

## **BRO** Teachers Notes

Written by Helen Chebatte

Published by Hardie Grant Egmont, February 2016

### **SUMMARY**

At Christian Boys High, everyone hangs with their own, on their own turf. “Fobs” are in the corner near the lunch tables. Behind the science labs is “Rez” turf. The “Ozzies” hang near the canteen area. The middle of the schoolyard belongs to the “Lebs”.

The rules are unspoken and unwritten, but they’re clear: stick with your own kind, don’t dob in your mates or your enemies, respect the family. Never hit on a girl if you know someone else likes her. Above all, be loyal to your best mates, your bros.

Groups fight to prove something, to show loyalty, to take revenge. And recently, unknown to teachers, one of the students has started a fight club where boys fight for fun.

Bro explores what happens when Romeo Makhoul, the narrator, begins to question and break the rules in this world. He’s Australian born, with Lebanese heritage. He eats Lebanese food at home and lasagna from the school canteen. His best friend, his bro, is Aziz Mansoor – Diz for short. At high school, he’s considered Leb.

When Romeo falls in love with Stef, an Ozzie’s ex-girlfriend, he’s forced into a violent world. The fights are racial; they break even the dangerous rules that the teenagers have set for themselves. Romeo sees the danger, but he can’t see an alternative to fighting. Ultimately, his loyalty to his friends and his beliefs about honour, push him towards a day that has tragic consequences for everyone.

*Bro* is an exploration of the divisions that exist not only in this high school, but also in the wider community. Romeo shows us the unspoken rules and borders that exist for teenagers, and what happens when they’re crossed. It’s through his insight that we begin to explore and question ethnic rivalries. It’s through his grief that we begin to see what can happen when we’re brave enough to break the rules society sets.

This text provides an important opportunity for classroom discussion on critical issues – cultural differences and racial tensions, violence and conflict resolution, the effects of social media, immigration, grief, mateship and belonging. The themes lift the discussion beyond the schoolyard. The stage could be anywhere. The drama is universal. With the help of a funny and brutally honest narrator, taboo subjects are laid bare and given an important airing.

*Bro* is a great and devastating story.



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### **About the Author**

Helen Chebatte is a writer, actor and drama teacher living in Sydney. Growing up Syrian-Australian, Helen Chebatte is no stranger to the challenges of fitting in while remaining true to her cultural heritage. Throughout her childhood, Chebatte was fascinated by the eclectic mix of lives and languages existing in the same community. It is this fascination that inspired *Bro*.

### **Reading Journal**

The teenagers in *Bro* face many issues that are particularly relevant to teenagers. As you read *Bro*, keep a journal. Make notes on some or all of the things listed below.

- Your opinion of the issues raised
- Questions you would like to discuss
- Similarities and differences between yourself and the characters
- Predictions about upcoming events

## **PRE-READING ACTIVITIES**

*Bro* is set in the world of an urban Australian high school. Based on the setting, title and cover, make some predictions about the types of conflicts that might arise between the characters.

In *Bro*, there are unwritten, unspoken rules that exist amongst teenagers. Do unspoken rules exist in your high school? What are they? Can you break them? What happens if you do? What factors influence these rules? (Consider such things as gender, culture, economics, fashion, and academic ability).

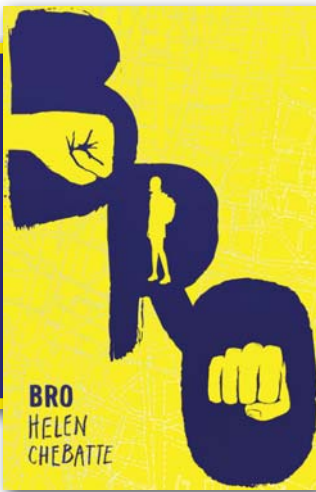
In what ways do these unwritten rules continue after high school?

*Bro* explores the importance of friendship. Write a journal entry about an important friendship in your life. Consider how it has changed you, for better and for worse.

*Bro* explores the many pressures that teenagers face. In pairs, make a list of the pressures you experience. As a class, discuss your lists. What things do you all have in common?

