live, work and learn in the region.

What encompasses Asia?

Asia can be defined in geographical terms, but it can also be described in terms of cultural, religious, historical and language boundaries or commonalities.

While it includes West and Central Asia, in Australian schools, studies of Asia will pay particular attention to the sub-regions of:

- North-East Asia including China, Japan, Mongolia, North Korea, South Korea and Taiwan

- South-East Asia including Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), the Philippines, Singapore, **Thailand**, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam
- South Asia including Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

SUGGESTED TEACHING CONSIDERATIONS & APPROACHES

The Half Child can be studied on a variety of levels as an independent text or in conjunction with other texts:

OPTION A: CLOSE STUDY OF TEXT

The text may be studied as a stand-alone close novel examining plot and characterisation in the course of the text's episodic chapter structure. The text can be studied as a structured reading-comprehension study complemented by sub-studies of language techniques such as dialogue, syntax, jargon, simile and descriptive language. The author's writing style can be deconstructed and analysed in terms of its language forms and features.

The text's complex content will also accommodate teaching strategies underpinned by broad thematic or conceptual approaches. *Ethics and Justice*, for example, would function as a plausible theme to be explored in and through the narrative. Other plausible themes that could be examined through a thematic study of *The Half Child* include:

- *Deception & Corruption*
- *Wealth & Power*
- *Social & Professional Facades*
- *Culture & Thailand* (in conjunction with other texts linked specifically to Thailand e.g. *Bangkok Hilton*, documentaries)

OPTION B: CRITICAL READING

The novel lends itself to teaching units premised on the application of critical readings. A Feminist reading can be applied to the text's depiction of its fiercely independent and resourceful female private investigator. Furthermore, a teacher may feel tempted to undertake a collective study of the representations of female protagonists in Savage's *The Half Child*, Marele Day's *The Life and Crimes of Harry Lavender* and P.D. James' Cordelia Grey series, including *The Skull Beneath the Skin*. This comparative approach would allow capable students to apply feminist readings of appropriations of the post-war female private investigator in quite different cultural, social and historical contexts.

Similarly the novel's sustained depiction of Thai society and economic inequalities would enable a teacher-guided study of the text from a Marxian reading. The text exposes the issue of economic disadvantage and explores how this impacts directly on individuals and social class and the distribution of power within society. This approach would clearly lend itself to the consideration of current events via the print, television or web media. Students' numeracy



and data interpretation skills would be enhanced through examining GDP and average income data from Australia, the US and Thailand. Population data and geographical data could also be effectively and meaningfully integrated into a study of the novel guided by a **Marxian reading**. Such an approach to the students' learning experiences may reinforce the economic inequities explored by Savage in the novel.

OPTION C: COMPARATIVE STUDY

The Half Child could be effectively studied in conjunction with another text—novel (same genre), novel (different genre, but linked through theme or concept, context etc), picture book, film, poetry, visual representations of Thailand, etc.

The text would lend itself to students exploring the ethics of inter-cultural adoption processes and different governments policies and stances on these matters. Contemporary interviews with Deborah-Lee Furness, for example, could be accessed via Youtube and discussed in conjunction with the chapters of the novel dealing with the American couple's adoption of the Thai baby. The students' study could culminate with a whole-class debate or tutorial exploring the relaxation of adoption regulations between Australia and developing countries, including those in Asia.

The representation of socio-economic conditions in Asian countries could also be a focus. The representation of poverty in the popular film *Slumdog Millionaire*, for example, could be studied in conjunction with *The Half Child*. Similarly students could then undertake a sobering reflection on their own living standards in Australia.

OPTION D: GENRE STUDY

Arguably the most tempting teaching approach to *The Half Child* would be in the context of a broader study of the crime fiction genre. Students could be able to analyse how facets of the novel adhere to the broader conventions of the crime fiction genre and specific conventions of sub genres of crime fiction.

