

Teachers' Notes  
**SKY LEGS**  
by Irini Savvides

**Synopsis**

*Sky Legs* opens with Eleni, an Australian girl of Greek and Spanish heritage, in Byron Bay on the far north coast of New South Wales. It's the easternmost point in Australia, the place first touched by the morning sun, and is much loved for its physical beauty, with its surfing beaches, its lush tropical hinterland and mountains. Hippies, backpackers and movie stars fell in love with the casual, hedonistic way of life there long ago.

Eleni has always loved being alone with nature here, but on this trip she has come to do a clowning course, which her mother has given her as a gift. The improvisation scenes at the beginning of the novel are comic and energetic, and Eleni makes lasting friends here, particularly Astrid and Mihali. But just as important are the lessons in discipline, courage and self-expression.

The novel shifts to the Blue Mountains west of Sydney. Eleni and her father have left their home in the hip inner Sydney suburb of Newtown and moved here to make a new start. It is difficult for any student to make friends at a new school, but perhaps particularly so in the final years of secondary school, when friends and enemies have been long established. Both girls and boys make Eleni feel an outsider, an intruder. Tiana tries to humiliate her in class by pretending to be a friend and then sabotaging her in one exercise. Carl O 'the nothing man' makes fun of her.

An interesting social phenomenon underlies this bullying. Places like Toowoomba, Hepburn Springs, the Adelaide Hills, the Blue Mountains were settled much as the famous hill stations of India were developed by the British in the 19th century. They provided cool relief from the heat of the capital cities on the plains and were planted with exotic gardens and trees. And to some extent the population there has remained more Anglo-Australian and less changed by recent immigration patterns than the cities themselves.

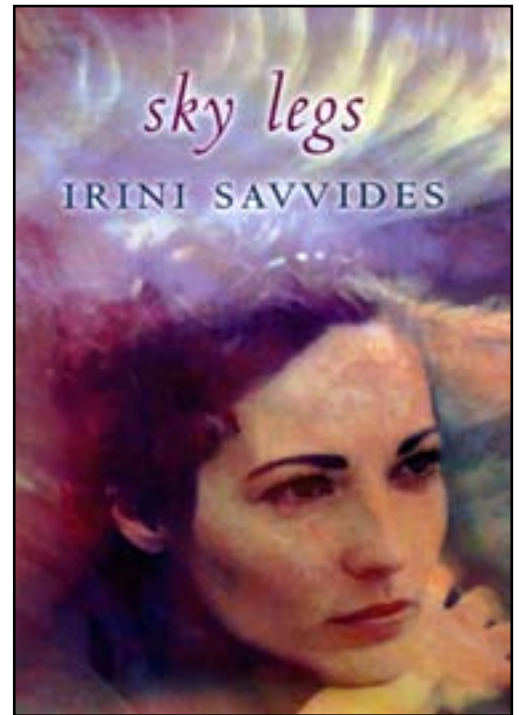
Eleni is ostracized for her name, her facial hair (she has a 'moustache') and her clothes. Not all of the bullying therefore centres on the fact that her parents are Greek and Spanish. Some of it is about the way her physical appearance challenges feminine gender stereotypes; some of it is about the fact that the hip and gothic clothes from inner city Sydney make this place look like Hicksville. Some of it is also about Eleni's intelligence and confidence. An outsider or newcomer is supposed to demonstrate a degree of subordination or subservience that is simply foreign to this girl. She is too clever and too outspoken.

Prejudice is like an old dragon let loose in this school and breathing fire that anyone can see from one generation to the next—except that people pretend it's not there.

The one close school friend Eleni makes is a boy called Pete. He is an outsider too. He loves to act and dance but when she sees him in a cabaret show, he is afraid that his love of dressing-up, of make-up and putting on a show will be exposed to ridicule. He loves Eleni's strength: her apparent indifference to the mob.

Eleni sees in Pete a kindred spirit. That and her experience at the Winter Magic Festival when she first came to Katoomba make her feel optimistic about the possibility of having some sort of a life here. Eleni remembers the Winter Goddess, striding on stilts up the main street of town during this annual parade and New Age celebration of the spirit, high above the rest of the crowd, without an apparent care in the world. She doesn't know until late in the novel that this wonderful image that mirrors her own deepest desires was in fact her friend Pete in costume and make-up.

Eleni's other friend in her strange new home is Mihali—one of the actors she met on her clowning course at Byron Bay. He turns up on his travels and volunteers to help at her father's restaurant—and they fall briefly in love. Unlike the students at school, Mihali doesn't make fun of Eleni's moustache—he thinks it is cute. And far from being intimidated by her confidence, he loves it. But the relationship cannot last. Mihali is literally an angel and, in falling in love with Eleni, he has broken the rules so he has to leave her.