*Bro* explores the different cultural backgrounds that make up Australia. "Google convict bro – everyone comes from somewhere." (p.221) On the board, compile a list of languages and cultures that make up your class.

Make a list of things you love that are from other cultures and countries. (Consider things such as food, music, TV shows, clothes and books.)



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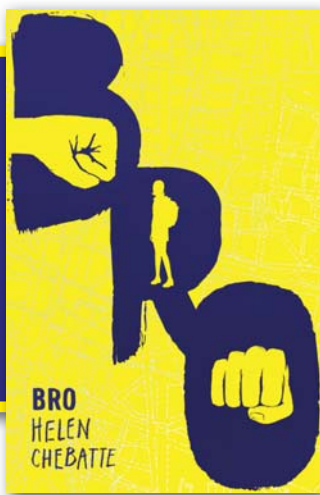
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### **READING ACTIVITIES**

#### **COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS**

1. In Chapter 1, the reader is introduced to Romeo and Diz. Compare and contrast these two characters. Why do you think they make such good friends?
2. 'At our school everyone hangs with their own kind, on their own turf,' Romeo explains in Chapter 2. Describe the groups that exist in Romeo's school.
3. Who does Romeo have a 'thing' for? Who is Luke Palmer? Why doesn't Romeo like him?
4. Why can't Nat openly date Zac?
5. 'You never hit on a girl if you know someone else likes her. It's an unspoken rule.' (p. 10) Do you agree? Why or why not?
6. What is fight club? Who started it? What is Romeo's initial reaction to the club? 'Fight clubs are for show ponies.' (p. 30) Do you agree? Why or why not?
7. What do we learn about Romeo's family in Chapter 4? Why has Romeo 'never been seen as Australian'? How do you see Romeo?
8. In Chapter 5, Romeo arrives at the party wearing a Bob Marley t-shirt. Who is Bob Marley? Where is he from? Why might the author have chosen to dress Romeo in this way?
9. Predict some conflicts that might arise as a result of events at the party.
10. Make a list of the foods that Romeo and Diz eat during the course of the novel. In what way is food symbolic?
11. What is Romeo's attitude to Zac's 'male needs'? (p. 41) What does Romeo reveal about his attitude towards women in Chapter 4?
12. How is life hard for Zac? Why does he feel he can't say no to fighting?
13. Why does Stef decide to break up with Romeo? In what ways is she trapped by expectations, in the same way that Zac is trapped?
14. 'I speak Leb, eat Leb and live Leb. That makes me Leb.' Explain Stef's counter argument to Romeo's statement.

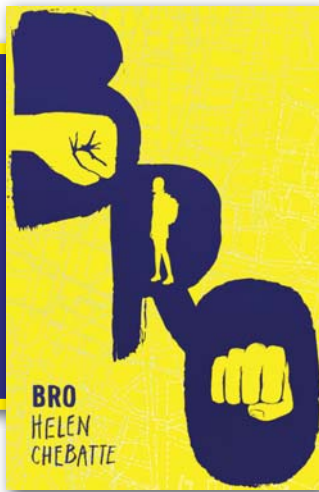


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15. How are teachers presented in the novel? In what ways do they make life harder/easier for students?
16. 'When you do something to someone, it's gonna come back to you,' Diz comments to Romeo on page 62. In what religions is Karma a key concept? Do you believe in Karma? Why or why not?
17. Diz is influenced by a variety of cultures. As you read the novel, make a list of his interests and the culture from which they originate.
18. What does it mean to be dog-shot? List the causes of the fight that occurs in Chapter 12.
19. Why does Romeo feel he has to fight? What alternatives does he have?
20. Make a list of things we learn about Diz in Chapter 14.
21. Why is Romeo uneasy in Chapter 14?
22. At the end of chapter 15, a conversation takes place between Nat and Romeo about ethnicity. Nat is trying to demonstrate to Romeo the absurdity of their ethnic groups because they're all Australian anyway. Discuss what makes one person more Australian than another?
23. What is Romeo's attitude to fight club?
24. What happens to Romeo in Chapter 19 and how does he feel about it?
25. How does Diz react to the dog-shot?
26. 'I know Lebs look out for each other but this is surreal. It's like I'm in a movie or something, and the drama's building with every scene,' Romeo comments on page 117. How is the author building the drama?
27. Make some predictions about where the drama might end.
28. *Bro* explores different ways that people can resolve conflict. How does Romeo resolve his conflict with Stef in Chapter 22? How do Stef and her friends deal with conflict?
29. What is Zac's solution to the conflict between Romeo and Luke?
30. Why does the call over the loud speaker give Romeo the chills?

