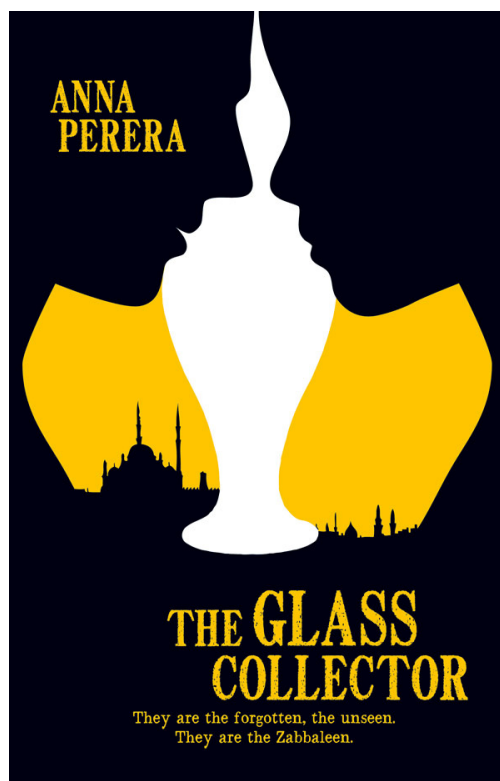


# THE GLASS COLLECTOR

By Anna Perera

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## Teacher's Notes by Dr Pam MacIntyre

### Summary

This is a story of harshness and deprivation that will shock many young readers in comfortable, affluent parts of Australia. And so it should. Everyone in the story is working hard to make enough money in order to survive and there is little to share—even in terms of comfort, support and friendship—for fifteen-year-old Aaron at the beginning of his story.

The setting is present day Cairo and for the duration of the story we live among the Zabbaleen people—Coptic Christians who collect three quarters of the city's rubbish, and recycle eighty percent of it. Despite the conditions under which they live, and their poverty, the Zabbaleens are a proud and ethical people whose creed is 'Strive to do your best even in the worst conditions. Don't steal. Don't harm. Don't lie' (p127). This novel takes us on a journey of growth and self-knowledge with Aaron as he comes to understand his world and his place in it.

The author paints an evocative picture of the metropolis of Cairo in all its diversity, from the affluent shopping precincts, crowded, traffic-filled streets, to the area called Mokattam, where Aaron and the other Zabbaleen live. On page 6 we are told 'It's normal in Cairo – this city of magic and ancient mysteries – for rich and poor to stand side by side, to share the same doorways and buildings, the same streets, without ever really seeing each other.' A lasting impression is of the lack of infrastructure and social welfare for its poorest people.

While this is a confronting story, Perera lets the details speak for themselves. She also makes the story and world accessible to readers through her resilient central character, Aaron. He is no long-suffering paragon, but a flesh and blood boy who is dealt with harshly by circumstances until eventually fate lends him a hand. While the story will initially shock young readers, the author eventually moves them to a more challenging place. When they have read the conclusion, they might well have their world view changed profoundly. Are the values of their affluent society universally held? What can we learn from Aaron's Zabbaleen community? Might our initial reactions be superficial? This story takes readers on a personal and social journey that will leave few unengaged with fundamental ideas of what makes a good society.

## **Characters**

This story is all about characters—the people who make up the part of the Zabbaleen community that is focused on in this story—and they are vividly created, especially through the rich dialogue that reveals them and their lives. There are opportunities for Readers' Theatre to bring the text to life, such as P28-29; 31-33; 244-247.

### **Aaron**

- Is the central character. He is fifteen-years-old, full of sadness and anger at his mother for not loving him enough to survive. He finds it difficult to get over her death and has to live with a step family who have no affection for him: a harsh step father, Hosi, and a bully of a step brother, Lijah.
- P9 he sees a vision. What do readers make of this religious experience? Aaron wonders what it means. What do readers think it means? Will it have importance later in the story?
- P15 He earns a living by collecting glass rubbish. He's an expert who doesn't get cut. He also loves the beauty of the glass.

