

"Mariel van Arckle stinks. And she's not half the person Muriel Heslop was."

The film's treatment of the wedding and of marriage should make interesting discussion for your class. Muriel considers her wedding is a ticket to happiness yet look at life for married people in the film:

Chook is unfaithful and accused of rape. Bill is cruel and uncaring. Betty is oppressed and unappreciated. Deidre is manipulative and shallow. Tania is betrayed and definitely not "euphoric", and Ken exploits marriage to suit his and David's ambitions.

Is the film saying something serious about marriage and people's attitude to it? Is marriage a popular notion amongst your friends? Was it given a high priority on the lists of "expected events" it was suggested you make before viewing the film? In their penthouse, David challenges

end her marriage to David. "I have to stop lying now. I tell so many lies... one day I won't know I'm doing it. I don't love you." Has Muriel "won" at this point?

MURIEL'S FINAL TRIUMPH

When Bill's main concern at his wife's funeral is that the press record that he received a telegram from Bob Hawke - Muriel realises "I thought I was so different. A new person. But I'm not. I'm the same as him."

What has Muriel finally learned? Why does the film end with Muriel and Rhonda shouting "Goodbye" to almost every person and building in Porpoise Spit?

MEDIA STUDIES

BEFORE VIEWING THE FILM

Muriel's Wedding is a comedy and as such is designed to make the audience laugh. What is laughter? Why do we laugh?

What makes you laugh? Write down the things that make you laugh: silly incidents that have happened to you or others, funny jokes or stories, television programs and films. Be specific, try to focus on what it is that makes you laugh at these things. Can you identify a "victim" in your jokes or funny scenarios. Is there someone who is the butt of the joke? Are you laughing at them or with them?

In terms of film and television write down as many comedy programs you can think of. A large list will reveal that there are different types of comedy. Organise your list into sub-categories. Here are some to get you started - situation comedy (known as 'sitcoms'), satire, stand-up comedy.

What features did you use to place the program into its category? i.e. what distinguishes sitcoms from satire? You may also like to organise your list according to British, American and Australian humour. What distinguishes the comedy from different cultures? Can we talk about 'Australian' humour? What are its distinguishing characteristics?



WHAT IS LAUGHTER?

When we are born, crying is something we do almost immediately. We do not, however, laugh until three to four months have passed. It occurs in conjunction with our recognition of parents. If you have access to an infant you may note that up to three months or so it will gurgle and burble but not actually laugh. Identification with a parent is accompanied by some wariness about other strange adults and this unfamiliarity may cause the child to cry. If the parent, which the baby identifies as its personal protector, was to do something which startles it, two sets of signals are communicated - "there is nothing to fear I am your protector parent" accompanied by "be careful this may be frightening". The baby responds by giving a half crying reaction and half a parental-recognition gurgle producing a laugh.

Through childhood and into adulthood our patterns of play often involve attempts to shock and startle ourselves and others without actually getting hurt. When we realise we are 'safe' we demonstrate our relief by laughing.

You should be able to identify examples of this in the lists you drew up when answering the question, "What makes you laugh?" Often the situations you find funny are so because you are safe, the misfortunes or embarrassing incidents are happening to someone else.

THE STRUCTURE OF COMEDY FILMS

Like most narrative feature films, comedies follow an identifiable structure. The early part of the film establishes locations, situations and usually some sort of conflict/s. It also introduces characters. The middle of the film concerns itself with problem-solving and resolution of the conflict/s. To conclude there is often an end-joke or moral to the story.

Listed below are the main characters in *Muriel's Wedding* -

Muriel aged 20, unemployed, lives with her family in Porpoise Spit, devoted ABBA fan. Bill, Muriel's domineering father, corrupt local councillor, regards Muriel as useless.

Rhonda, old school friend, encourages Muriel to move into a Sydney flat with her and becomes heavily dependent on Muriel when she falls ill. David, a South African swimmer, needs a bride to gain Australian citizenship.

