



Half My Life

by Diana Noonan

About the author:

Diana Noonan is an award-winning writer for young people of all ages. Her work is published internationally and has been translated into several languages.

Diana lives self-sufficiently on the remote Catlins Coast of New Zealand with her illustrator husband Keith Olsen. When not tending her garden, she can be found backpacking and cycling to some of the world's more obscure spots in search of traditional lifestyles. For more than 30 years, a village in Greece has been her second home.

Synopsis of Novel:

Sixteen-year-old Katie Papahadjis lives in Newtown, Wellington in a flat above the fish and chip shop owned and run by her Greek father. The novel opens with Katie furious that her father has decided to return to Greece for three weeks because his mother, Katie's grandma (her yiayia), is dying. It is not that she does not want to finally meet the mythical woman who has been writing to her for so many years, but the timing is terrible. Katie is desperate to go to her new boyfriend's year 13 school formal, and smart, good looking, wheelchair bound Luke is a genuinely great guy. And, she rages, it is not as if her emotionally cold and distant father has ever shown the remotest interest in Greece or his remaining family there, in fact he appears to be very anti-Greece most of the time and it is Katie's stressed out mother who appears to be making sure they all go to Greece to see the dying grandmother. But Katie has more problems than missing the formal to cope with and we soon learn that she is a very troubled teen with serious mental health issues and regular therapy sessions with 'Mike the Psych'. She has very low self-esteem and self-harms to quieten the negative and destructive voices in her head that tell her she is ugly and useless. She also has obsessive compulsive behaviours and very frightening panic attacks.

When the family finally arrive in grandma's remote West coast village in Greece we are plunged into an ever deepening spiral of family tensions and historic feuds. Her grandmother and father barely speak, other family members are secretive or openly hostile and Katie becomes increasingly frustrated that no-one is willing to explain to her what on earth is going on in her dysfunctional family. Only when her grandmother is in her final dying days do we find out that this powerful and manipulative woman alienated her seventeen-year-old son by refusing to allow him to be with the woman who was carrying his child and in his anger he left the family and went to Australia for many years, where he eventually met Katie's mother, and then on to New Zealand. Katie is shocked to discover that she has a thirty-nine-year old step-brother, but they bond when she alone undertakes a dangerous night-time mountain rescue mission to transport him, his pregnant wife, and two small children to medical safety.

On return to New Zealand Katie has a new understanding of her father's behaviours and they begin to develop a warmer relationship. With her new understandings her mental health issues are much more manageable and she has also repaired a rift with Luke that had threatened to end their relationship before it had really started.



Themes / issues

The novel is a vehicle for several weighty themes mostly based around family dynamics. Noonan's most dominant theme is the need to not allow events and attitudes of the past to completely shape the present. When minds are closed and forgiveness is in short supply future generations are forced to carry a burden not of their making. But Noonan says cycles of anger, blame and intolerance can be broken and the best way to do this is emotional honesty, open communication and love.

Katie rages against the intolerance and emotional dishonesty of her parents and wider family members, but she is also guilty of this, especially with her boyfriend Luke, who deserved her compassion and not shock and suspicion when he opened up to her about the sexual abuse he once suffered from an older male at a party. Noonan's inclusion of confused sexuality and an abusive sexual encounter are very topical issues and will strike a chord with many readers. Via Katie, Noonan challenges us to examine our attitudes to the variety of sexualities, but she also wants us to be very aware that the main issue in what happened to Luke is not the homosexual nature of the sexual encounter, but the lack of consent. Luke had been drinking earlier and although he may have not been forced into the bedroom by the older and more experienced young man, he soon became very uncomfortable and clearly told his abuser to stop what he was doing. He was ignored and what followed was definitely not consensual sex, ie it was rape.

Only at the end of the novel is Katie willing to risk opening herself to Luke and to begin facing down her demons.

Other ideas the novel explores are the need to look for both sides of issues – things are rarely clear cut, and other cultures and ideas can offer richness to our lives. The dangers of seeking perfection and holding false ideals is another good avenue of exploration.

Despite the seriousness of Katie's mental health issues, it may not be a good idea to treat mental health problems as a stand-alone theme. Her mental health issues are definitely exacerbated by her family circumstances and while we are aware that her problems have not vanished at the end of the novel, we are certainly left with a feeling of optimism for her ongoing struggles. If you do wish to treat mental health as a thematic issue, ensure you focus on the benefits of seeking professional help. Some teachers may be uncomfortable with lead character Katie's dismissal of her school's counsellors, and should ensure that students have confidence in the professionalism and empathy they should experience from their own schools' counsellors.

