

# The Good Daughter

Amra Pajalic

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Recommended for Secondary

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## Praise

'Funny, sharp and insightful.' **Simmons Howell**

'A raw and honest story about duty and the desire to run free.' **Melina Marchetta**

'I love *The Good Daughter*. It had me in stitches. Hilarious, poignant, gutsy and real.' **Randa Abdel-Fattah**

## Synopsis

Sabiha Omerovic, born to Bosnian-Muslim parents, struggles with an identity that is in flux. As the novel opens Sabiha and her mother have already moved from Melbourne's inner suburbs to St Albans. They are 'embracing [their] ethnic roots' and she is transformed from 'Sammie', the anglicised name she chose for herself, back to Sabiha. Sabiha is an outsider in her own community and must learn new ways of behaving.

Sabiha's grandfather, Dido, with whom they live, represents old-world values and the inability to accept the new ways of living embraced by the Australian-born generation. He is also undergoing his own personal struggle as he attempts to reconnect with Islam after long-held loyalty to Communist values.

As well as negotiating Dido's demands, Sabiha must also come to terms with her mother's illness and her impending relapse. School serves as nothing more than a respite from problems at home but even in her social circle she can't entirely relax as she finds friendships and relationships difficult. While she has formed a tight friendship with two boys, Brian and Jesse, who also act as her protectors from bullies, she is still caught up in her old friendships in the city with Kathleen and Shelley. Through her interactions with the girls, as well as with her new friends in the western suburbs, Sabiha must ultimately discover the meaning of true friendship.

Sabiha is infatuated with Brian but blind to Jesse—the voracious reader and social isolate—who is attracted to her, inadvertently creating a love triangle which she completely misinterprets. The gritty denouement to this plotline shows teenage sexuality played out in realistic terms. Pajalic's edgy conclusion to each character's romantic longings is sure to intrigue readers but the author provides a moral counterpoint in showing that actions have emotional consequences.

*The Good Daughter* is a coming-of-age novel which deals with cultural identity, mental illness, family and friendship, and teenage sexuality. Whilst written with a light and comic touch there is much for students to explore.

## About the Author

Amra Pajalic was born in 1977. *The Good Daughter* is her first novel. It was shortlisted in the 2007 Victorian Premier's Award for an Unpublished Manuscript by an Emerging Writer and was chosen as a finalist in the 2009 Melbourne Prize for Literature Best Writing Award. *The Good Daughter* won the 2009 Melbourne Prize for Literature Civic Choice Award. Amra lives in St Albans in Melbourne's western suburbs with her husband, daughter and three cats.

Visit [www.amrapajalic.com](http://www.amrapajalic.com).

## Author Statement

As a high school student I was always reading, but there seemed to be no books that represented my story about growing up. I'm talking about coming from the Western suburbs of Melbourne. About being from a migrant background and the family expectations placed on you to be a good wog girl, while at heart being Aussie and wanting to break out of this mould. So I wrote *The Good*

*Daughter* for myself and for teenagers like me so they have something to read that speaks to their experiences and that will inspire them to fight for their 'outlandish' dreams.

### Reading Journal

As you read *The Good Daughter* keep a journal or blog in which you:

- make predictions about upcoming events
- list questions you would like to discuss
- write about your opinions of the issues raised and the characters' actions.

### Pre-reading Activities

1. Look at the cover. Make some predictions about what you think this book will be about. Do the title and cover image suggest different things?
2. Amra Pajalic's novel is titled *The Good Daughter*. What do you think makes a 'good' daughter or son?
3. Make a list of things that are most important to your parents. Make another list of things that are most important to you. Are there differences? If so, how do these differences affect your relationship with your parents?
4. What makes a true friend? List the most important qualities to have in a friend.
5. Write a journal entry about a time a friend betrayed you. Write another entry about a time a friend supported you.
6. In pairs or small groups create a definition for the word 'identity'. What elements create a person's identity? Can someone's identity change over time or is it fixed?
7. What do you think makes up your identity at this point in time? Write a list or short explanation.
8. In *The Good Daughter*, Sabiha rebels against her mother and grandfather's insistence she adopt Bosnian cultural practices. Is there anything you have rebelled against and why?
9. Make a list of things teenagers sometimes do because of peer pressure.
10. Sabiha and Jesse love reading and enjoy recommending books to each other. Write a list of 5 books you would recommend to a good friend. Explain the reasons for your choices.
11. Write all the things you know about Muslim people. Re-visit this list after you read the book and again after you do Research Task 1 and/or 2. Have your views changed? What have you learned?