And although this is not the last appearance by a guardian angel in the novel, the experience of being loved unconditionally makes Eleni strong enough to face the bullying of the crowd and defeat it. We learn that the clowning course was a gift from her mother before she died. This is why Eleni and her father moved house to try and create a new life for themselves. And through reading some letters, Eleni learns that her parents too suffered prejudice and loss a generation earlier, when they wanted to marry outside their own cultures in Europe and then migrated to a strange new home in Australia.

Pete tries to tackle prejudice by himself. He gets right in the other students' faces by turning up to school in an outfit that he has made himself: it is a girl's school uniform. There is nothing written down in the rules to prevent his wearing it, but there is plenty in the unwritten rules. Eleni exposes Carl O's sleaziness in retaliation for his teasing of Pete and she cleverly enlists a teacher's support by claiming that she and Pete have created this occasion as a research project on gender stereotypes. Nevertheless, Pete is savagely bashed in the toilets and cannot come back to school, so his strategy fails.

Eleni realizes that they need to be smarter if they are to win this struggle against narrow-mindedness. She and Pete try a subtler approach. They use all their dramatic skills to create and perform a Brechtian piece for the school revue, using humour, costume, make-up and clowning to force all the students, including ringleaders like Carl O, to experience for themselves prejudice in this cruel and demeaning country called the Land of O.

### **Background to the novel by Irimi Savvides**

Teaching high school every day one of the things that never ceases to concern me is teenagers' lack of tolerance for difference, and the 'dumbing down syndrome.' I wanted to explore the challenge that young adults face when they move schools, but also look at how 'bullying' is used to stop others achieving their full potential or developing individuality. Closely linked to this was my wish to show how creativity can be an excellent outlet for making change, both within and outside of one's self. As in my first novel, I wanted to suggest that there is always hope and that sometimes it comes from the most unexpected places! Even in the face of grief and isolation *Sky Legs* shows that there are often angels walking amongst us, sometimes on stilts and sometimes in dresses!

### **Publisher's comment by Mark Macleod**

When I first read the manuscript of Irimi Savvides' second novel it was called *Big Fat Black Moustache*. I loved the title—and this was eighteen months before anyone had even heard of the hit film "My Big Fat Greek Wedding". But two very high profile consultants who had loved her first novel *Willow Tree and Olive* said that the title was a big fat mistake. No one would want to pick up any novel called that. I asked why. 'Because no one wants that sort of realism,' I was told.

This made me angry. An experience that many women have had in our society—a prejudice against facial hair—and all that it symbolized was still unacceptable when the author inverted it and used it triumphantly in a work of art. We weren't willing to face the truth. But of course when I cooled down I realized that I was dealing with the same disappointing truth faced by magazines and the fashion industry when they try to depict the bodies of real women, rather than the undernourished fantasies sized 6. People would rather not look in the mirror.

This was a novel that I wanted people to read and think about, so if it was going to discourage them, the title had to go. Probably a good thing as it turned out, because it might have appeared to be leaning on the film.

What's Eleni's problem? Is it where her parents came from, the way she looks, the fact that she's clearly more intelligent and confident than the rest of the crowd? Maybe it's just that she's upset over losing her mother and moving house. Ah—that's it. She's not herself. That makes us feel better.

Some readers will resist the idea that a teenage girl can experience the kind of prejudice the novel portrays in today's multicultural Australia. They're sadly mistaken, and part of the problem rather than any solution. Australians have worked very hard over several decades to create a harmonious society from many different cultural backgrounds, but with unemployment and recession we have seen how fragile this is and how easily political extremists can push us to locate blame for our troubles in anyone who is different—not quite 'one of us'.

*Sky Legs* is a confronting novel that tells some uncomfortable truths about living in Australia now, but in its passion and refusal to give in and in its belief in the power of creativity and the human spirit it is also optimistic and unexpectedly beautiful.

By the way, where's Eleni's moustache on the cover of the book? The same place Selma Hayek's was in the film about Frida Kahlo. Margaret Atwood has argued that the artist's job today is to tone down reality because it often appears to be stranger than any fiction. But there's no blurring of the truth in the imagination.