Writing style

The first person, straight past tense narration works well for this novel. Many teens, girls in particular, will immediately bond with Katie and empathise with her crippling self-doubt and destructive behaviours. She may not share her feelings with other characters in the novel, but, via very credible interior monologues, she does not hold back with us, the readers, describing in 'painful' detail her hairpulling episodes and the horrible voices that tell her she is fat and useless.

Activity:

- Select a short, lively passage from the story (for example part of the mountain rescue) and rewrite it in the third person. Students should be able to comment on the real difference this makes to their engagement, and will have a new understanding of why so many YA novels have first person narration.
- Noonan describes village life in Greece very well, and has little trouble transporting us to the harsh beauty of the environment and the complex people who live there. By using the author's frequent sensory descriptions teachers should have little trouble getting students to see, hear, smell and feel these exotic settings.

Activity:

- Select a passage where Noonan vividly describes village life or rural Greek scenery. Identify the language features used to convey these descriptions.

Year level suitability and application

Noonan's target reading audience is probably year 11 girls but the novel should work well with year 10 and year 12 as well, male or female. Some high school English departments may wish to use it as a year 11 class set, but it should also find its way into many students' personal reading logs. The novel's strong lead character, upfront themes and interesting settings will work very well with the NCEA Level One Written Text questions.

Activity:

- discuss with students how well the novel fits with the 2019 level 1 external exam Written Text questions – Tell students they will be able to attempt writing essays after reading the text.

Learning opportunities

Before reading activities

Reading the cover for visual/verbal clues:

- Discuss with students how publishers 'position/manipulate' readers in a variety of subtle ways before they read a word of the story. Students work in pairs to study the verbal and visual clues given by the front and back cover of the book – colour, images, layout, contrast, font style and placement, title etc. Students make a set of predictions on plot, character and setting based on those clues alone. Younger students will need specific coaching in this skill.

Prior knowledge discussion / activities:

- Students share any personal experience they have of mixed family cultures. Even the most homogenous looking classes will have interesting cultural blends to share with others – and this could be a good opportunity for some students to seriously dig into their backgrounds for the first time.
- Get students to share any knowledge they have of Greek culture past

and present. Classical Studies students will perhaps have an advantage here and be able to lead the discussions. They will be able to point out to others how much of our culture has been directly influenced by ancient Greece. This also lends itself to interesting etymological exploration and students may be very surprised to learn how much of our language has Greek root origins. Most students will be aware of the Latin influence in our language but many will be unaware of the equally large Greek influence.

- Class discussion on the weight of the ‘cultural baggage’ (family structures, ethnicity mixes, political leanings, religious affiliations, career expectations etc) we carry with us and how this influences how we think and relate to others. And once again, don’t be put off if your English classroom has a homogenous look – the differences will soon appear. Younger students will need coaching on this activity. The general idea here is to treat diversity as a strength.

During reading:

Understanding the content – answers may be written or oral

Chapter one:

1. What is the main reason for Katie not wanting to go to Greece at this particular time?
2. What are two indications in this chapter that Katie has serious mental health issues?
3. In what ways do you think Katie’s family is dysfunctional?
4. Compare and contrast Katie’s two grandmothers.

Chapter two:

5. List the therapists Katie has seen prior to Mike and say why each has not worked for her.
6. What is different about Mike?
7. How do you know that Katie’s father may have a role to play in her mental struggles?
8. What extra difficulty does Luke sometimes have to deal with when using his wheelchair?

Chapter three:

9. Why do you think Katie will not discuss her therapy sessions with her mother?
10. What is unusual about the way Katie’s family found out about Yiayia’s illness?
11. What held up the progress of Katie’s father’s English?

Chapter four:

12. Describe the symptoms of one of Katie’s panic attacks.
13. What intrigues many people about Katie’s and Luke’s ‘private life’?
14. Describe Luke’s reaction to what happened to him at the party.

Chapter five:

What is holding Katie back from sharing her various problems with Luke?

Chapter six:

15. How do you feel about Katie’s reaction to Luke’s story of rape?
16. Katie seems quite ‘thrown’ by the possibility that Luke may be gay. How does this tie in with the impression you have made of her so far?
17. What further evidence of Katie’s mental health issues do we see in this chapter?

Chapter seven:

18. What does ‘the voice’ tell Katie in this chapter?
19. Why is she ignoring Luke’s texts?
20. What does her father’s contribution to their luggage tell you about the importance of family in Greece?

Chapter eight:

21. In what situations does Katie do the shoe arranging exercises?
22. What mystery does her father’s passport reveal?

Chapter nine:

23. What does Dr Yiannis mean when he says the people at Leonosis still think like villagers?
24. What positive development does Katie realise when they leave for the village?
25. What connections do Katie and her father make at one stage of the journey?
26. Why are Albanian refugees trying to cross into Greece?

Chapter ten:

27. What family relationship differences have you noticed between Greece and New Zealand?
28. What is your first impression of young Metaxia?

