



*School Days of a Methodist Lady:  
a journey through girlhood*

**STUDY AND TEACHING NOTES**

By Sandra Duncanson

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## ABOUT THE TEXT

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*School Days of a Methodist Lady: a journey through girlhood* is a memoir by Australian writer and teacher, Jill Sanguinetti. The book is a deeply personal and often raw account of her time living as a boarder at Methodist Ladies' College (MLC) in Melbourne in 1958–1961.

Sanguinetti bases the book on extracts from letters that she wrote home to her parents in Kyabram, northern Victoria. Young Jill Sanguinetti is sharp, forthright, intellectually curious and earnest. She is often also anxiety-riddled and driven by the typical urges of an adolescent girl: to be liked and to reject the tight restrictions and privation of boarding house life.

The central concerns of the text are also brought into perspective with the use of extracts from classic coming-of-age novels, memoirs and a range of hymns, prayers, poems and song lyrics that reflect the culture of the school environment and provide a fascinating contrast to her family's life in the country.

Sanguinetti's preoccupations as a teenager in the late-1950s will be familiar to any twenty-first century reader: peer pressure, academic expectations, self-doubt, depression, the lure (or not) of the opposite sex and romance, gender roles, questioning authority and 'the meaning of it all'. Far from simply providing a commentary on her schoolgirl experiences, Sanguinetti touches on her family's heritage, her relationships with her parents and siblings, and life growing up in rural Victoria in the late-1950s. She reaches some very poignant conclusions about her own 'getting of wisdom' and the role our memory can play in shaping our understanding of ourselves, especially when it becomes clear that those memories have been skewed by the passage of time, our own assumptions and retrospective evaluations.

## STYLE, STRUCTURE AND LANGUAGE

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### Memoir and coming-of age tales

The text is a memoir. As a genre, memoir seeks to retell and reflect on a specific period, moment, pattern or event in the writer's life. Usually the moments help to explain a realisation or turning-point. Memoir is autobiographical, in that it recounts the author's experience, but differs from autobiography, which seeks to tell a life story. Memoir, like autobiography, is written in the first person, but does not always follow the strong chronological structure than many autobiographies follow – because the focus is on the lessons and experiences of a small period of time, memoirs can often be structured around events, ideas or moments instead of chronology. Accordingly, *School Days of a Methodist Lady's* narrative is divided into chapters that loosely discuss a different aspect of Sanguinetti's childhood and adolescence.

The narrative voice is primarily that of the adult Jill reflecting on her time at school, but large sections are also presented as excerpts from letters that she wrote to her parents between the ages of 15 and 18. There is also a short section (Prologue) at the beginning, written from an omniscient perspective, and a letter from Sanguinetti directly addressing her readers.

The text firmly positions itself as a coming-of-age tale, not only through its title and content but also through the passages that open each chapter. Sanguinetti draws on fictional classics of the genre, such as *The Getting of Wisdom*, *Anne of Green Gables* and *Jane Eyre* (notably also with female protagonists) to both highlight and offer contrasts to her 'growing-up' experience. Typically, such stories follow the protagonist from early adolescence to adulthood with a strong focus on dialogue or interior monologue rather than plot and action, and in many respects (but with a few diversions) Sanguinetti's memoir follows this format. In many ways, the memoir also draws on the traditional concerns of the *Bildungsroman* (from the German *Bildung*: education; and 'roman': novel), a type of fictional coming-of-age story that charts the moral and psychological maturation of a character through a tricky journey of self-realisation, often in direct conflict with the rules and expectations of society. (There are also sub-genres of this type of story that you could discuss with students.)

## Language and cultural references

The language of the text is, in many ways, of its time. The opening few chapters, when young Jill is still fresh from the rural idyll of *her* Goulburn Valley, draws heavily on the idiom of 1950s working-class Australia. Yet as the text unfolds, we also see the language – both in young Jill’s letters home and in her adult voice – change. We no longer read about things that are either ‘shabby’ or ‘classy’ but discover a world that is capable of being both ‘terrific and revolting’ in language that evolves as young Jill moves into adulthood.

*School Days of a Methodist Lady* regularly references music and poetry, including a range of MLC school songs and hymns. It is also rich with cultural references from the time, with popular music, TV shows and film references throughout. It relies heavily on endnotes, which add a rich layer of historical information and untold side-stories to consider.

