



**Author: SARAH LUKE**  
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### Blurb

Marion's life is anything but ordinary. The daughter of the principal, Captain Neitenstein, she is the only girl aboard a magnificent floating boys' school, anchored permanently in Sydney Harbour in the late 1800s. Her best friend has boarded a steamship to France and now it's just her and this ship full of ragtag schoolboys. One night, Marion discovers that a new student, Alexander Walker, is escaping the ship to meet up with his vicious gang, the Forty Thieves. Marion bravely follows Walker into the frightening Rocks slum to investigate ...

What are the Forty Thieves up to and will Marion be able to stop them before it's too late?

Discover what life was like for kids on the mean streets of Sydney's Rocks in this rollicking adventure, featuring real people and places from Australian history.

### About the Creator

Sarah Luke is a teacher and historian. She likes researching in archives, where she tries to read old loopy handwriting and search through boxes of dog-eared photographs as inspiration for her books. Sometimes she finds a lot of information about people from the past and writes non-fiction books about them. At other times she is inspired to write historical fiction stories, so that people who merely ghost through archives also have a chance to be remembered. Sarah likes exploring old places in Sydney—particularly sandstone palaces and mossy, dark graveyards. *Marion and the Forty Thieves* is her first children's book.

## *Marion and the Forty Thieves* Teachers' Notes

Recommended for: Grades 3-6

### About *Marion and the Forty Thieves*

*Marion and the Forty Thieves* is a novel that blends history with fiction. It tells the story of a real girl from nineteenth-century Sydney, Marion Neitenstein (pronounced 'Nay-ten-shtain'; Marion is the girl pictured on the right, wearing a hat). Marion was the only daughter of Frederick William Neitenstein, the Captain of the Nautical School Ship *Sobraon* (pronounced 'Sa-brawn', and pictured below).

The Nautical School Ships *Vernon* and *Sobraon* were industrial schools, set up by the NSW colonial government in 1866, to help break the circle of juvenile criminality across NSW. The ship-board institutions lasted until 1911. Under NSW's 1866 *Industrial Schools Act*, children under sixteen who were homeless, school truants, jobless or who were not being cared for by their parents could be arrested for these 'crimes' and sent to an industrial school. Girls went to a land-based institution (which moved from Newcastle, to Cockatoo Island, to Parramatta) and, from 1892, boys went to the *Sobraon* (after the *Vernon* had been decommissioned). Like the *Vernon* had been, the *Sobraon* was permanently anchored at Cockatoo Island on the Parramatta River.

Marion lived on board the *Sobraon*, which was essentially a floating boarding school, with her mother and father. In addition, the (approximately) three hundred boys lived a regulated life: they attended school lessons, maintained their ship, and spent their recreation hours playing sports and tending to their pets on Cockatoo Island, as well as reading in the library. After about a year on board, boys were apprenticed out in rural NSW, until they turned eighteen. They often went to farms, and the money they earned during their apprenticeships was given to them upon reaching adulthood. Marion, in comparison, spent about sixteen continuous years on the ship, as it was her home.

There is very little archival material that relates directly to the real Marion. As a result, *Marion and the Forty Thieves* imagines what Marion's life might have been like, by contextualising her within nineteenth-century Sydney. In the novel she meets many real people (including café owner and eccentric Quong Tart, as well as the fearsome Joseph Bragg, leader of the Forty Thieves gang) who are based on detailed archival research carried out by Sarah Luke as part of her work as a historian. Luke's main sources for *Marion and the Forty Thieves* were the administration records of the Nautical School Ships, old letters, archival photographs (which have been included in the novel), old newspaper articles and diaries. *Marion and the Forty Thieves* explores themes such as the importance of belonging, the ability of friendship to inspire courage, and the power of persistence.



### BEFORE YOU READ

#### Visual Literacy

Students look at the archival photographs throughout the novel and brainstorm:

- What do you see?
- What questions do you have?

Using the images, students describe what life was like in nineteenth-century Sydney. They consider: how might Marion's life have been different to the *Sobraon* boys' lives?

### AS YOU READ

#### Spelling Words

- |                   |                     |
|-------------------|---------------------|
| 1. <i>Sobraon</i> | 11. Muster          |
| 2. Industrial     | 12. Apprentice      |
| 3. Neitenstein    | 13. Precarious      |
| 4. Captain        | 14. Inkblot         |
| 5. Milliner       | 15. Cutters (boats) |
| 6. Urchin         | 16. Gangway         |
| 7. Kerosene       | 17. Lieutenant      |
| 8. Vagabond       | 18. Stowaway        |
| 9. Parlour        | 19. Whistle         |
| 10. Starched      | 20. Ingenious       |

#### Analytical Character Profiles

For each character, answer the following questions at the start, middle and end of the novel:

1. Describe what the character looks like
2. Explain what the character values
3. Explain what the character desires
4. Predict what might happen to the character next

Explain how this character is characterised by Luke. For example, are there particular stylistic techniques used to describe this person, or used when they speak?