Students could critically examine **appropriations** of the Private Investigator in crime fiction texts. Students could compare and contrast Savage's Jayne Keeney (Chapter 1) and the depiction of private investigators derived from the cartoon genre (Daffy Duck) and Peter Corris' Sydney-based Cliff Hardy.

Intertextuality as a literary device can be introduced and examined in this unit. The references to Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson in *The Half Child* can be explored and explained to students.

A critical comparison of the private investigator characters in *The Half Child* and one of Peter Corris' Cliff Hardy novels would be worthwhile exercise. The ethical conduct of professionals and religious figures as explored by Savage could be considered in a comparative study of Corris' *Man in the Shadows*.

ADDITIONAL TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

LANGUAGE

The text contains Thai language, idiom and jargon: *Nok noi* (p.2) *farang*, *songthaew*, *man kaew*, *look kreung*. Students could collect these terms and build their own Thai vocabulary.

Savage has also used a variety of literary techniques to enrich the effectiveness of her narrative: simile, descriptive language, dialogue, Biblical Allusion.

The Prologue

The reader is exposed to the challenges that confront Pornthip as a sixteen year old single mother in Thailand. This section of the novel and the issues raised therein could be complemented with students accessing some of the experiences of young Aboriginal mothers recounted in *The Stolen Children—their stories* (Carmel Bird—ed.) Bird's non fiction text also provides an interesting outline of how inter-racial children were classified by Australian authorities.

The role of "the state" or church charities in taking babies from their biological parents could be the focus of an in-class ethical debate or whole-class discussion.

FOCUS: urban life in Thailand

The novel provides the responder with powerful descriptions of Bangkok (p.8). These descriptions could be complemented with web images (or youtube clips) that students access and represent with appropriate extracts from the novel.

FOCUS: working overseas

The dead girl at the centre of the investigation was a member of the Young Christian Volunteers. Students research the different volunteer groups that provide support to Asian countries. Assess the implications of the statement—"People volunteer to work overseas as a stepping-stone to a career in international development." p.43. Is this a valid justification for their involvement in such programs?

A joke is made about smoking and air quality in Asia. p.20. Students research programs and initiatives that have been adopted by governments in India, China and Thailand to address concerns about air pollution and related health problems.

Student can research the acronym NGO and what this term means.

The multicultural nature of Thailand is mentioned on p.29—references are made to the different languages that are used by the people in commercial exchanges—Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi...

Maryanne's letters were written in 1996. Students research current events from that year in both Australia and Thailand.



CHAPTER 8

The text provides interesting observations—“...at the end of the bar sat a group of young Australians, a party of British tourists at the other. There was a table of puffy-looking men with thick Eastern European accents and bags of leather goods at their feet, and two very blonde types reading a travel guide in what looked like Swedish. A tiny stage in the far corner of the bar with a pole from floor to ceiling suggested things might hot up as the night wore on.”

Class discussion and speculation about how the Thai people may perceive foreign tourists and the bar culture. (pp.69-70)

CHAPTER 9

Critically appraise the bodycopy from the New Life Children’s Centre—“Our Centre welcomes...” Etc. Suggest what the motivation is to attract Westerners to work at the centre and interact with the Thai children and babies.

The technique of self examination in a mirror is a writing technique commonly employed by crime writers. (p.74) Comment on what is achieved through the author employing this technique.

As a writing activity in class—use mirrors or mirror functions on computers to then compose a paragraph describing yourself using the techniques employed by Savage. The inclusion of anecdotes—true or fictitious—is encouraged.

Symbols are used effectively by Savage in the narrative. The wearing of a crucifix conveys what? (p.75) Students explore how the inclusion of simple symbols can communicate information about places and individuals.

The issue of religion is flagged in this chapter—as is the assimilation of Thai children into Christian families in the US, Europe and Australia. Discuss the ethics of this issue. Complete a PMI (positives, minuses, interesting) on this policy being implemented in the adoption process in developing countries. Note: correlations with the religious instruction mentioned in Carmel Bird’s *The Stolen Children—their stories* would be the focus of a whole-class or small group guided discussion.