The memoir is candid and confessional in its observations, portraying both an exuberant and curious youngster and a contemplative outsider, a conflicted and self-deprecating teenage girl. In many ways, these contrasts in tone also mirror the young Jill’s religious journey: she moves from a very social country church to passionate fundamentalist revivalism to a more intellectually engaged philosophical pondering. All the while, there is a sincere encounter with spirit, a profound yearning for a conversation with the Divine and a sense that despite the intermittent grief and desolation Jill ‘liked thinking of [herself] as a pure, clear light shining out from [her] own small corner of the world’. In other words, despite a circumstance of privation, on some deep and at times invisible level, Jill is tenaciously optimistic, drawn to a lived experience of communion and joy.

## CENTRAL THEMES, IDEAS AND VALUES

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The forces that shape a young person’s identity and the way that our perception changes over time (the ‘getting of wisdom’) are the central themes of the memoir.

Each chapter deals with a different aspect of growing up and living away from home, raising a range of interesting issues for students to discuss:

- the social roles and education of young women in the 1950s and 1960s Australia
- teenage friendships and their complications
- peer pressure and the desire to fit in (including pressure to date, navigating the complexity of adolescent female friendships, rebellion, being a victim of bullying and the experience of exclusion)
- the complexities of communal and institutional living, including issues of obedience and authority
- depression and anxiety
- the ways in which individuals respond to expectations – both of themselves and of others
- the relationships within a family and how they are viewed differently with time and reflection (the idea of parents ‘doing their best’ for their children with what they have and what they know)
- changing attitudes, methods and practices in education (including the philosophy of all-girl schools, religious pedagogy, the role and methods of discipline, academic expectations and public funding for private schools)
- the role of organised religion in society as opposed to the journey of personal connection with God
- the shifting societal norms around emotional expression and what is considered permissible, especially in dealing with grief or trauma

- the escape/salvation of intellectual and creative pursuits, especially music and poetry
- the contrast between small-town country life and living in a major city
- social inequality and the treatment of outsiders

## SETTING

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### Kyabram

Kyabram, founded in the 1870s, is a town in the north-central region of Victoria known as the Goulburn Valley. It is just under 200 km from Melbourne and just over 40 km from the NSW border at Echuca. The area is known for its fruit and dairy industries.

In 2011, Kyabram had a population of around 7300. The town has been the centre of a few waves of migration, from Italian and southern European families in the early 1960s and, more recently, refugees from Africa and the Middle East.

Film Victoria photo index of Kyabram:

<http://www.filmcentralvictoria.com.au/locations/index.php?action=browse&stage=index&location=52&pg=1>

### MLC

Methodist Ladies' College (MLC) was founded in 1882 as a Christian school that aimed to give girls a high standard of education that had previously only been offered to boys in the 'colonies'. The MLC motto is '*Deo Domuique*' (For God and for Home).

You can read a brief history of MLC and see images of many of the places referred to in this book, including the story of Nellie Fitchett, on the MLC website at: <http://www.mlc.vic.edu.au/about-mlc/history>

### Australia in the 1950s and 1960s

The *MyPlace* website is aimed at upper primary and lower secondary students to support their study of a specific set of film texts, but it has easily accessible information about the culture and politics of Australia, organised by decade.

<http://www.myplace.edu.au/home.html>

To gain a view of domestic life in 1950s and 1960s Australia, browse through archival issues of *The Australian Women's Weekly* at

<http://trove.nla.gov.au/aww/covers?year=1955>

## CHAPTER SUMMARIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS

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### Dear Reader

Written in second person as a direct address to 'Dear Reader', the first few pages of the book set up the premise ('this book is about a girl, a school and a family'), give a short explanation of what MLC was like in the 1950s and 1960s and explain why and how Sanguinetti came to write the book after finding her old school letters and using them 'like a telescope into the distant past'. The book is firmly established as a 'growing-up story'.

### Discussion points

- Sanguinetti writes: 'this is a collective as well as an individual memoir'. Is it possible for one person to accurately tell another's story?
- Stylistically and in terms of the content, why do you think Sanguinetti chose to begin the book with this letter? How does it position us as readers?

### Prologue

The prologue – written in third person from an arms-length, omniscient viewpoint – sets the scene of the Sanguinetti family (Iris, Rick, Jill and Margot) moving from Sandringham in bayside Melbourne to Kyabram, 'their promised rural paradise' in north central Victoria. They take a train from Spencer Street to Kyabram, where they are met by Jill's father Frank, and begin their life running the local newsagency.