In small groups discuss some likely scenarios about situations, conflicts, resolution and the end joke or moral using the structure of comedy films outlined before. Don't try to guess what *Muriel's Wedding* is about, just try to explore some of the options. Remember this is a comedy so your characters and the situations they encounter need to make the audience laugh. How will you achieve this?

AFTER VIEWING THE FILM

Examine the structure of *Muriel's Wedding*. Where is it located? How do we meet Muriel, Bill and Rhonda? What situations or conflicts are established? How are these problems and conflicts solved or resolved? What is the end joke or moral to the story?

Construct a table of the main characters. Against each name write some details about that character's age, gender, behaviour, mode of dress, relationships with other characters. In this way you will build up a compre-



hensive dossier on the characters. Use this to discuss the use of characters to push the story along. Who does what? Why? What effect does this have on others? What are the outcomes? Are they sad, tragic, funny? Identify a scene that really made you laugh. It may have been Muriel and Rhonda's ABBA impersonation, the scene in the bar where Tania explains

ity to the Muriels of the world not to depict them in this way?

Does Muriel triumph in the end and so justify her earlier treatment in the film? Identify a comedy film where the audience was able to laugh along with the characters rather than at them. Could *Muriel's Wedding* have been made like this?

Comedy is often juxtaposed/contrasted with tragedy. Where does this happen in *Muriel's Wedding*? Why does the filmmaker make this sort of contrast? What purpose does it serve?

Other than Muriel, who are the victims in this film? Identify the parallels between Muriel and her father Bill.

Muriel is clearly committed to two things in life, ABBA ("...my life's as good as an ABBA song") and her desire to be a bride. Is it a bride she wishes to be or has she been seduced by the image of weddings? Are there any clues in the film to suggest how this has occurred? Why was the music of ABBA used? What alternatives would you suggest? How are values transmitted in our society? From where has Muriel's value system developed? Do all girls of Muriel's age want a husband and a white wedding?

This study guide was written for ATOM by Michael Considine, Libby Thibault and Andrea Mullett



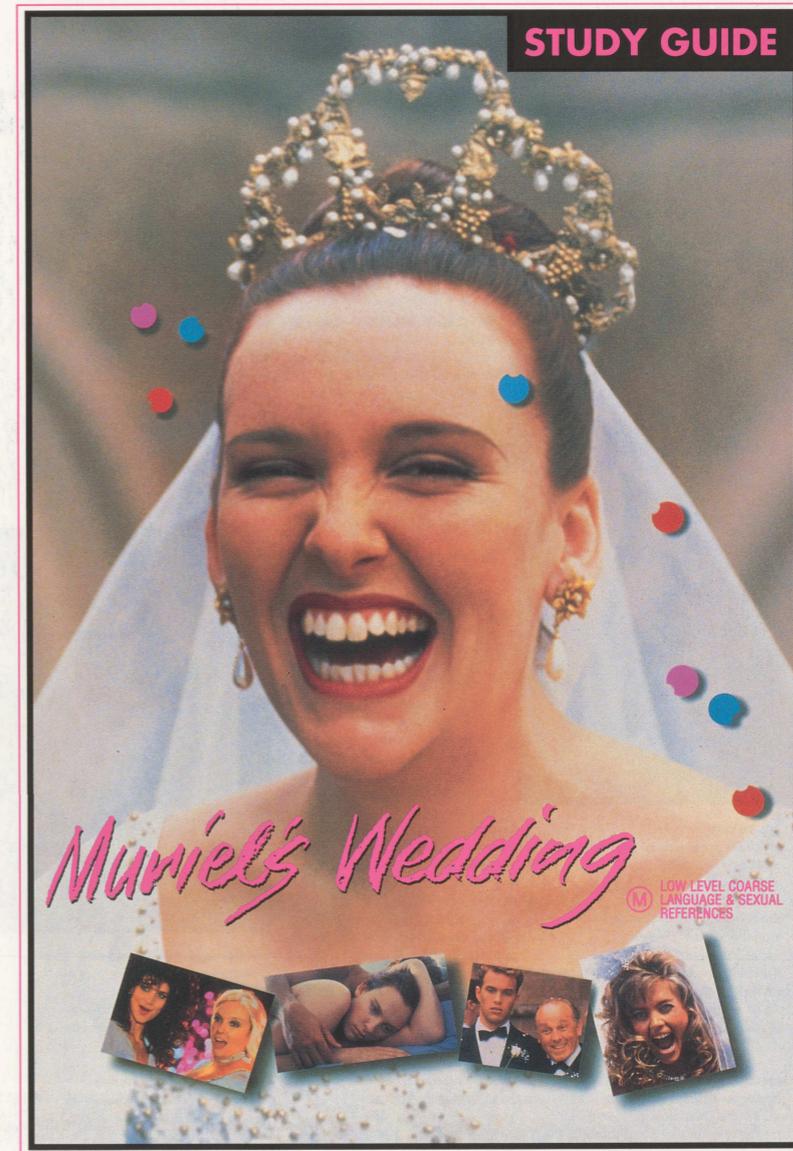
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Tel: (03) 482 2393 Fax: (03) 482 5018