- Aaron is complex. For instance, on page 7 he fantasises about poisoning Lijah one moment and then jumps off the cart to rescue an injured dog.
- P30 He is often cold and lonely, having no single blood relative alive.
- P64 Since his mother died, Aaron hides his feelings to protect himself.
- P112 Love is all he ever wants to feel.
- P116 When he steals from Omar he doesn't like the person he has become.
- He keeps one perfume bottle, almost as a talisman. It is worth discussing with students why it is so important to him. What might it symbolise for him?
- He loves Rachel and she stays as one bright light in his existence. Talk about whether this capacity for love suggests to the reader that Aaron has the possibility of a better life in him.
- His love of the beauty of the glass and this aesthetic capacity is what Michael sees when he teaches him to work with the stone at the church. Is this the future for Aaron?
- P245 When Michael takes Aaron to the council rubbish dump, for the first time, Aaron sees the value of his work and understands that the city needs the Zabbaleen. This is worth discussing: can it be read as a justification for the situation, or is it about Aaron coming to value the community and connectedness of his situation that provides him with a sense of his history and family, or both?
- When Aaron lives with Michael and his wife, despite the more affluent surroundings, he realises what he misses about his neighborhood and what its special values are to him. This is worth discussing with students as it may challenges some views of the world.
- P263 He calls out to his neighbours that he is 'sorry'. He begins to understand what his community offers him.

### **Lijah**

- Aaron's step brother is a violent bully, drives the pony cart that they use to collect the rubbish, and often beats up Aaron.
- P36 provides an example of the casual unpleasantness Lijah deals out to those smaller or less powerful than he is: he takes Abe's one possession, his football.
- At the end of the story Lijah is allowed some redemption. It seems love and marriage have mellowed him. Students might consider that this is another example of the transformative power of love and friendship.

### **Youssa**

- Is an an older step brother who is alcoholic and lazy.
- He also finds a better life for himself after the death of his father and the improvement in his living conditions.

### **Hosi**

- Aaron's cruel and abusive stepfather.
- It seems for Lijah, Youssa and Aaron that Hosi's death allows the young men to create a better life for themselves.

### **Jacob**

- Aaron's best friend and 'font of knowledge'.
- Appears to be taking drugs from the medical waste he collects. Aaron worries about him.
- P223 His entertainment is to spray graffiti around Mokattam.
- P229 He also acts a barometer for Aaron, and finds when Aaron lives with his family, that Aaron is selfish and self-absorbed. Jacob feels hemmed in by him. His resentment builds and he calls Aaron a thief.
- It is worth discussing whether Jacob really understands Aaron and what is causing his bad behaviour, or whether his viewpoint of him is accurate.

### **Abe**

- Is eight-years-old and idolises the older boys, especially Simon and Aaron. He knows everything about jelly fish, and loves his football—his one possession.
- He and his mother own a valuable pig that they hide from the authorities.
- He is a constant friend to Aaron.

### **Shareen**

- A pretty, extremely volatile sixteen-year-old neighbour who longs for a better life and dreams of a Hollywood future.
- She is a mercurial character. For instance, she stands up to Lijah. (p47). Why is she not afraid of him? Is it something to do with her, or that women are respected?
- P26 works at the weaving centre. Her father forces her to marry the wealthy but awful older man, Daniel. She runs away to Cairo in search of her dream.
- She is unpredictable. Talk about what motivates her. She can appear to be kind but then cruel and attention seeking.

### **Simon**

- P32 One of the older and cockier kids who promises impossible things to Abe.
- He and his brother are killed in a bomb blast while they are in the city. Their deaths are not recorded in the newspaper.

### **Omar**

- He owns the perfume shop from which Aaron scavenges the broken glass, and he has a lasting impact on Aaron, who carries with him, many of Omar's wise sayings, such as 'glass is a mirror that shows you who you are'. Talk about this with students in relation to Aaron. What does his love of glass suggest about him?
- P59 Omar confronts Aaron and tells him the history of the shop and that it has been in his family for centuries.
- P61 He shows compassion to Aaron but tries to explain tradition and concepts that are completely foreign to a boy from Mokattam.
- What does it mean to Aaron when he finds Omar's shop closed for renovation? Is it a turning point for him?

### **Rachel**

- She is also fifteen-years-old and is in charge of the ponies.
- P46 the pony enclosure is 'full of hope' because it is clean and well looked after.
- P146 Many members of her family have died.
- P146 She wants to be a vet but no schooling beyond primary school is available in Mokattam.
- A kind Doctor saves her life and ensures that she recovers from horrible injuries after she was run over by Lijah's motorbike.
- She marries Aaron and appears content. What do readers think is her future?

