

*My Sister Sif*  
by Ruth Park  
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University of Queensland Press

## Teachers' Notes

### **SYNOPSIS**

*My Sister Sif* is a fantasy story that unites elements of social realism with environmentalism. Set in a contemporary society, the human world is combined with that of the *sea people* – mermaids and mermen – who are facing enormous challenges to their lifestyle as a result of human negligence.

The feisty protagonist, fourteen-year-old Riko and her sister Sif, are half *sea person*, half human. Both have the ability to communicate with sea creatures, such as whales and dolphins. While being schooled in Sydney, it is Sif in particular who yearns for the ocean, prompting the girls to secretly plot to return home to the island of Rongo.

Once home, Sif falls in love with the *land crab* (human) Henry. Riko becomes fiercely jealous and possessive of her sister. When the *sea people* are forced to flee their beloved island home as a result of environmental damage, Sif is forced to choose between leaving forever with her full blooded mermaid mother and brother or staying with Riko and Henry.

Driving the narrative is the saddening effects on marine ecology of environmental disasters such as nuclear testing, oil spills, ocean mining and global warming. Dolphins and whales, for instance, give birth to disfigured stillborns. Sif too has succumbed to these issues, her lungs becoming incapacitated. This leads to her eventual drowning.

### **THEMES**

#### **Environmental Issues**

- Human environmental disasters such as oil spills, mining, nuclear testing and global warming
- The effects of these disasters on underwater ecosystems and ecology
- Responsibility – we all have to make changes to the way in which we treat our world if it is to survive
- Extinction of species
- Relationships:
  - Riko has a very special bond with her sister Sif and will do anything to protect her. This does however lead to jealousy.
  - Riko has strained relationships with other characters in the story. These are mostly resolved during the story as she matures and processes events:
    - Matira, Riko's mermaid mother who left her at a young age
    - Riko's father, a drunk human, who has died
    - Riko's friend, Pig who is a *menuhene* (little person) living underground. He loves Riko however they have a falling out.
    - Henry, the human scientist who falls in love with Sif who eventually shows Riko that he would never hurt or betray Sif
    - Dockie and Mummy Ti – her human parent figures – who show their strengths and weaknesses through the text
  - Riko has a beautiful bond with the whales and dolphins

## WRITING STYLE

*My Sister Sif* is told in first person, past tense. Ruth Park uses graceful description and erudite vocabulary to recount the events. There is limited direct speech.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ruth Park, one of Australia's well-known and best-loved writers, has written many books for children, including the ever-popular Muddle-Headed Wombat series. Her book for young readers *Playing Beatie Bow* won several international awards, and has been made into a film. *My Sister Sif* was shortlisted for the 1987 CBCA Book of the Year for Older Readers. Ruth Park lives in Sydney.

## AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Ruth was born and grew up in New Zealand and regards herself as an "island person". She is always far more comfortable when she can view the ocean.

Ruth spent some years living on Norfolk Island, in the South Pacific, in the 1970s and her time there increased her awareness of the fragility of island life and the beauty and power of the Pacific and its history.

She has always had an affinity with islands and the sea and ever since she returned from Norfolk she has lived within sight of the Sydney Harbour.

She has written and published many books for children where an island is the setting, such as:

*Come Danger, Come Darkness*

*Nuki and the Sea Serpent*

*The Shaky Island*

*The Sixpenny Island and*

*My Sister Sif*

## STUDY NOTES

### **Environment**

- Complete a case study of marine ecology, examining the implications of global warming on particular ecosystems such as coral reefs, the Antarctic etc
- Examine the food chain of whales. How is this affected by environmental damage?
- Use **DeBono's 6 Thinking Hats** to evaluate an environmental issue such as ocean mining or nuclear testing in the Pacific region
- Investigate a particular environmental disaster and the changes that have been made to global practices and/or laws as a result of this disaster. Consider oil spills, nuclear testing (eg Bikini Atoll) or specific effects of global warming (eg The Great Barrier Reef, Antarctica)
- Debate Japan's cultural right to hunt whales
- Complete a life cycle of a sea creature mentioned in *My Sister Sif* – for example, dolphins, sea snakes, whales
- Investigate the ways in which dolphins and whales communicate.

### **Text Analysis**

- Complete a sociogram showing the relationships that develop between Riko and the other characters in *My Sister Sif* including Sif, Stig, Matira, Pig, Mummy Ti, Dockie and Henry
- Riko matures as the narrative progresses. Discuss how she has changed and what events have led to such changes.

- What do we learn about Sif in the opening chapter of the novel? Does the reader's perception of Sif alter as the story unfolds? Explain.
- Create an illustrated plot line of *My Sister Sif*, outlining major events and developments. This could be done using a software program such as *Inspiration 7* or *Microsoft Word*.
- Design an alternative dust jacket for the novel, complete with an original blurb and review comments
- Author's Chair – have students imagine they are Ruth Park. Other students pose questions they would like to ask of the author about the text.
- The reader learns that Henry has been told about the existence of the *seapeople*. Write this passage suitable for inclusion in the book, including the conversation between Henry and Dockie.
- Imagine you are Henry. Create his yellow journal, selecting 4 or 5 events from the book on which to write journal entries. Include sketches of your observations.
- Write a letter from Sif to Riko about her decision to stay rather than migrate with the other *seapeople*.
- Borrow a shell collection from a local museum or encourage students to bring in shells from home. Make sketches of these shells using watercolour pencils. Use these as stimulus for an underwater creative story.
- Ruth Park describes the habitat of the *Menuhene* people in great detail. Reread the passage/s of their surrounds or of the cave that Pig takes Riko to. Draw this scene.
- Alternatively, draw the underwater city, using descriptions from the text as a guide.
- Explain what Mummy Ti means when she says, "Life it turn and turn, and us with it, like a big wheel." (p215)
- Discuss how Stig convinces Riko that she has a responsibility to help the *landcrabs* to make significant changes to their lifestyles. What message is the author giving to her audience?
- How do you think Riko coped with the death of her sister, Sif? Give reasons to support your answer.