### Discussion points

- Why do you think the prologue is written in a different voice and style to the rest of the book? What impact does this have on the reader?
- What other literary techniques or language choices have been deployed in the prologue to influence the way we read it? (Think about sentence structure, word choice and how time and place are established.)

### 1. Kyabram Dreaming

The chapter begins with a quote from Australian writer Clive James' *Unreliable Memoirs*. 'Kyabram Dreaming' describes Jill, Rick and Margot's childhood in Kyabram and the family's routine and lifestyle during the early years in the town. Specifically, we learn about the physical freedom that the children enjoyed, 'we roamed Kyabram without restraint' (3); the daily rhythm of the family business and the roles of the children in the shop, 'Mum and Dad worked long hours to build a thriving business' (2), 'We served in the shop as soon as we could read and add up' (3); their home life and family activities, 'bottling fruit, visiting family in Melbourne or taking family camping trips 'in pursuit of nature and adventure' (7); and moving from being 'cramped into the room behind the shop'(11) with a Primus stove and an outdoor toilet to their 'dream home', a 'triple-fronted cream brick veneer ... decorated in the latest '50s style' (12). We also learn about the history of Kyabram through Jill's memories of town life: race relations and the treatment of local Aboriginal people, her parents' involvement in social activities in the town; and, the family's connection with their natural environment: yabbing, swimming, climbing trees and 'adventuring' on friends' farms.

### Discussion points

- The book is set up as a memoir about going to boarding school in the city, so what function might the chapter about Kyabram have in the overall structure of the story?
- Why do you think the chapter is called 'Kyabram Dreaming'?
- Sanguinetti uses a lot of language and cultural references specific to the time and place she is writing about – dunny, shabby, classy, six o'clock swill, got skittled, Ky High, junket, tin humpies, Gene Autry and Hopalong Cassidy. What is the impact on the reader of using this language and style? Consider the role of *voice* in narration.

## 2. Early Education: from Ky to Kew

The chapter charts Sanguinetti's path through school – from Prep at Sandringham East Primary, through Kyabram Primary School and her 'pleasantly laid-back and predictable' two years when she 'showed off and had fun' (22) at Kyabram High School. She describes the routines, lessons, discipline, political attitudes and expectations of different periods of her schooling and discusses the impact of significant moments and teachers. Throughout, she establishes herself as having a 'runaway mind that craved fun and stimulation and could not abide boredom' (16). The importance of music is also emphasised. The chapter ends with Sanguinetti's 'preparation' for boarding school: a description of the 'schoolgirl literature' she read about boarding school life.

### Discussion points

- Does the attitude of Laura in the excerpt from *The Getting of Wisdom* that begins this chapter mirror young Jill's attitude to boarding school?
- How does this chapter set up our expectations of what will happen to Sanguinetti when she goes to MLC? Consider the examples of 'Ky' classes, Jill's attitude to learning and behaviour in class, the pedagogical approach of the teachers and the cultural milieu of her upbringing.

## 3. Old Traditions Play a Part

This chapter introduces us to MLC through Sanguinetti's eyes: her arrival, meeting the principal, Dr Wood, and meeting her roommates in the boarding house. She documents the daily routine, including the official ('awe-inspiring' assemblies (35), 'dowdy' uniforms (37), and Dr Wood's 'commanding presence' (35); the unofficial (midnight feasts and initiation pranks); and, the divide between New Girls and Old Girls. We also learn of Sanguinetti's 'inner ambivalence' (34) as a student in her first year at the school. This chapter is where the extracts from her letters home begin to punctuate the text. We are also introduced to her classmates, teachers, form structure and school songs. The chapter ends with a reflection on how 'small acts of mischief and rebellion' helped to combat the 'private grief' of homesickness that so many of the girls experienced – some very deeply and for prolonged periods (43).

### Discussion points

- How does the language and style of young Jill's letters compare with the voice of the adult Jill telling this story? In these early letters, can you see any emerging patterns in her voice?
- List the number of ways that Jill's initial experience of MLC contrasts to the previous chapter's discussion of her earlier schools.

## 4. Yarra Mud and Dandruff

This chapter is devoted to Sanguinetti's struggles with terrible boarding house food, hunger and battling the icy, unheated dorms. Seeing their daughter is miserable, Jill's parents offer to send her to another boarding school, but she declines for a range of reasons – 'MLC's larger than life personalities, its old-fashioned nostalgic traditions and its music' as well as 'leaving her friends, or the amazing Dr Wood' (55). The chapter ends with her realisation that she often 'swung high and low between happy and miserable times' (56).