### Evocative writing

- Mokattam is about the community and how people manage to live with dignity and purpose in such circumstances. To set the scene, it would be useful here to select parts of Kevin McCloud's documentary *Slumming It* on Dharavi in Mumbai, the largest slum in India, where he finds a similar community that members choose to live in even if they can afford more affluent housing.
- He articulates well his ambivalent feelings and understandings, and his insights might well assist a deeper appreciation of *The Glass Collector*.

### Their life

- Perera paints a vivid setting of bustling, dirty, chaotic Cairo (eg page 8). This could be a rich stimulus for writing about students' own cities and towns—the detail, the people, the smells and the sights.
- P20 Mokattam has 'glassless, roofless brick tenements', and is 'a hidden village built into the side of an abandoned limestone quarry at the foot of Mokattam Mountain.'
- Pages 21 onwards describes the town evocatively, with its piles of garbage to be sorted 'Here you need strength, hope and courage to survive'.
- Page 25 reveals how the Zabbaleen are exploited by the merchants who buy the garbage for a pittance and sell it on at a large profit. Students might well talk about why there is no regulation of this. Why is there no government protection of the Zabbaleen? What does this tell us about the wider society? Students might consider whether there are parallels with their own societies.
- P26 The church is centre of their spiritual life and supports them psychologically at least. There is not much evidence that it provides material support for the people, even though the church itself is beautiful and attracts tourists. Is the author making a comment here? Later, the Church is depicted as the beating heart of Mokattam; a sanctuary (p39). Is that sufficient for the community?
- Pp36-37 Description of where Aaron and his family lives, the lack of hygiene, and what is regarded as 'a lot of food'.
- P84 This is a powerful description of desperate hunger, and no means of getting food after the death of the pony.
- P85 Aaron hates the indignity of having to beg, so he is driven to scavenging for food and stealing. He is quick and opportunistic and snatches a bag with a birthday cake inside and then a package from outside Omar's shop (p88). Talk about how readers view this; was it a crime or was Aaron justified?

- P101 Jacob's family collect the bio-hazardous waste and he talks about the dangers. People die of hepatitis. On page 102 there are details of little children (ten and eleven years of age) sorting this dangerous waste.
- P105 Aaron imagines how Cairo would collapse under piles of stinking rubbish and infestation of rats, without the Zabbaleen.
- The families live on top of each other; there is little privacy, few secrets, and life is lived in full public view.

### **Coptic Christians**

- This community, despite its hardships and poverty maintains a code of behavior. P106: not stealing and keeping the rules of the community are important to maintaining a cohesive society.
- Discuss with students what codes of behavior they think are important, or that they adhere to, for a just and cohesive society. Does the wider society adhere to them too?

### **Ideas for discussion**

- P173 'One day you will be judged for what you give, not for what you have'.
- Aaron has a collection of Omar's sayings, such as (P249) 'not to be afraid of change, of bad events, death, grief of any kind, because pain like chaos, is a way of rearranging the elements so that life can start again in a different way.' And: 'Nothing can satisfy our minds like the kinds of journeys we are capable of when we use our imaginations' (P261). These could be used for a writing stimulus.

### **Dreams**

- The young people in the story have dreams: Rachel to be a vet and work with animals; Aaron to have a shop like Omar's with beautiful glass; and Shareen, chasing hers, has left Mokattam.
- Discuss whether students think Shareen has found her dream. Consider here that her letter to her father is full of hate, and that love is redemptive in the novel.
- Have Rachel and Aaron left their dreams behind or have they found something more satisfying?
- Responding through writing: with a partner, write the next chapter in Aaron and Rachel's life, or write about their lives ten years in the future.

## Stages in the plot

The events in the story focus around episodes in Aaron's life. This is not a story of fast action but there is plenty of drama in the plot, as Aaron struggles against bullying and danger in his daily life. Events that might seem small have important consequences and build up a picture of Aaron and the choices he makes, occasionally with the help of others, but mainly on his own. Students might make comparisons between Aaron's daily pattern of life and their own, and examine the wisdom/bravery/foolishness of his decisions. Does he have any real choices in his life?