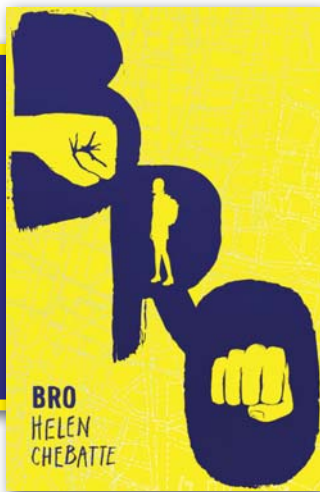


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31. Why is Romeo called to the office in Chapters 24 and 25?
32. How does Mrs Bankovic's behaviour highlight Romeo's dilemma about his identity?
33. In what ways is Romeo starting to challenge the rules in Chapter 27?
34. How does Diz lighten the moment?
35. Chapter 28 shows that Romeo and Stef's relationship has changed since the party. How?
36. How does the tension escalate in Chapter 29? How does Romeo react?
37. What important conclusion does Romeo arrive at in Chapter 30? To what extent do you agree with him?
38. Why is Romeo's dad called to the school?
39. 'If I find out you're involved in a fight club, I will kill you!' Romeo's dad tells him. How is this ironic?
40. How does the fight get out of control? What happens to Diz? Check the predictions you made during reading. Were you right? How was Diz's death foreshadowed in the novel?
41. Write a journal entry where you explore what Romeo has gained and lost by fighting.
42. How does losing Diz change Romeo? How does it change his relationship with his father?
43. How does Diz's death change Luke?
44. What does Romeo do to change the unwritten rules in the school? In what ways does he give Diz's death meaning?
45. Explain the significance of the final chapter.



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### **DEVELOPMENT**

#### **CHARACTERS**

Although Romeo is the central protagonist in the novel, Bro has a well-developed cast of characters. Choose two of the characters below, and fill out character charts for them. Provide a quote and page number for every point you make.

##### **Romeo Makhlouf**

- Physical features:
- Personality traits:
- Cultural background:
- How do his friends see him? His family? Other people in the school?
- How does he relate to other people?
- How do you see Romeo?
- How does other people's perception of him change during the novel?
- How does Romeo change during the novel? What events change him?

##### **Diz (Aziz Mansoor)**

- Physical features:
- Personality traits:
- Cultural background:
- How do his friends see him? His family? Other people in the school?
- How does he relate to other people?
- How do you see Diz?
- Does Diz change over the course of the novel? To what extent is Diz an innocent?

##### **Luke Palmer**

- Physical features:
- Personality traits:
- Cultural background:
- How do his friends see him? His family? Other people in the school?
- How does he relate to other people?
- How do you see Luke?
- How does other people's perception of him change during the novel?
- How does Luke change during the novel? What events change him?



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### **Stef**

- Physical features:
- Personality traits:
- Cultural background:
- How do her friends see her?
- How does she relate to other people?
- How do you see Stef?
- How does other people's perception of her change during the novel?
- How does Stef change during the novel? What events change her?

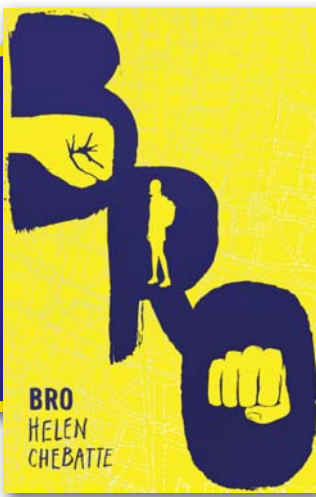
### **CHARACTER ACTIVITY**

During the novel, Romeo feels that his choices are limited. He repeatedly tries to tell his teachers, his father, Stef, and himself, that he has no choice about whether or not to fight.