### Discussion points

- Why do you think there are so many direct extracts from letters (including an inventory of her 'Life Expenditures') in this chapter? What effect does the voice of the young Jill have in telling this part of her story that a more adult voice might not have achieved?
- This chapter begins with two quotes – one from *Jane Eyre* and one from *The Getting of Wisdom* – how do these quotes set up our expectations for the chapter?
- In rejecting her parents' offer to move her to St Michael's, Jill says 'MLC was tough, but a kinder, more modern school might be tepid by comparison'. What does this say about Jill's shifting priorities? What about her sense of her own resilience?

## 5. Discipline and Resistance

This chapter tells the stories of students who failed to meet the expectations that MLC set: who broke the rules, were subversive, or just didn't really fit the MLC 'mould'. Many of these, Sanguinetti counts as friends. It also outlines the role of the school prefects in keeping order and standards and the leadership of the Boarding House Mistress, Miss Cowper. Sanguinetti lists many of the rules and regulations that she found 'infuriatingly petty' (65). The chapter ends with a lengthy letter extract, an entreaty to her parents listing all of the reasons Sanguinetti should become a weekly boarder, spending weekends with her grandmother in Sandringham.

### Discussion points

- Does the boarding house sound like the 'open-gated prison' (69) Sanguinetti refers to? Explain your view with evidence from the text, and consider the time and place she is writing about.
- How does this chapter position us to respond to the figures of authority in the school? Give a few examples of the devices used to do this.
- What alternate viewpoints might exist to counter the opinions Sanguinetti expresses about repressive discipline in this chapter?
- How does this chapter contrast to the images we are given of life back in Kyabram? Consider each place's lifestyle as well as the language that is used to describe it.

## 6. My Family at Church

This chapter outlines Sanguinetti's family's religious history: her grandfather's zealous ministry, her parents' religious upbringing and her own family church experience outside MLC. It raises a range of crucial issues, including spiritual awakening and external influence in young adults, the questioning of faith and the transcendent power of music. Although the author notes that 'Church was as much part of our lives as school, and not too much was made of it' (75), she also recounts many instances of genuine spiritual connection: suddenly feeling 'touched by the Holy Spirit' and 'God singing through me' at age four (74); noting that 'hymn singing filled me with a spiritual yearning and sense of divine communion' (77); and 'a strange swelling in my heart as Jesus's love entered me' at the age of twelve (79). The chapter also raises the role of church life in a small regional community, especially as a kind of social hub and centre for helping the less fortunate, such as the orphans from Dhurringile.

### Discussion points

- How does Sanguinetti contrast her Baptist, Church of Christ and Methodist Church experiences? What might her explanation of each type of Christianity reveal about her underlying religious beliefs?
- What complicated social questions does the existence of the boys of Dhurringile raise? (Students could research forced child migration and the Stolen Generation in Australia.)
- Sanguinetti presents some significant religious and philosophical ideas phrased as her own childhood questions. Make a list of these significant questions and rewrite them as an adult might. Do they seem fundamentally different?

## 7. Spiritual Strivings

Chapter 7 outlines Sanguinetti's spiritual and religious experiences at MLC, where 'Christian worship was built into the life of the school' (82). She recounts the ways in which she and other boarders complained about the extent of religious worship, but also notes the fervour and emotion stirred in students by Dr Wood's Easter Services. Sanguinetti also discusses her brief experience of fundamentalist Christianity, with the visit of Billy Graham to Melbourne in 1959 and her fleeting interest in the Worldwide Church of God, promptly quashed when she seeks spiritual guidance from Dr Wood. The year also sees the opening of MLC's new chapel, which Sanguinetti describes as 'really beautiful' (89) with streams of heavenly light shining through the stained glass image of the Lord' (91). However, young Jill questions the financial cost of the building, especially considering Dr Wood's reputation as a 'self-proclaimed puritan' (91). Much of the chapter is devoted to discussing the principal and his spiritual, political and social ideals of 'equality

transcending class, colour, gender and creed' (95). This includes Dr Wood's outspoken rejection of state funding for independent schools and his edict, 'From those to whom much has been given, much will be required' (99).

### **Discussion points**

- Sanguinetti's highly emotional response to religious music and ritual is at odds with her 'rational misgivings' about religion. What are Jill's central doubts about religious doctrine? How do these shape her interaction with the Christian worship that 'was built into the life of the school as a matter of course'?
- Although Sanguinetti describes Dr Wood as a 'self-proclaimed puritan', he is also noted as a 'dissenter' within the church. In what ways does Dr Wood symbolise progressive aspects of the church and Christianity in general?