- P63 Lijah has not given the pony water and it is in danger of dying.
- P67 The pony dies and the feeling is that the family is finished now as it has no means of transporting the rubbish. They can't replace the pony.
- P68 In this close community the loss affects everyone and is seen as terrible bad luck.
- P77 Jacob has fallen on needles and is afraid of hepatitis or HIV. Many children in the hospital waste section have died of unspecified diseases.
- P114-115 Aaron steals from Omar's shop.
- P124 Aaron is exposed by Shareen who betrays him to the priest. Hosi casts him from the family. Talk about the hypocrisy and injustice of Hosi's actions. Aaron is now homeless. Abe remains his friend.
- Aaron takes the courage to go Shareen's engagement party and face the community.
- P143 Aaron moves to the pony stalls and finds food in the rubbish. It is clear he is losing the will to go on and the physical capacity to do so.
- P149 All the pigs are slaughtered because of fears of the Swine Flu. This is what actually happened in Mokattam and students might like to research this on the internet. What were the consequences?
- P161 Hunger drives Aaron to Jacob's family and to work in medical waste which he abhors and does only as a last resort.
- P168 He goes back to the city and Omar's shop. A bomb goes off in the city (P169) and two boys Aaron's age are killed on their pony cart, but their names are not reported in the newspaper.
- P180-183 Aaron goes collecting medical waste with Jacob and enjoys the friendship. Here are descriptions of how they manage the toxic waste without becoming cut by needles etc.
- P207 The community focuses on Shareen's wedding as a positive celebration, but a teenage girl dies of hepatitis and it is not a good omen.
- P232 Aaron finds a ruby necklace in the rubbish and despite Jacob telling him to take it to the priest, he pockets it. Jacob fights him for it and takes it to his mother, Noha. Aaron is banished from Jacob's house.

- P238 Aaron has an encounter with Shareen and Lijah beats Aaron senseless.
- P243 Discuss with students why it takes so long for Michael to help 'this poor orphan boy'? He has obviously observed what is happening to Aaron for some time.
- P247 Michael takes Aaron to his small apartment and tells him he can stay with him and his Danish wife, who is also an artist.
- P251 Aaron finds the quiet and indoor life strange and misses having outdoor space, or family and neighbours to share his life with. Even though it is clean, Michael's apartment feels dull and lonely. There are no dramas, gossip and challenges. Aaron comes to recognise how connected to other people he is. He realises he needs to live a good life in Mokattam and then he will have a home. He is proud of who he is and the good job he and his people do. This is an important moment in the plot and deserving of discussion. Is it what readers expected for Aaron? What does it suggest about values? Do readers find this challenging/suprising?
- P254 Aaron's physical transformation.
- P267 Hosi dies of a heart attack. Aaron feels relief and that he has been offered a new beginning.
- P273 There is a proposal to build recycling plants in Mokattam in order to put the merchants out of business. But the term used is 'one day' and the hopes of the people are dashed again. It is worth discussing aid programs and charities here, and their long term goals. Are there parallels in Australia (eg intervention in Aboriginal communities)?
- P275 Michael is going to teach Aaron to carve and this gives him a future. Consider here the significance of the link between the vision Aaron had early in the story and what his first carving is.
- P276 Aaron goes back to glass collecting as well as carving; he is a glass collector and an artist. He has the respect of his step brothers. Lijah is married and his wife Suzan keeps the home nice and he is fed. Discuss this transformation of Lijah and Yassou. Why has it happened? What does this suggest are the central ideas in the book? Are they ones students agree with?
- P283 Rachel wants to marry him.
- All ends well.

**Moral questions:**

- Are there moral absolutes in a world that is so patently unjust and unfair?
- Is stealing always wrong?
- Are there grey areas? Consider lack of social security, no government support, no access to health care.

- The place of women and girls in this society. P164: It is better to be a boy than married into slavery and abuse. Does this change the way readers understand Shareen?

### **Related reading/viewing**

*Trash* by Andy Mulligan – about children living on a garbage dump, perhaps in the Philippines.

This book is going to want students to find out more and there are some excellent documentaries for them to watch

Mai Iskander's film [\*Garbage Dreams\*](#) made the Oscar shortlist for documentaries.

Trailer of it here <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b26dBL5tQPk&feature=related>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KEUeOpUSdmc&feature=related>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZW42515sH8k&feature=related>