### Reading Activities and Essay Topics

1. As you read the novel, compare and contrast yourself with the main characters. Which one do you most identify with and why?
2. The opening scene of the novel shows a conflict between Sabiha and her mother over a dress. What does this scene reveal about Sabiha's character? What does it also reveal about her relationship with her mother?
3. On page 5, Sabiha explains: 'For years I'd called myself Sammie...' Make a list of reasons people change their names. Why did Sabiha change her name to Sammie and why did she change it back?
4. On page 8 Sabiha says: 'If you say you're Muslim most people assume the stereotype of the turban-wearing, bearded Arab man or the hijab-wearing, subjugated Arab woman'. Why does Sabiha say this stereotype is wrong?
5. 'Most of the Bosnians...freaked out when they heard that Mum was bipolar.' (p.18). As you read the novel track people's reactions to Bahra's illness.
6. Sabiha only gradually discovers information about her mother's mental illness and we, as readers, make these discoveries with her. When you have finished the novel go back and find where the author has given clues about (or foreshadowed) Bahra's impending breakdown.
7. Why does Bahra give Sabiha the pita-making lesson? (p.36) Why does Sabiha react the way she does to Dido's comment?
8. '[We] were supposed to be one happy triangle.' (p.36) Explain Sabiha's frustration with the situation between herself, Kathleen and Shelley. Do you think Sabiha is being reasonable? Why? Why not?
9. 'That woman would never have confided in Kathleen.' (p.62) Why not? How do you think people's appearances affect the way others treat them? Can assumptions be made about people from their appearances? Why? Why not?
10. After being attacked by the twins Sabiha says, 'I'm such a loser' (p.87). She believes she is alone in her experience of being bullied until Brian and Jesse reveal they have also been victims. List the different kinds of behaviour that can be described as bullying.
11. Adnan describes 'The Price is Right' as 'the only show for wogs' (p.99). What reasons does he give? This passage is written in a humorous way but has a serious point. Are there any other elements of Australian society that immigrants from non-English-speaking countries may find challenging?
12. Sabiha says, 'I was in no-man's-land. To the Aussies I was Bosnian, to the Bosnians I was Aussie' (p.99). Why does Sabiha feel like this?
13. At parent-teacher interview time Sabiha tells Brian, 'My Mum never comes...' (p.109). How does she feel

- about this? Why do you think Bahra doesn't attend Sabiha's interviews? List as many different reasons as you can.
14. On page 111, we discover that Adnan's mum and sister are the breadwinners of his family because his father can't work. All the teenagers in the novel have difficult family situations. As you read, make notes about the difficulties the following characters face in their families: Sabiha, Brian, Jesse, Adnan, Dina, Gemma, Shelley, Kathleen.
  15. When Sabiha and Adnan visit Brian's house Sabiha says, 'It felt weird wearing shoes in the house' (p.116). What customs or rules does your household have that may be different from other families'?
  16. Explain Adnan's interest in circumcision (p.117). How were Bosnian-Muslims treated in the former Yugoslavia?
  17. Dido says of Sabiha's mum: 'If she marries [Safet] she'll be with a Muslim. She would have stability and respect' (p.130). Explain why Dido thinks these things are important for Bahra. How does Sabiha feel about this?
  18. Sabiha accuses Adnan of turning everything into a 'bargaining match' (p.135) yet Sabiha often bargains with her mother to get her way. She also catches Adnan reading her diary but Sabiha is secretly reading her mother's old love letters (p.138). Have you ever acted in contradictory ways? Write a journal entry about a time where your actions contradicted your beliefs. Why did you do this? What did you learn from this?
  19. On page 138, Sabiha complains: 'I served Dido...I played the good daughter...what did I get in return?' Does Sabiha get anything in return for the things she does? Write a journal entry about a time you did something out of obligation or duty. Explain why you did it.
  20. What does Sabiha know about her father? (p.140)
  21. Why does Sabiha put salt in the coffee? (p.141–3) Do you think she was right to do this? Why? Why not?
  22. What is a 'war of attrition'? (p.146) Have you ever conducted a 'war' like this? Explain.
  23. When Sabiha catches her mother in a compromising position with Safet her mother explains her mistake by saying, 'All the days blur together' (p.145). Why do you think she feels this way?
  24. 'Dina...was living a double-life.' (p.153) As you read though the novel make a list of all the characters who are living a 'double-life'. Explain what they're hiding and why.
  25. Sabiha explains her mum's relationship with old boyfriend Darko as 'pretty much the same as your Romeo and Juliet scenario' (p.155). Explain how Bahra and Darko's situation is similar to the Romeo and Juliet story.
  26. Bahra explains why she didn't marry her Serbian boyfriend: 'What would have happened to my children? To be half and half with their loyalties torn.' (p.156) Has Bahra avoided this situation? How does Sabiha feel about her mother's statement?
  27. Both Sabiha and Jesse refuse to bow to peer-pressure when others are smoking (p.162). List other ways in which these two are similar.
  28. Many characters in this novel have negative sexual experiences (p.167–8). Why do you think this is?
  29. 'It was pathetic to see her bending over backwards to be the good mother in front of her family.' (p.169). How does Bahra try to be a 'good mother'? How has she failed in the past in the eyes of her family?
  30. Read the exchange between Sabiha and Kathleen (p.176–9). Who is right? Or have they both betrayed each other? Explain your opinion.
  31. 'We'd promised each other to be best friends for life.' (p.178) List some of the reasons friendships end. Do you think the end of some friendships is inevitable?
  32. 'Grown-up parties [are] overrated.' (p.181) Why does Sabiha believe this?
  33. Sabiha says about Brian: 'I was so confused: I wanted him to like me but I...wasn't sure exactly what I meant by that.' (p.184) What is Sabiha confused about?
  34. 'When you have a Mum like mine, public embarrassment is a waste of emotion.' (p.193) What does Sabiha mean?
  35. 'No, you're cool Sabiha. Because you don't give a shit about what those idiots think of you.' (p.194) What is the accepted definition of 'cool' in your school or friendship group? What is your definition of 'cool'? Are there any differences? What kinds of things do you think should be seen as cool?
  36. Sabiha's publication success is overshadowed by Adnan's TV appearance (p.199–200). How does she feel about this?
  37. 'She'll make an excellent wife.' (p.205) What is Suada's definition of 'excellent wife'? What is your reaction to her views?
  38. 'Her willingness to do anything that manoeuvred me with a Bosnian was scary.' (p.223) Why does Sabiha's mother think it so important to mix with Bosnian boys?
  39. On page 232, Sabiha describes her mother's violence as being out of character. What does it signify?
  40. In the chapter titled 'the alien invasion' (p.235) what does Sabiha discover about Frankie's boyfriend and Shelley's cousins?
  41. What do Jesse's handouts reveal to Sabiha and what effect does this information have on her? (p.246)
  42. Jesse explains: '...people who come from overseas don't know how to translate the jargon.' (p.248) What other kinds of challenges do non-English-speaking immigrants encounter in everyday life?

