

THINGS NOBODY KNOWS BUT ME

AMRA PAJALIĆ

'Brave, compassionate, searingly honest and funny, this is a memoir in a voice like no other. Amra Pajalić's love letter to her mother is a book that grabs at your heart and doesn't let go until the final page.'

ALICE PUNG

READING GROUP NOTES

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About the book

When she is four years old Amra Pajalić realises that her mother is different. Fatima is loving but sometimes hears strange voices that tell her to do bizarre things. She is frequently sent to hospital and Amra and her brother are passed around to family friends and foster homes, and for a time live with their grandparents in Bosnia.

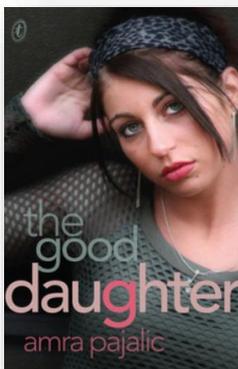
At sixteen Amra ends up in the school counsellor's office for wagging school. She finally learns the name for the malady that has dogged her mother and affected her own life: bipolar disorder. Amra becomes her mother's confidante and learns the extraordinary story of her life: when she was fifteen years old Fatima visited family friends only to find herself in an arranged marriage. At sixteen she was a migrant, a mother, and mental patient.

Surprisingly funny, *Things Nobody Knows But Me* is a tender portrait of family and migration, beautifully told. It captures a wonderful sense of bicultural place and life as it weaves between St Albans in suburban Australia and Bosanska Gradiška in Bosnia. Ultimately it is the heartrending story of a mother and daughter bond fractured and forged by illness and experience. Fatima emerges as a remarkable but wounded woman who learns that her daughter really loves her.

About the author

Amra Pajalić is a Melbourne-based author of Bosnian background. Her debut novel *The Good Daughter* (Text Publishing, 2009) won the 2009 Melbourne Prize for Literature's Civic Choice Award, and was a finalist in the 2009 Melbourne Prize for Literature Best Writing Award. Prior to publication it was shortlisted in the 2007 Victorian Premier's Awards for Best Unpublished Manuscript. She is also author of a novel for children *Amir: Friend on Loan* (Garratt Publishing, 2014) and the co-editor of the anthology *Growing up Muslim in Australia* (Allen and Unwin, 2018) that was shortlisted for the 2015 Children's Book Council of Australia Eve Pownall Award for Information Books.

Previous works



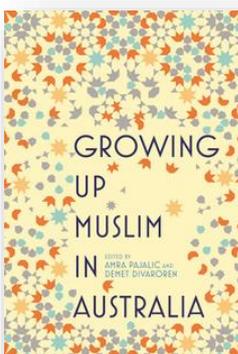
***Winner of the 2009 Melbourne Prize for Literature's Civic Choice Award**

***Shortlisted for the 2007 Victorian Premier's Awards for Best Unpublished Manuscript**

'A funny and challenging debut novel that has been described as the Bosnian answer to *Looking for Ali Brandi* ... *The Good Daughter* is a gritty and enjoyable novel, at times unflinching and dramatic.' *Canberra Times*

'*The Good Daughter* is the debut novel from new Melbourne author Amra Pajalic and it's one you won't want to miss! (5 stars).' *Girlfriend Magazine*

'Insightful... A spirited debut novel.' *Herald Sun*

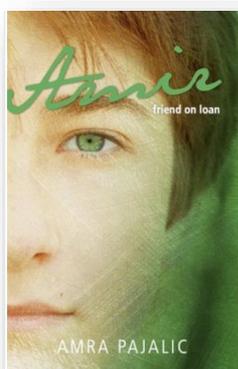


***Shortlisted for the 2015 Children's Book Council of Australia Eve Pownall Award for Information Books**

***Selected for the 2015 Summer Reading List for Prime Minister.**

'*Growing up Muslim in Australia* is the kind of book that will change how readers look at the world, at others and themselves. This anthology of real-life stories from Australian Muslim authors explores the complexities of growing up Muslim in multicultural Australia—in the 1980s and 1990s but also the post-9/11 landscape, where to be visibly Muslim was suddenly redefined.' Meredith Lewin, *Books+Publishing magazine*.