- What factors limit Romeo's choices?
- Do any of the same factors limit you in your choices? How?
- How and why does Romeo change? Is it just Diz's death that changes him, or are there other factors such as teachers, friends, family and self-exploration?
- To what extent is Romeo to blame for Diz's death? What other factors are responsible for the tragedy?

Imagine you are Romeo at the end of the novel, just before the fight where Diz dies. Assume you have a full knowledge of the events in the novel. Write a speech where you attempt to convince the others not to fight. The only thing you cannot mention is Diz's death.

Choose one character from Bro. Write a monologue in which the character explains how their attitude has changed because of the events they've experienced. Explain what they regret. Your character could reflect on why they wanted to fight, what factors had influenced them to make the choices they had, and how they intend to change.



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### **THEMES**

Helen Chebatte explores many powerful themes through the drama and characters in her novel.

In pairs, choose one theme and find quotes or examples to illustrate your theme. Share your findings with the class.

#### **Racial tension**

"Like most fights at school, it turns racial. It doesn't matter what it is, your background will always cop a hit." (p.84)

#### **Identity**

'...your heritage defines you, whether you like it or not.' (p.9)

#### **Cultural heritage/ The influence of other cultures**

'Teta Josephine is in the kitchen making malfoof.' (p.18)

#### **Stereotypes**

'Why does everyone think if you're an Arab you'll work in construction?' (p.14)

#### **Belonging**

'You're all Australian. No-one's saying forget your heritage, but look around you. You live here, in Australia.' (p.211)

#### **Mateship/friendship**

'So what, bro?' he says, grabbing me in a headlock. "We'll take 'em all on together.' (p.6)

#### **Violence and conflict resolution**

'Anger doesn't serve anyone, Romeo. It never has, it never will. It's born of fear.' (p.228)

#### **Loss/Grief**

'When Mum died, Dad let his hair grow. He wore it in a ponytail for ages, until Teta made him go to the barber. Since then he's never gone back to how he was before.' (p.21)

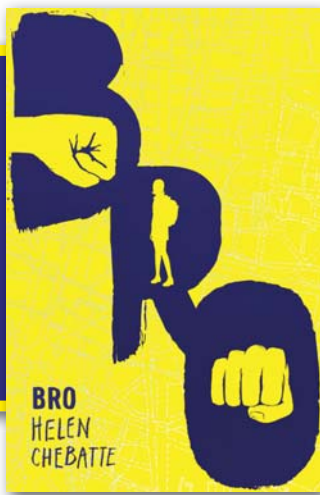
#### **Immigration**

'Not all FOBS are 'fresh off the boat' – I came here by plane...FOP Hahaha.' (p.221)

#### **Gender**

'Romeo, when girls gossip it's nasty. Believe me I know, it happened at my last school.' (p.52)





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### **Family**

'There's something comforting about your grandmother being in the kitchen, cooking for you.' (p.18)

### **Impact of Social Media (Positive and negative)**

'YouTube can make you a hero, or it can expose you as a loser and shame you.' (p.81)

### **Redemption**

'Diz, I will never forget your happy face. Your death will always remind us of what happens when we hate.' (p.217)

## **DISCUSSION / ESSAY TOPICS**

'Fighting is never the answer. Differences can be settled in civilised ways.' (p.91) Discuss this in relation to the events in *Bro*.

Despite the death of Diz, *Bro* is essentially a hopeful novel. Discuss.

The real cultural difference in *Bro* is between girls and boys. Discuss.

How are women presented in the novel? In what ways are they powerful? In what ways do they lack power? Compare and contrast the way the boys and girls deal with conflict in the novel.

Why is fight club such an attractive proposition to some of the boys in the novel? Is it their background? Culture? Is it the influence of popular culture? Peers? Is it their gender?

The male characters in *Bro*, regardless of their cultural background, have much in common. Discuss.

'Sometimes our experiences, though painful, can be helpful. To ourselves and to others.' (p.230) Discuss in relation to *Bro*.

*Bro* is set in a high school, but the themes are relevant for all people, regardless of race or age. Discuss.



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### **EXTENDED ACTIVITIES**

#### **Open Discussion Class**

At the end of *Bro*, Romeo agrees to be part of an open discussion class. Choose one of the following ideas raised in *Bro*, and lead a class discussion on it. Some suggestions have been provided as a guide.