43. On page 256, Sabiha meets Jesse's mum for the first time. Describe her.
44. Sabiha observes: 'Jesse's whole body was a portrait in pleading' (p.256). What does this mean?
45. Sabiha explains why she wants to drink alcohol: 'I wanted to forget all the betrayals and all the things I'd stuffed up.' (p.262) Describe what happens when Sabiha gets drunk. Do you think she feels better or worse? Why?
46. When Sabiha discovers Brian and Adnan she was taken by surprise. (p.277) Why do you think she missed all the clues?
47. Sabiha says: 'I wanted to return to my state of innocence' (p.280). Describe a time you felt like this.
48. What happens in the chapter titled 'what comes around, goes around' (p.278) to further contribute to Bahra's breakdown?
49. The title of the last chapter is a common saying: to err is human, to forgive divine (p.299). What does this mean? How does it relate to what happens in this chapter?
50. On the last page Sabiha realises: 'Since we'd moved to St Albans I'd spent all my time complaining about what I'd left behind, and hadn't noticed what I'd gained.' What has Sabiha gained?

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### Creative Writing Activities

1. Re-write a crucial scene in the book from the point of view of another character: Bahra, Dido, Brian, Jesse, Adnan, Dina or Kathleen.
2. Write a letter from Bahra to Sabiha explaining some of her decisions and actions.
3. In the novel Jesse writes a short story which is 'a string of vignettes, scenes from the perspective of a high school student' (p.113). Write your own story comprising of vignettes about student or family life.
4. Imagine what happens when Sabiha visits her mother at the end of the novel. Write the scene. Include direct speech.
5. Write a short piece which shows a character of your invention living a double-life.
6. Write a story about a teenager trying, and failing, to be a 'good' daughter or 'good' son.

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### Research Questions

In pairs or small groups research one of the following and report back to class:

1. Bosnian-Muslim traditions and customs
2. Muslim traditions and customs from a range of countries around the world
3. Yugoslav wars (1991–1995) and immigration
4. Bipolar disorder
5. Hypothyroidism

6. Romani people ('gypsies')
7. Historical, religious and cultural reasons for circumcision
8. Voiceworks magazine contact and submission details. Submit a short story or poem.

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### Debate Topics

Use evidence from the novel, as well as wider research, to support your arguments.

- Friendship has a use-by date
- Teenagers should do everything their parents ask them to do
- 'You can only be friends with your own kind' (p.274)
- It is necessary to lead a double-life in order to be accepted by others
- The most important factors to consider in choosing a marriage partner are stability and the respect of others (p.130)
- Stereotypes are always true
- Tradition and cultural heritage are not relevant to this generation
- Family is everything
- Having a sense of belonging is essential in forming an identity
- Women should be respected regardless of how they look (p.105)
- Students in Australia take pride in mediocrity (p.110)
- Teenagers have to submit to peer pressure to be cool

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### Drama Activities

- Choose a character from the following list: Bahra, Dido, Brian, Jesse, Adnan, Dina, Kathleen, Shelley. Write and deliver a monologue from their perspective. Use props and costume.
- Enact an interview-style TV show where the characters are questioned by the presenter about their actions, feelings and motivations.