'This group of stories will be an eye opener to the readers, at its basis showing that growing up, whoever you are and wherever you come from the issues are the same, friends, family, sex, school, what to do with the rest of your life. For a class this would be an enthralling set of stories to read, pointing out that young adult's worries and concerns have little to do with the stereotypes we see in the media.' Fran Knight, *ReadPlus*



'It tells the tale of a friendship strained by circumstances out of the boys' control and explains the reasons behind the Balkan war in terms a young person can grasp... [*Amir: Friend on Loan*] provide[s] insights into the individual lived experience. It is through learning about other people's stories that empathy and respect ultimately grow... [it] encourage[s] intercultural understanding and the recognition that emotions and questions of identity are universal.' Jodi Wiley, *Viewpoint*, Vol 22, No 1.

Reviews

'Brave, compassionate, searingly honest and funny, this is a memoir in a voice like no other. Amra Pajalić's love letter to her mother is book that grabs at your heart and doesn't let go to the final page.'

Alice Pung [author of *Unpolished Gem* and *Her Father's Daughter*]

'Melbourne's Amra Pajalić opens her heart and soul in this memoir of life with a mum battling mental illness ... It's a brave story of how a daughter reveals her own struggles as a migrant child who must grow up too quickly. Verdict: Raw but real.'

Carina Bruce, *The Herald Sun*

'This gritty, poignant and at-times humorous book will make readers feel open-hearted to the author and her experiences ... Writing this book must have taken courage and for that reason alone it is worthy of a place on readers' book shelves.'

Sarah Hudson, *The Weekly Times*

'This [book] could have been grim but there's humour and irony here, such as playful echoes of Jane Austen.'

The Age

'Amra Pajalic's memoir *Things Nobody Knows But Me* is a window on growing up in two cultures, an experience shared by many Australians. In this instance growth is shadowed by mental illness and domestic violence. It is told in a distinctive voice, sharp, direct, sometimes bruising ... Part of the strength of this narrative is the dual focus. We see the experience from both the growing child's perspective and from the mature Pajalic's point of view. While the child lives in the moment, the mature voice oversees and records, is matter-of-fact, non-judgmental, sometimes amused ... *Things Nobody Knows But Me* is powerfully engaging. The reader is kept in tension, fearful for the child Pajalic and her teenage self, for Fatima and Haris. And Pajalic is masterful in using the contrasting landscapes of St Albans and Bosanska Gradiska to full dramatic and ironic effect.' Phillip Siggins, *The Australian: Weekend Australian*

For discussion

- *Things Nobody Knows But Me* is a memoir. How does a memoir differ from an autobiography?
- Amra has written this memoir with the use of interlinked vignettes that move back and forth through time. What effect does this have on the portrayal of her mother, grandmother and herself, and on the memoir as a whole?
- In her prologue, Amra describes the day she discovers the name of her mother's illness, and the effect it had on her. She writes '*I realised I couldn't judge Mum for her failings. She was a victim of her own brain chemistry, and as her daughter my role was to accept and love her for who she was, not who I wanted her to be*' [p 9]. How does revisiting and engaging with past difficulties transform their effects? Do you feel Amra's prologue influenced your reading of this memoir?
- Why do you think doctors were unable to come to a definite diagnosis of Fatima's illness?
- Consider the Hodža's ritual to chase away the spirit of Amra's dead father – if, as Amra writes, her mother '*felt comforted by the Hodža's ritual and did not seek the guidance of the Lifeline counsellors*' [p 21], is it fair to think of it as fraudulent? Why/why not? Can you think of any other religious rituals that bring relief and/or comfort yet have no scientific explanation?
- Exile is usually thought of as being barred from one's native country. But there are different kinds of exiles in this memoir. Discuss.
- Do you think Fatima's friends made false claims that her children were in danger, so as to ensure Fatima would be admitted to hospital, or were the children really in danger and Amra has blocked out that possibility [p 27]? If these claims were false, were they nevertheless justified?
- Consider the adults' reaction to Fadil's 'game' [pp 30-34]. Is this how you would have reacted? What does this tell you about women's behaviour towards the men, and men's attitude towards women/girls in this society?
- Guilt is a big part of this memoir. Consider the ways in which guilt affected Amra's, Fatima's and Izet's behaviour – did they behave in this way because of their guilt, or in spite of it? Discuss.
- Discuss the way Amra combines humour and irony with the more serious aspects of this memoir. How does this affect your understanding of events and people in this book?
- Compare the stories Amra's grandmother tells, to those her grandfather tells [pp 74-84]. How do they contrast, how are they similar? What do these stories tell you about her grandparents?
- Consider the hold Fatima's parents have over her. Do you think it is the result of cultural attitudes, or the fact that Fatima has a mental illness?