Chapter eleven:

29. What goes wrong when Katie goes to buy bread?
30. How does her encounter with the English speaking man deepen the mystery?

Chapter twelve:

31. What term did Mike use for the type of neglect Katie suffers from?
32. What different perspective on family dynamics does Metaxia give?

Chapter thirteen:

33. What are Katie’s parents arguing about at the start of the chapter?
34. How would you feel if you were in Katie’s shoes and no-one would answer your questions about the past?

Chapter fourteen:

35. What conflicting thoughts does Katie have about her yiayia?
36. Katie’s voice says to her ‘what if Luke had been lying when he said he was straight?’ and then she asks herself ‘could I be happy with a guy who was also attracted to boys?’ What are your thoughts on

Katie's attitude and fears as expressed here?

Chapter fifteen:

37. What upsets Katie when she and her mother visit her father at the market garden?
38. Describe the atmosphere at the medical clinic.

Chapter sixteen:

39. What further mysteries develop at the hospital?

Chapter seventeen:

40. Describe Niko's family circumstances?

Chapter eighteen:

41. What had the stranger taken from Yiayia's house?
42. What is odd about Katie's fathers' reaction to this?
43. Who does the Albanian turn out to be and what links can you now make in the mysteries?

Chapter nineteen:

44. What hard choice does Katie's father have to make?
45. Why does her father's anger make Katie feel oddly happy?

Chapter twenty:

46. Why does Katie apologise to her reflection in the mirror?
47. Describe a brave and clever thing she does on the way up.

Chapter twenty-one:

48. In what ways do you think Katie has changed since her trip to Greece?
49. What is different about her relationship with her father?
50. What new understandings do you think Katie has about relationships in general?

Post reading: Taking it further

- Students suggest several reasons for Noonan's choice of title for the novel and suggest other possible titles with explanations for each.
- Students write a letter to Diana Noonan giving their reaction to her novel and asking her to clarify or elaborate on any areas of confusion. They could also ask her about her title choice and hopefully find out how close to the mark they were.

Activity one: Group work activity

Select two of the themes / issues listed earlier in these notes and get students to elaborate more on what the author may be commenting on and how she may be positioning them think about these issues. When considering the 'how' aspect students will need to closely consider character presentation.

A group spokesperson reports findings to the class.

Activity two: Individual work – longer paragraph answers.

- Describe at least one challenge faced by a character in the written text. Explain how this challenge helped you understand the character.
- Describe at least one idea that changed your perspective or point of view in the written text. Explain how this idea changed your perspective.
- Describe a key moment in the written text that surprised or shocked you. Explain how this moment was important to the text as a whole.
- Describe a character that you disliked or admired in the written text. Explain how your feeling towards this character helped you understand the text as a whole.
- Look at the 2019 Level 1 Written Text external exam questions. Write brief notes on how applicable each one is to the novel, then select one and write a structured essay. Give students ample time for planning and writing – two periods will be sufficient.

Role play activities: (all role plays need to be handled with sensitivity and closely monitored by the teacher)

- Monologue – adopt the role of Katie or one of her parents and speaking in character explain your relationship with another character. Discuss how the relationship evolves.
- Monologue - Speaking as Katie one year in the future reflect on the events of a year ago and comment on how they have helped make you the person you are now.
- Group role play – in groups of two to four students select, rehearse and present a conflict situation in the novel.

Beyond the text activities:

- Write a speech celebrating families that have mixed cultural make up. Your speech should also point out the problems or possible conflicts that can arise, but the basic tenor of the speech should be celebrating the strengths of such families and exploring the life skills they promote.
- Design a poster promoting a cultural / educational exchange for a New Zealand student going to Greece. Give the programme an original name.

Visual image questions:

- The letter to Katie has a street number but the one to Yiayia does not. What does this suggest about the services available in each location?
- Katie's letter to her yiayia begins 'Dear Yiayia – I hope...' Writing in Katie's voice write the first few sentences of what she may have written. Repeat the process using Yiayia's voice in her letter to Katie.
- Saranda is an actual village in Albania while Leonosis is fictional. Suggest why Noonan chose not to use an actual Greek village.
- Greece is a member of the European Union and is also in the OECD – Albania is in neither. Research what these organisations are and

write a paragraph on how this shapes the lives of the population in each country.

- Imagine you and your family are Albanians planning to illegally move to Greece or Italy. Research the serious problems you need to overcome and then write a short story of your escape.
- List the countries that share borders with Greece. What are possible positive and negative implications of living so very close to neighbouring countries? What are positive and negative implications of New Zealand's opposing geographic isolation?
- Look carefully at the pictures and symbols on the Greek postcard and construct a key that explains what they represent.
- Construct a similar postcard for New Zealand or for your city / town / farm.