The terminology—“half caste and mixed race” is corrected by Fran on p.83. Discuss the function of language in society and the issue of politically correct terms such as Eurasian and Afro-Asian. A suggested whole-class activity to explore politically correct phrases, words and terms used in the contemporary media. For example, collect a selection of news articles that use politically correct terms, jargon or euphemisms (e.g. poor—socio-economic disadvantage).

Suggest what plausible arguments and enticements you think may have been afforded to the children’s parents to encourage them to relinquish them and allow them to be adopted by Western families. (p.85)

CHAPTER 10

The anecdote about Frank’s missionary work makes mentions a of Communist doctor who was not impressed with the issuing of Bibles. Students research Communism and Communists and what values they may uphold.

Savage’s novel contains Biblical Allusion—the references to Pattaya and Jomtien—this is termed Thailand’s own “Sodom and Gomorrah.” Undertake research of the Bible to ascertain the connotations of this reference. Can you suggest why Savage might have selected to use this reference in this particular chapter? Students undertake internet research on the histories of these towns

Possibly view extracts from the TV program *Big Trouble in Tourist Thailand* (8 part doc) BBC.

Political movements in Asia are a subtle undercurrent in the novel. Students research the events and motivations of the Red Shirt protestors in 2009-2010. Clarify the reasons for these riots and how the local authorities responded to these acts of civil disobedience.

The chapter refers to the sex industry in Pattaya. Recommend a tasteful and sanitised account of this aspect of Thailand. Consider accessing *youtube pattaya walking street 28 March 2015*.

Whole-class discussion of the definite links between the growth of the commercial sex industry and the American GIs during the Vietnam War. Undertake research on the notion of R&R. The issue of abortions is also depicted in the text. (p.92.)

CHAPTER 11

The presence of Russian prostitutes and Russians.

CHAPTER 12

The US couple utilising IVF methods to conceive their own child.

Perhaps research this field and the costs involved too. What inferences can be made about the American couple premised on your reading of Chapter 12? Consider how Savage has effectively positioned readers with respect to this couple.

CHAPTER 13

The chapter commences with information provided from an edition of the *Pattaya Mail*. What does this article reveal to the responder about the social context?

Note the carefully crafted connection to the novel’s prologue—and baby Nok.

CHAPTER 14 & 15

The issue of Police corruption is depicted and highlighted when Mayuree encounters a ruthless member of the Royal Thai Police Force. (pp.116-117) The issue of corruption within police service may be worth discussing. Plausible links can be made to corruption within the NSW police in the 1960s and 1970s explored in *The Prince and the Premier*.



CHAPTER 16

The religion and culture of Thailand is explored. An insight is given into Buddhist monks (novices).

CHAPTER 17

CHAPTER 19

Consider the words spoken to the baby by Chaowalit (pp.140-141). Is he being evil or practical—based on your reading of the novel and research into the Thai society and the stigma associated with being born a farang—the child of a whore.

CHAPTER 20

CHAPTER 21

The illnesses that are attributed to the deaths of children are mooted: syphilis, gonorrhoea, AIDS and finally sickle-

cell anaemia. These conditions could be researched by students. It may be interesting for students to research Angela Savage's own career and experiences in social welfare work and community health programs. Her work in AIDS education in Thailand may suggest her own expertise and experiences have guided and influenced the text—and therefore given the text its authentic flavour. Similar correlations can be observed in the works of P.D. James and Ian Fleming. Both these British crime fiction authors (and their careers) can be researched.

Speculation abounds in Jayne's mind—she suggests organ farming and also cot death as plausible explanations to the baby's death. Again, the novel can function as a springboard into both these issues.

The novel's conclusion is characterised by surprise, irony and realism. Consider what complex ethical issues Savage would hope readers may consider after reading *The Half Child*.