Students should focus on the following, updating their profiles as the story progresses: Marion, Captain Neitenstein ('Dutchy'), Alexander Walker, Henry Edwards, Joseph Bragg, and Mrs Crosscapel.

#### Themes

Track the following themes through the novel:

The importance of belonging

- Marion begins the novel very lonely and isolated, but forges connections with Henry Edwards and, later, Alexander Walker
- Walker refuses for the first half of the novel to consider himself a '*Sobraon* boy' as he continues to work undercover for the Forty Thieves; this changes when he and Marion are directly threatened by Bragg
- *Sobraon* boys band together to bury Henry as a '*Sobraon* boy'

The ability of friendship to inspire courage

- Marion's bravery in following Walker to the Rocks inspires him to switch allegiance
- Marion, Henry and Walker work together to foil Bragg
- Mr Inglis does not support Captain Neitenstein, and therefore does not inspire courage and resilience

The power of persistence

- Marion works hard to save her father's job, and the ship, despite difficulties
- Mrs Crosscapel is not intimidated by Bragg and continues to search for her son
- The Forty Thieves, and Bragg, persist in their plans to destroy the school

#### Literary Allusions and Intertextuality

*Marion and the Forty Thieves* contains subtle references to other texts (these are called literary allusions or intertextuality). Students read/research the following and make connections between them and *Marion and the Forty Thieves*.

- '*Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*' (Arabian Nights)
- Henry Lawson's poem '*Captain of the Push*' (1892)
- Banjo Paterson, '*In Push Society*', in *An Outback Marriage* (1906)

- Arthur Ferres, '*Jim the Vernon Boy*' (1896). Available through a TROVE newspaper search and via the NLA's catalogue

Connections might include:

- Morals and themes
- Perspective and purpose
- Stylistic techniques (e.g. imagery, characterisation, tone)

#### Historical Accuracy

Quong Tart was an important figure in nineteenth-century Sydney. In July 2023 he was honoured with a Blue Plaque in Ashfield where he lived until his death in 1903. Read about him [here](#) and in a [newspaper article from 1886](#) (supplied by the NLA). Students evaluate his representation in *Marion and the Forty Thieves*. Is his characterisation by Luke consistent with his real personality?

Students read Luke's description of '[A day in the life of a Vernon boy](#)'. Students evaluate Luke's representation of daily life for these boys in *Marion and the Forty Thieves*.

#### Creative Writing

1. Students choose a moment from the novel and re-write it from a different character's perspective. They might like to rewrite Chapter Six from Quong Tart's perspective or Chapter Nineteen from Captain Neitenstein's perspective. CHALLENGE: use some of the same literary techniques used to characterise them from the novel.
2. Students write a scene that is 'missing' from the novel. For example, they might like to write a narrative about exactly what Walker gets up to while Quong Tart is giving his Lantern Talk on the ship, or what Henry Edwards' life was like before he was brought onto the *Sobraon*.
3. Students create their own *Sobraon* boy, from scratch, using one of the group photographs in the novel as inspiration. CHALLENGE: make some literary allusions to other texts.



#### Australian Curriculum Links

##### Subjects:

English  
History

##### General Capabilities:

Literacy  
Critical and creative thinking  
Personal and social capability  
Ethical understanding  
Intercultural understanding

##### Cross Curriculum Priorities:

Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia

#### Further Reading

##### FOR STUDENTS

Sarah Luke, 'A day in the life of a Vernon boy', (*Traces* magazine blog, 2020)

Stephanie Owen Reeder, *Marvellous Miss May, Queen of the Circus* (NLA, 2018)

Ethel Turner, *Seven Little Australians* (NLA, 2005)

Ruth Park, *Playing Beatie Bow* (1980)

##### FOR TEACHERS

Sarah Luke, 'Ghostly Girls' in Paul Ashton (ed), *If It's Not True It Should Be: Writing Creative Non-fiction History for Children and Adults* (Halstead Press, 2023)

Sarah Luke, *Like a Wicked Noah's Ark: The Nautical School Ships Vernon and Sobraon* (Arcadia, 2020)

#### External Links: Historical Accuracy

<https://blueplaques.nsw.gov.au/blue-plaques/locations/quong-tart>

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/71066490>

<https://tracesmagazine.com.au/2020/12/a-day-in-the-life-of-a-vernon-boy/>

#### Image Credits

MHNSW-StAC: NRS-4481-2-[4/8624]-809 *Recreation Ground N.S.S. [Nautical School Ship] Sobraon*, Sydney, Museum of History NSW

MHNSW-StAC: NRS-4481-3-[7/16268]-St1095 *Sobraon Near Cockatoo Island N.S.S. [Nautical School Ship]*, Museum of History NSW

MHNSW-StAC: NRS-4481-2-[4/8664]-1615 *Naval Officers and Cadets N.S.S. [Nautical School Ship] Sobraon*, Sydney, Museum of History NSW