## **8. My Maternal Love Story**

This chapter gives us insight into Sanguinetti's relationship with her mother. It also details her mother's family background: Iris Sanguinetti was raised by her teetotaling fire-and-brimstone Church of Christ minister father, 'Papa' Forbes – a veteran of the Boer War, World War 1 and World War 2. 'Mama' Ruby Rundle, Jill's grandmother, was born in Fiji where her father, Newman, managed a sugar plantation. Iris is described as 'Musically and artistically gifted' (103), 'an accomplished seamstress with a flair for recycling and innovation' (103) and 'capable, independent of spirit' (105). Her 'radiance of spirit shone through her smile, her violin playing and her knack of communicating naturally with anyone she met' (100). In particular, she paints the picture of a talented and vibrant woman who always did her best with what she had and bore any misfortune with stoic determination. We also learn the story of Iris and Frank's first child, Francis (b.1940) 'afflicted with asthma and eczema' (105), who died at the age of three when during one of his asthma attacks he was 'treated' with a spoonful of cod liver oil by 'Papa' Forbes.

### **Discussion points**

- How does this chapter chart the changes in young Jill's relationship with her mother as she grows older?
- Sanguinetti tells us that being 'separated from Mum was tough'. Is it possible to judge their 'closeness' by modern parent-child relationship standards? Why/why not?
- What role does the Sanguinettis' first child, Francis, play in Jill's story? How does she rationalise his untimely death?
- Sanguinetti portrays her mother as a complex and layered persona: 'She was singing the notes, stamping the rhythm with her foot and pointing out the place in the music, flour dripping off her hands onto the music stand'. What do we really know of Iris? What can we glean about her priorities as a mother and an individual? Examine the text to find direct quotes and/or letters from her to outline her character.

## **9. Angst**

After being one of the top students at Kyabram High, Sanguinetti finds herself 'well down in the ranks' on arriving at MLC. This fosters a fear of failure that leads her to study obsessively. The chapter contains large passages from her letters detailing her growing anxiety about achieving good grades and finding enough time to study.

### **Discussion points**

- How does the language of young Jill's letters reveal her 'up and down like a yo-yo' experience of anxiety and depression?
- In the final paragraph of this chapter, the adult Sanguinetti asks 'What was it about me?' How does this rhetorical question foreshadow the 'getting of wisdom' that she articulates in the final chapter?

## 10. Extracurricular Endeavours

Sanguinetti discusses her failed elocution lessons, her disastrous first violin recital and being 'mediocre at sport' (123) before moving on to the competitive culture of the school: 'sporting heroines wore different clothes to distinguish themselves from us lesser mortals' (124). However, she also discusses many of the opportunities to participate in ambitious musical projects with other schools, attend professional recitals and concert series in the city, and participate in debating competitions and writing programs.

### Discussion points

- Closely read William Blake's 'The Tyger' on page 122. Why might this poem have resonated with young Jill while she was at school? And as an adult?
- How do the poems on page 130 and 131 that appeared in MLC's magazine *Silver and Green* add to our understanding of the young Jill's character? Do they reveal things about her that do not come out in her letters?
- The episode at the violin recital is described as a 'night of disgrace' (131). Is that a fair description? In whose opinion was it a disgrace and why?

## 11. Letters to My Father

The chapter outlines young Jill's 'half in jest, half in serious argument' (148) relationship with her father. She also describes his family background and recounts the Sanguinetti family history, including its convict beginnings. Frank Sanguinetti (b. 1913) was raised in Melbourne's working-class inner north followed by bayside Black Rock, by his father, Frank Senior who was a tailor, and his mother Jan, 'a brilliant cook, slightly-scatterbrained, and a raconteur of family adventures and misadventures' (136). A hard-working businessman, Frank loved challenging his children intellectually and naturally modelled virtues such as charity, hospitality, civic-mindedness and tolerance. Frank also served in the navy during World War Two, suffering the effects of post-traumatic stress; Sanguinetti posits that this may have contributed to his occasionally turbulent relationship with Iris and the children. Sanguinetti also describes Frank's contributions to Kyabram and his reputation as a 'skylarker' with a quietly compassionate heart, strong business acumen, emotionally reserved nature and unswerving social conscience.