### Before reading the novel

1. Ask students to brainstorm all the times they have felt that they did not fit in during their lives. Then get them to select one and place it in the middle of a piece of blank paper. Around the event ask them to write in spirals as many single words as they can, describing it. In another colour have them rewrite the event from the point of view of an onlooker. What would that person see? They may then choose to use either sets of ideas to write a monologue from either or both people's point of view on the event.
2. Ask students to research some of the world's famous clowns. You may point them in the direction of Cirque Du Soleil, Charlie Chaplin or physical theatre experts like Jacques Lecoq. If possible show them one sequence of a routine involving clowning. Then put them into pairs and have them brainstorm what clowning means to them. You may give them guidance; what do clowns give to the public, why are they so long lasting, what might be their serious purpose? Ask them in their pairs to find an example of children's literature which involve clowns. *The Last Clown* is a suggestion but there are many others. How are they portrayed? Have each pair deliver their findings and then form a class table of ideas. Have students then write their own children's story involving clowns and clowning. Ask them to write a précis first explaining to the teacher how they wish to portray clowning. Once they are finished have them write a reflection statement outlining if their story turned out as they wished and what they learnt in the writing process. Have the class share their stories and their reflection statements.
3. Read the class Auden's *Stop the Clocks* and then show them the sequence in *Four Weddings and A Funeral* where it is read at the funeral. Ask them to write down their ideas on the poem focusing on the following; why is the person upset, how is this shown, what elements of the poem's language suggest the writer's grief to you, was there a difference when you read the poem and heard it read, what was it? What other elements in the scene added to your understanding of the poem? Have students create a visual representation on loss, either from the personal experience of losing a pet/ grandparent/ friend or from ideas in the poem. Those that wish may share it with others
4. Have the students survey up to ten people on two questions; do they believe in angels? Do they believe in ghosts? Share findings in the class and then ask all the skeptics to form a group and all the believers to form another. Their task is then to find four pieces of literature (film, poetry, short story and one of their choice) which proves their point. They must as a group present the pieces of literature and examine how these pieces support their point of view. After all the presentations have been made, have students write an argumentative essay on the topic: *Angels. Why I do or do not believe in them.*

### During the novel

1. Students can keep a *reading log* as they go. In it they can do representations of the following aspects of the novel; characters—what do the main characters look like in your mind, describe them and give page references as support (both physical and emotional traits), settings—draw any of the settings from Byron Bay, The Blue Mountains and the school, explain why these settings help create the meaning in the novel, motifs—keep a record of recurrent motifs, why do you think they are important in the novel overall?
2. Eleni—keep a chart of the events that have happened to Eleni and how she deals with them as you read. Imagine you are Agony Aunt. Write her some advice every time a major event happens to her. Read on, did she follow the advice you would have given or not? Once you have read the whole novel read back on the advice you have given her. What was the purpose of it? Even though she may not have followed your guidelines did she achieve a better sense of self by the end? Do a *Before* and *After* picture to show this.
3. Friendship—trace the friendships that develop in the novel. Which do you think is the most long lasting one and why? Give page references to support your point of view.
4. Clues—trace the clues given that Mihali is not an ordinary man. When did you as a reader know that he was an angel? Did it change the way you felt about him? Why or why not? Why do you think the author chose to make Mihali an angel?

5. Haiku—there are many haiku written in the poem. Research haikus and read to the class two favourites and explain why you like them. Select one of the themes of the novel: hope, friendship, healing, loss, love, miracles, angels and belief and write a series of haiku on them. Illustrate them and read/explain your choice of images to a partner.
6. The text uses many different styles throughout. Make a list of them and discuss why you think the author chose not to write the text in chronological narrative.

### After reading the novel

1. William Least Heat-Moon, a famous author, once said that each novel has a hub. Which section for you was the heart or hub of the novel and why? Imagine you are going to sell the book to a potential buyer. Use the hub to show what the strengths of the novel are.
2. The novel is to be made into a film. Select up to five actors to play the main roles and write them a letter explaining the following; what the book is about, what the character is like that you wish them to play, why you selected them for the role, what the purpose of the novel is overall and how you will, as director, achieve this purpose.
3. The title of the novel is an important factor in creating a book. The working title of this novel was *Big, Fat Black Moustache*. Do you think it is a better title than *Sky Legs*? Why or why not? Which of them shows the main themes of the novel most strongly? Write an essay on the following using detailed textual reference to back up your argument:  
*The title of the novel should not be changed. Sky Legs suggest Eleni's journey. Discuss.*
4. Pete is an unusual character in the novel. Collect a series of advertisements to show how males are represented in the media. What are the common stereotypes for men? How are these limiting for both sexes? How does Pete break these stereotypes in the novel?
5. Imagine you are Eleni's mum. You are allowed to make one more contact with her before you go on your way. Write the final song that she would sing to her daughter, given a chance to say farewell. Base the ideas on incidents and references to her in the novel.
6. Author study—read *Willow Tree and Olive* and examine what similarities and differences there are between the two novels. Which one is your favourite and why?