HOUSE & MOORHOUSE FILMS presents
TONI COLLETTE BILL HUNTER RACHEL GRIFFITHS in MURIEL'S WEDDING
Director of Photography MARTIN McGRATH A.C.S. Film Editor JILL BILCOCK
Production Designer PATRICK REARDON Costume Designer TERRY RYAN Original Music PETER BEST
Casting ALISON BARRETT Associate Producers MICHAEL D. AGLION & TONY MAHOOD
Produced by LYNDA HOUSE & JOCELYN MOORHOUSE Written & Directed by P.J. HOGAN
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STUDY GUIDE



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SOCIAL STUDIES SECTION

INTRODUCTION

Muriel's Wedding is particularly relevant for students of English, Australian Studies, Contemporary Society, Media Studies, and Studies of Society investigating:

- family life
- the dysfunctional family
- peer pressure
- group and self-identity
- self-esteem

and the claustrophobic atmosphere of small town Porpoise Spit. In the opening scene of the film, at her friend's wedding, Muriel is thrilled to catch the bouquet. Her moment of happiness is destroyed when the other girls are furious and demand a re-throw. After all, no one will ever want to marry Muriel.

That's how it is for twenty-year-old Muriel. Her friends are embarrassed by her, her domineering father, Bill, thinks she's useless because she can't get a job. So Muriel hides away in her bedroom, listening to ABBA music, and dreaming about the day she'll get married.

BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM

In either pairs or small groups, discuss your opinions of the following issues, and then share your ideas with the rest of the class. In a co-educational class, it could be interesting to form gender based groups, to draw some conclusions about whether there are any differences between male and female attitudes.

IDENTITY AND INDIVIDUALITY

– Is it more important to have a strong sense of your own individual identity or to belong to a group?
– To what extent is your individuality formed and influenced by factors including: family, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, and class?
– It is often claimed that the mass media is the most important influence on young people's sense of identity. Do you agree? Think about this statement in relation to young people's ideas about fashion, music, dreams and ideals, leisure activities and values.

– Is there a pop group or public figure who particularly influences you? Why or why not?
– What are your dreams and ideals?
– Who is included and who is excluded from peer groups in your community?
– What happens to those who are excluded?

ATTITUDES TO MARRIAGE

Survey your class and a larger sample group of teenagers to find answers to the following questions:
– How many people in your survey group believe that they would like to marry?

- Why do those who answered yes want to marry?
- Why do those who answered no believe that they will not choose marriage?
- What is a suitable age to be married?