'Anger doesn't serve anyone, Romeo. It never has, it never will. It's born of fear.' (p.230)

- In what ways has anger led to tragedy in our society?
- Do you think anger is a part of human nature? Does it ever serve a purpose? Justify your answer
- What are some more effective and safe ways that people, both teenagers and adults, could deal with this emotion?
- What are some of the official ways we deal with anger on a national and global level?

'Your heritage defines you, whether you like it or not.'

- To what extent do you agree with Romeo?
- Discuss the dangers involved in letting one thing define you.
- Discuss the benefits of a multicultural society.

'Why does everyone think if you're an Arab you'll work in construction?'

- Discuss some other stereotypes that exist in society.
- How are stereotypes dangerous?
- Are they ever useful? Why or why not?
- Why do people use them?
- Discuss times when you have been stereotyped, and how this made you feel.
- How can we combat stereotypes?

'I speak Leb, eat Leb, and live Leb. That makes me Leb.' Do you agree? What, as Stef asks, constitutes an Australian?'

- Is it about where your family is from, or is it about the life you choose to lead?

The adults in Bro all want the fighting to stop. They want the racial tension to stop.

- Do some of the adults in Bro contribute towards these tensions?
- In what ways does our government contribute to these tensions? (Consider the language our leaders use, the policies they have in place.)
- What changes need to be made at a societal level, in order to improve the tensions in high school?



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### **Advertising Campaigns**

Create a social media campaign that encourages young people to deal with anger in a responsible way. Or, Create an advertising campaign that explores what it means to be an Australian.

### **Conflict Resolution**

After Diz's death, Romeo deeply regrets the fight. His teachers, Stef, and his father all tried to stop him. The teachers tried to stop fight club. Why weren't their methods effective? Design a method of conflict resolution that might have worked.

For example, a trial run by students, but presided over by a student-elected teacher? An open discussion class? A talk from a public figure with experience in the negative impact of violence?

### **Visual Texts**

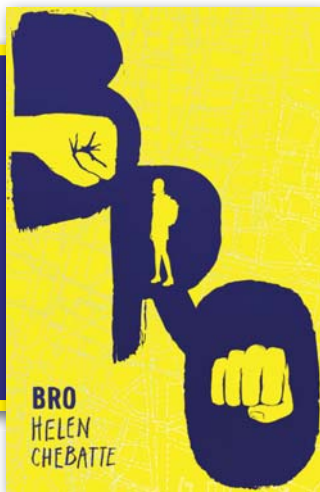
Watch one of the visual texts mentioned at the end of these notes. Make a list of similar themes that arise.

Write a short play where you include some of the themes that are raised in Bro and the visual text. Perform this for the class.

### **Language Variation and Change**

A neologism is a new word or expression or a new meaning of a word. Australian Standard English is a living language. What does this mean? Why does language evolve? Is it important for language to evolve? Why or why not?

- As a class, list some examples of new words or expressions that have entered Standard Australian English in your lifetime (for example, tweet, frenemy).
- In pairs, list some of the neologisms found in Bro. (For example, dice, bro.)
- Create your own urban dictionary where you list some recently invented words, or list some words that should exist, but don't. (For examples of these, see The Meaning of Liff, by Douglas Adams and John Lloyd.)



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### **Comparison Texts**

The following fiction titles may provide some opportunities for comparison studies. Suggested thematic comparisons are provided in brackets.

- *Does My Head Look Big in This?* by Randa Abdel-Fattah, Pan Macmillan Publishers, 2005 (Culture as catalyst for change in behaviour)
- *Jasper Jones* by Craig Silvey, Allen and Unwin, 2009 (Violence as catalyst for change in behaviour)
- *Looking for Alibrandi* by Melina Marchetta, Penguin Books, 1992 (Focus on the place of self in society)
- *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton, Penguin Random House, 1967 (Conflict between rival groups)

### **Film/TV**

*West Side Story* (Ethnic rivalries)

*Summer Heights High* (Conflict between different ethnic groups)

*Heartbreak High* (Conflict from within a single ethnic group)