For discussion [continued]

- Did you think Fatima did the right thing leaving her children behind when she returned to Australia [p 129]? Discuss.
- Compare and contrast Amra's relationship with her grandmother to that that existed with her mother. Which do you consider healthier?
- Consider Izet's personality. Do you think he's the right sort of man for Fatima? Why/why not? Why do you think he decided not to go home after being married just one week [pp109-110]?
- Consider the different Bosnian children's experiences of – and attitudes to – sex. Do you think they differ from that of Australian children's? Why/why not?
- What was your reaction to the letters Amra sent her mother? Do you think Amra realised what effect her grandmother's words would have on her mother?
- Because of her circumstances, Fatima lets Amra make choices and learn from her mistakes from a very young age. How did that shape Amra? Who were Amra's role models and how was she shaped by their histories, culture and experiences?
- Consider Fatima's first marriage [pp 171-177]. What is your opinion of arranged marriages? Do you think family members or a matchmaker are able to make wiser decisions than those driven by an individual's choice, where parents or guardians are not consulted? What advantages/disadvantages do you see in arranged marriages?
- When Fatima is admitted to hospital to give birth, then to a psychiatric hospital for the first time, Delil simply walks out without a goodbye or an explanation. What do you think prompted this behaviour?
- Consider Izet's 'grumblings' – is he justified in being dissatisfied with his life in Australia? Why/why not?
- How did you interpret Amra's behaviour towards her mother – normal teenage angst or something deeper? How much of her behaviour is influenced by her friends?
- Haris' behaviour towards his mother and stepfather is a direct contrast to Amra's. Why do you think this is so?
- Do you think the migrant experience emphasised Fatima's underlying mental illness? In what way? Did you find the Bosnian attitudes to mental illness any different to Australian attitudes?
- What are your thoughts on immigrants gathering in particular suburbs – do you see replicating customs from the 'old country' as a positive or negative thing? Discuss.
- Compare and contrast Amra's behaviour with men to that of Fatima's. In what ways was Amra's behaviour influenced by her mother's. How is it similar/different?
- Looking back over the book, what did you learn about family and forgiveness? What did you learn about mental illness?

Suggested reading

Back, After the Break – Osher Günsberg [HarperCollins, 2018]

The Rapids: Ways of Looking at Mania – Sam Twyford-Moore [NewSouth, 2018]

Banana Girl: A Memoir – Michele Lee [Transit Lounge, 2013]

Madness: A Memoir – Kate Richards [Penguin Books Australia, 2014]

Black Rock White City – A. S. Patrić [Transit lounge, 2015]

Unpolished Gem – Alice Pung [Penguin Random House, 2009]

Growing up Muslim in Australia – Amra Pajalic, Demet Divaroren [Allen and Unwin, 2019]

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Transit Lounge Publishing

Trade paperback - ISBN: 978-1-925760-20-0

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