### Discussion points

- How is Jill's relationship to her father distinct from the one with Iris? Use the letters and anecdotes featured in this chapter to analyse the particular dynamic between Jill and Frank.
- In what way does the photo section enhance your understanding of Frank and his ancestry? How do you think his personal history shaped him as an individual?
- Sanguinetti notes that 'Those were patriarchal times' (142). Do you think Frank is just a 'typical' man of his time? Compare him to the other males we meet in the book.
- 'In his own quiet way, Dad looked after several people in Kyabram' (140). Using examples, describe the way that Frank provided an exemplar of social responsibility to his children.

## 12. The Gift of Girlfriends

This chapter begins with 'Friendships were the essence of boarding-house life' (150). It outlines the positive and negative aspects of the teenage friendships that are established in the boarding house: fights, jealousies and insecurities as well as shared affections, crushes, camaraderie and bonding over petty rule breaking. The boarding house routines and rules, feminism, and the interesting divide between boarders and daygirls is also discussed.

### Discussion points

- 'We hadn't heard of feminism' (159). Would you class young Jill and her friends as feminists even though the term hadn't really entered their vocabulary yet?

- Sanguinetti writes that the ‘moral condemnations’ of being gay in the 50s might ‘have spoiled our ... sharing of affection’ (159). Do you think it would have been possible to come out in the late 50s? What evidence is there in the text to support your view?
- Is there any evidence in this chapter to suggest that despite making friends with a whole range of girls, that young Jill was something of an outcast?

### 13. The Embarrassing Problem of Boys

The chapter follows young Jill’s experience with male–female relationships (romantic and platonic). In particular she reflects on other girls’ dating habits and compares them to her many failed dates and her quest to find ‘a suitable boy’. She also writes candidly about the impact that boys’ lack of interest in her had on her self-image.

#### Discussion points

- Do you get the sense that Jill really wants to find a ‘suitable boy’? Or is it just the social stigma of not dating that she is trying to avoid?
- Dating during this period seems to involve a lot of covert activities to avoid being discovered by adults. Has this changed? Or has this only changed for some parts of our society?
- Who seems to take the more active role in pursuing the opposite gender in this chapter: girls or boys? Is this what you might have expected of 1960?

### 14. The Sisters’ Story

‘The Sisters’ Story’ describes Sanguinetti’s relationship with her younger sister, Margot Sanguinetti (b. 1946, later Rosenbloom) – a ‘fierce rival’ (170). Margot followed Jill to MLC as a boarder in 1960, but never overcame her homesickness and feelings of isolation. She moved out of the boarding house for her Matriculation (Year 12) year. The chapter places a particular focus on Margot’s severe homesickness, the competitive nature of their relationship and issues of control and jealousy between siblings. We also learn a little more about their older brother Richard (Rick) Sanguinetti (b. 1942) who was a boarder at Wesley College in 1957–1960. Jill describes ‘hero worshipping’ (171) Rick and even remarks in reference to his ‘post-school’ transformation that ‘With his snazzy new clothes and characteristic wit, Rick would have made the ideal boyfriend if only he wasn’t my brother’(165). In the endnotes, Jill states ‘We never found Richard’s boarding school letters and he preferred not to have me tell his story on his behalf’. Despite this, there are numerous insights into Rick’s life and his relationship with his family through stories of his dating her friends, visiting her at MLC in his sports car and his persona as her ‘handsome, “cool” older brother’ (164).

#### Discussion points

- Jill initially draws clear contrasts between herself and Margot, seeing her sister as more beautiful, accomplished and socially accepted. Why do you think Jill’s attitude to Margot changes during Margot’s difficult years in the boarding house?
- Why do you think Sanguinetti chose to name the chapter about Margot ‘The Sisters’ Story’? What impact does the article ‘the’ (rather than using ‘my’ or ‘a’) have on our reading of the chapter?
- Do you think the extract from *The Getting of Wisdom* at the start of this chapter refers more accurately to Jill or Margot?
- Can you find evidence in Margot’s letters (in the language Margot uses or the letters’ content) to back up Jill’s assertion that she and Margot were so different?
- In her acknowledgements, Sanguinetti refers to her sister as a ‘true friend and comrade’. Is there evidence in this chapter that their adult relationship might become a strong and supportive one?
- Does Jill succeed in meeting Rick’s request that she not ‘tell his story on his behalf’? Is it possible, in a memoir such as this, for any member of the protagonist’s family to remain a complete mystery to the reader?

