

Rosie's Secret

A STUDY GUIDE



FOR THE TEACHER

INTRODUCTION

This study guide accompanies the film *Rosie's Secret* directed by Lisa Matthews. Although the film can be used effectively in the teaching of various curriculum areas in the secondary school, this guide has been written specifically for teachers and students of History, Years 7-12. The guide provides background materials on the central themes and issues explored in the film, together with a range of student activities intended to promote analysis and debate. *Rosie's Secret* is an excellent teaching resource for the history classroom. It examines the nature and making of history and raises central questions about the frequently overlooked role that women have played in initiating and shaping historical events.

Establishing the context of *Rosie's Secret*

Lisa Matthews pursues these concerns through an examination of the events surrounding the opening of the Harbour Bridge, 19 March 1932. The tale she weaves of these events is a very different version to that told by historians in 'standard' accounts of Australian history.

History texts tell us that Captain F.E. de Groot, member of an extreme right-wing organisation known as the New Guard, was the first to slash the ribbon with his sword, preventing the NSW Premier Jack Lang from claiming that title. The New Guard had been formed in January 1932 under Eric Campbell as a reaction to the policies of Lang's Labor Government. It aimed to counter communism and suppress disloyalty to the British Empire. On cutting the ribbon de Groot was reported to have shouted, 'On behalf of decent and loyal citizens of New South Wales, I now declare this bridge open'. History records that de Groot was then dragged from his horse by the Acting Police Commissioner W.J. MacKay and tossed to the ground. De Groot was subsequently tried and fined five pounds for his actions. By 1935 the New Guard had become inactive.

Commonly agreed upon accounts such as these become the 'facts' of history. As the story is handed from historian to historian consensus is arrived at as to where the action took place, who was involved and the sequence of events. While historians may 'fiddle' with various interpretations of why the event occurred and its outcomes, few question the facts concerning the incident itself. However, in *Rosie's Secret*, Lisa Matthews sets about challenging accepted views of the past by constructing an alternative story about the opening of the Harbour Bridge. Rosie Foster replaces de Groot as the first to cut the celebratory ribbon. The documentary approach with reference to eye-witness testimony and supporting pictorial and oral evidence builds a convincing case for the veracity of this 'other' version. Matthews deliberately 'misleads' or dupes the viewer into believing her story. In doing this, she makes an important statement about the power of those who construct and control the telling of history and the very nature of history itself.

Issues in *Rosie's Secret*

In the making of *Rosie's Secret*, Matthews poses a series of provocative questions about history:

- What is history? In what ways, if any, are myth and history similar? In what ways are they different? Should the word history be abandoned and replaced with 'mythistory'?
- Who tells history and for what purposes? What role does the historian have in recording and constructing history? To what extent do historians control the telling of history? Are there others who have vested interests and power to promote particular versions of the past? Who and for what purposes?
- How is history constructed? How do historians and others go about constructing history? How do they give authority to their versions of the past? How do these constructions mould our views about the past?

In examining these questions, the filmmaker looks at issues of historical accuracy, the reliability of sources and the potential for individuals and groups to manipulate and create versions of events to service personal ends. As the past has gone, no historical account can be verified or checked against the event or circumstances themselves, only against the accounts of historians and others. History depends on the eyes, ears and voice of an interpreter to mediate between past and present. Where the telling of an incident has been heavily edited at its very source, where individuals have been omitted and evidence has been hidden, then any subsequent account of that incident will be based on an illusion, on a false image of what may have occurred. In these instances history does become myth, a story without without real foundation - but a powerful piece of fiction.

Mixed with these questions on the presentation and processes of history, *Rosie's Secret* raises significant questions related to the representation of women in history. Where are the hidden women in history? Who are they? What has been their contribution to history? Although women have been active participants and initiators of change, in a society where history has been defined by male historians, their presence and agency have been 'airbrushed' out of the picture.

FOR THE STUDENT

BEFORE VIEWING THE FILM...

Discuss

- Working in groups or with a partner write a brief definition of the terms history and myth. Discuss some of the myths you have either read or heard about. Compare these stories with accounts of historical events with which you are familiar. What qualities or features do these myths and historical events have in common? How are they be different?

- Working in groups discuss how historians and others find out about past events and circumstances. The following questions may help you with this task:

- What sources do historians and others use to gain information about the past?

- How do they test the reliability of these sources?

- Frequently historians and others work with incomplete evidence.

Sources are often missing or unavailable for scrutiny. How are sources lost? Why might some sources be 'misplaced' or hidden? How might these circumstances affect the representation of an event?

Investigate

- What is a documentary? List the features of a documentary. How is it different to other filmic forms? Why is the documentary frequently used to investigate historical issues and events? What types of individuals appear in documentaries? What techniques are used by the makers of documentaries to explore an issue or situation?

- Working in groups or with a partner, compile a list of reasons or arguments to explain why women have been excluded from the telling of history. What other groups or individuals have been hidden from view? Why?

Research

- Research the events surrounding the opening of the Harbour Bridge in 1932. Who were the following - J.T. Lang? Captain de Groote? W.J. MacKay? The New Guard? According to standard accounts of that incident, what part did each play in the famous cutting of the ribbon incident? What happened to de Groote and the New Guard after the events of 19 March?



After viewing the film

- What was Rosie's secret? Why did Rosie's story remain a secret for so long? Briefly outline her story. How is Rosie's version different to the de Groote story? What alternative view of Australian history does Rosie's story offer? What steps or procedures would you follow to determine the veracity or truthfulness of each of these stories?

- This film presents an argument and like many documentaries uses evidence to support that argument. The evidence may be visual, oral, written and/or material. Often documentaries call on the testimony of eye-witnesses and draw on the evidence provided by experts and authorities to convince the viewer of the 'truthfulness' of the case presented. What sources of evidence does Lisa Matthews use to construct this 'fictional' documentary?



- How does the film attempt to establish the 'truthfulness' of the events it related? What techniques or devices does the film maker use to do this?

- What are the filmmaker's purposes in presenting this story? What point is being made about the recording and telling of history? about the place of women in history? And about the ways in which individuals and groups may tamper with or subvert the telling of history?

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Rosie's Secret is available for purchase
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