## 15. Matriculation: Four Great Teachers

In discussing her final year of school, Sanguinetti explores the highs and lows of being a senior student in the school: not being selected as a prefect; studying hard, especially when she is cold and hungry; her rising anxiety; her enjoyment of creative outlets, especially the Tiddeman House play and music; the growing connection with the other girls in her year and, perhaps most significantly, her teachers. 'It was my community, a community of women in which I felt safe and could express myself' (185). The chapter also provides an interesting profile of each of her Matriculation teachers and the 'absorbing journey' (186) they took her on that year.

### Discussion points

- Is the young Jill's attitude to the adults at MLC different in this chapter? Why do you think this might be the case?
- What does learning about the life stories of the teachers add to our reading of the memoir?
- On page 188 we learn that 'Cerry's gift was that she took us seriously as individuals with something unique to contribute.' Do you think that all of Jill's previous teachers lacked this 'gift' or were there factors that obscured her view of her teachers' positive qualities in the years leading up to Matric? What might these have been?

## 16. Goodbye Old School, We Loved You Well

Jill's school days come to an end with an emotional Speech Day ceremony at the Melbourne Town Hall, following what she describes as a 'mood of abandon bordering on hysteria' (198) as the boarders packed their things.

### Discussion points

- How does this chapter contrast to the tone and content of earlier chapters?
- Dr Wood's Speech Day address is not end-noted with a bibliographic reference. Do you think there can be an absolutely accurate relaying of a speech after 50 years?
- One of the most significant markers in many young people's journey into adulthood these days is receiving their Year 12 results and uni entrance offers. Sanguinetti chooses to cover this moment in one sentence that ends the chapter. Why do you think this is the case?

## 17. Fifty Years On

After recounting some of the dreams she has had while writing her memoir, Sanguinetti makes a return visit to MLC. She finds that 'the old traditions we sang of fifty years ago have indeed faded, to be replaced by new traditions, new kinds of learning and diverse spiritual pathways' (209).

### Discussion points

- Young Jill focuses a lot on how terrible the food was during her boarding house experience. What key differences in amenities and treatment of boarders does Sanguinetti notice upon her return fifty years later?
- How is the tone and style of this chapter different from the chapters about Sanguinetti's teenage experiences?

## 18. The Getting of Wisdom

Sanguinetti starts the final chapter with quotes from *The Getting of Wisdom*, highlighting Laura's sense of leaving school as a 'square peg' who doesn't know she will eventually find the 'right hole', and from TS Eliot's *Four Quartets*: 'And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time' (200). The reader is directly addressed through this chapter, as the lessons of time, learnt through Sanguinetti reflecting on her childhood, are directly articulated.

### Discussion points

- A useful exercise here would be to distil each of the points raised by Sanguinetti in this chapter into a PNI list (positive, negative and interesting).
- How is Sanguinetti's attitude to MLC presented in this chapter? Compare the language she uses to convey different aspects of the school: a 'bastion of privilege' and a 'great school' on the 'cutting edge of social and educational innovation' (217). Has her opinion of the school really being 'terrific and dreadful' changed that much or is it just articulated differently?

## Postscript

This chapter describes some of the difficulties of writing about Sanguinetti's school days and her parents' final years. The author also returns to discuss in a passing manner her experience with depression, and ends with a personal call to action that recalls Dr Wood's dictum: 'From those like me to whom much has been given, a contribution to the struggle for humanity is called for. With not so many years left it's time I got on with it' (224).

## Discussion points

- Many of Sanguinetti's school stories are about the terrible conditions and injustices of her boarding house life, yet the memoir ends with a clear acceptance that she is one to whom 'much has been given' (224). Does this position us to read her complaints about school differently?
- Does the postscript offer us the sense of self-acceptance we might expect from a memoir or a coming-of-age story?

## QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

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### Questions to consider as a class

1. Which do you find the most 'reliable' voice in the memoir? The younger voice in the letters who was in the midst of the experience or the older voice who has time to reflect? Can either see the experiences as they really were?
2. This memoir is not told in chronological order. Why do you think Sanguinetti made the choice to structure her book this way? How does the structure enhance or detract from our reading of the memoir?
3. The voices of young and older Jill use very different language (particularly the slang and types of adjectives). Make a list of the typical or repeated phrases each voice uses and discuss the differences.
4. 'As a young Methodist Christian, I took to heart the teaching of Jesus to "love one another, as I have loved you". To live fully was to live a life of the spirit, to open ourselves to the Grace of God, to receive his love, reflect it to others and to serve those less fortunate than we were' (93). Would you define Jill as a 'Methodist Lady'? What does that term mean? (Consider not just in terms of MLC's name, but in the broader social context of how society defines 'lady' and what it might mean to be a Methodist.)
5. The subtitle of the memoir is 'a journey through girlhood'. Does this suggest that by the end of the book Jill is no longer a girl and she has matured into a woman? Do you think this is the case?
6. Will memoirs like this exist in the future? Discuss the decline of letter writing in today's society and the rise of social media and email. It might not be our parents collecting our correspondence in boxes these days, but many groups and individuals do collect our stories on our behalf. Discuss how companies collecting our data or caching our messages or even 'friends' sending around our texts affects how our stories are being recorded and who will be able to shape, rewrite and tell those stories in the future.
7. Has anything about being at school really changed? There are still a lot of rules to obey and social dynamics to navigate. Discuss the commonality between teenage life then and now.
8. Why do people like to write coming-of-age stories? Who do you think this book's target audience is?
9. A *bildungsroman* is traditionally fictional, but does memoir also have an element of fiction? These stories often end with the protagonist accepting or finding peace with the social

structures or ideas they have been fighting against. Is there a sense of this acquiescence in this memoir?

## Activities

1. Create a timeline of the memoir using quotes from key events in the text.
2. Research one of the contrasting elements of the setting (Kyabram High/MLC, The Goulburn Valley/Kew, expectations of boys/girls in the 50s). Create a visual representation of each to display in the classroom side-by-side.
3. Research teenage life in the 50s with an emphasis on how life might have been different if you were a member of the same gender, ethnicity, religion and socio-economic group 60 years ago.
4. Run a series of round table debates like the ones young Jill participates in at Melbourne High. Start with the topics she mentions then broaden the discussion out to issues from the text.
5. Listen to some of the choral and orchestral pieces that young Jill mentions as having been influential (many of which were written centuries before her birth). Discuss whether we have lost our ability to really connect with music from past eras, and whether we have lost the ability to connect (or at least empathise) with the past entirely. Find a piece of music from before you were born that you connect to, and to write about it. Alternatively, create a short film/animation/artwork/performance to showcase to the class.
6. Make a list of books, films and TV shows that could be considered coming-of-age stories (or more specifically *bildungsroman*), exploring the similarities to and differences from Sanguinetti's memoir.

## Creative writing

1. Write your own letter home, describing and commenting on the events of one of your typical school days this year. Write a reply to that letter, as yourself in 50 years time.
2. Research and write the story of a significant character in the history of your school or your family.
3. Sanguinetti refers to a number of letters written to Dr Wood, which were no doubt very forceful but also rigidly polite, complaining about something at MLC that was unsatisfactory. Write a hypothetical letter to your principal in a courteous but assured manner that campaigns for a specific change in your school.
4. There are a number of ceremonial songs sung at MLC that Sanguinetti provides us with some of the lyrics for. One of these is MLC's school song, 'Lives are in the Making Here'. Write a school song for your school that 'conjures up images of the school's past and future glories' (35).
5. Many of the stories that Sanguinetti tells about other people are told in passing. Choose a story 'with gaps' (for example the story of one of the popular girls who is expelled at the start of chapter 5) and write a short story centred on that event.
6. Rewrite some of young Jill's letters as modern emails or social media messages.

## Essay questions

1. The central message of *School Days of a Methodist Lady* is that 'there is no one true educational story, just a swirl of thoughts, images and stories I tell myself' (15). To what extent do you agree that there is never one 'true' version of an individual's past?
2. Sanguinetti describes MLC as being both 'revolting and terrific' and 'liberating and oppressive' (118). *School Days of a Methodist Lady* demonstrates that you cannot label any part of your life as being purely 'good' or 'bad'; every aspect of human experience will have both a positive and a negative side. Discuss.
3. *School Days of a Methodist Lady* relies on a whole range of other texts to tell its story. Discuss how **either** one novel **or** one poet referred to in the memoir adds to our understanding of Jill's 'journey through girlhood'.
4. *School Days of a Methodist Lady* shows us that no one escapes from the teenage years without some 'baggage'. Do you agree?
5. Sanguinetti states in the postscript that by writing about her parents, she got to know them a lot better and feels 'fresh love' for them, but you cannot really get to know someone better by writing about them after they have died. To what extent do you agree?
6. Sanguinetti refers several times to Dr Wood's maxim: 'From those to whom much has been given, much will be required' (99). Is this an outdated opinion?