DREAMS AND IDEALS

Before watching the film, each member of your class should anonymously write down two or three dreams or ideals that they hope to achieve before they are twenty-five. After watching the film, write a list of what you recorded on the board. To what extent are your dreams and ideals similar to or different from:

- Muriel
- her girlfriends
- Rhonda
- David Van Arkle
- Bill Heslop

– Try to explain the reasons for the similarities and differences.

FRIENDS

– What qualities do you look for in your friends?
– Do they need to share common characteristics with you and other friends you mix with? Why or why not?



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AFTER WATCHING THE FILM

Analyse each of the following incidents in the film:

THE Hibiscus Island Holiday

Muriel's friends decide to go on a holiday together to Hibiscus Island, and leave her behind, making it clear that she's not welcome.

- Why do they reject her?
- What are their common characteristics?
- What do they value?
- Why do they accept Muriel later when she is married?
- Why does Muriel change her name to Mariel?

On the island, Muriel meets Rhonda who escaped from Porpoise Spit years ago.

- What factors led to the development of friendship between the two girls?
- What impact does Rhonda have on Muriel's discovery of her own identity?

RHONDA'S ILLNESS

When Rhonda becomes ill, Muriel seeks escape in her wedding day fantasies and visits shops all over Sydney trying on wedding dresses and making her own secret wedding album.

- At this stage, Muriel floats between reality and fantasy. Do you agree?
- Suggest other situations where individual responsibilities can shake a young person out of fantasy.

Muriel said to Rhonda, "If I can get married it means I've changed, I'm a new person."
– Why then does Muriel end her marriage and change her name back from Mariel to Muriel?



THE DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY

Each member of the Heslop family is depicted in some way as a failure.

- As a group activity, share your ideas and write a short description of:
- Bill Heslop, Muriel's father
 - Betty Heslop, Muriel's mother
 - Joanie Heslop, Muriel's sister
 - Perry and Malcolm Heslop, Muriel's brothers
- What factors could have made this family happy?
 - At the end of the film Muriel has no intention of staying with her family. How can you explain her decision?

DRAWING SOME CONCLUSIONS

Think about Muriel at the end of the film. In what ways have her attitudes changed:

- to herself
- to her mother
- to her father
- to her brother and sister
- to her old school friends
- to her view of her wedding

ENGLISH SECTION

BEFORE VIEWING THE FILM

Muriel's Wedding is a satirical comedy. Although audiences will find plenty of things to laugh about, the humour often has a harder edge which pokes fun at many features of our society.

- Discuss with your teacher the meaning of satire. What is its purpose? Collect satirical cartoons from newspapers and magazines. Who are often the subjects of satirical humour? Why are politicians and world leaders often satirized?



When things go wrong for us, or we have an unusual run of bad luck, we often say "you have to laugh!" Why is this? It is usually a compliment to people to say that "they have the ability to laugh at themselves". What does this mean? We also sometimes criticize people by saying "they take themselves too seriously". Keep these observations in mind when watching the film, and reflect on them in your later discussion of the film's humour.

The film is appealing to teenagers because of its focus on Muriel's battle to establish friendships. Muriel desperately wants to be loved and to feel worthwhile.

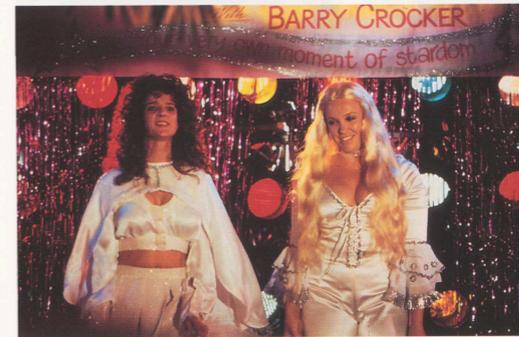
- Divide your class into small groups and talk about the bonds that exist between you and your friends. How do you make friends with peers? How do groups of friends establish and maintain a "group identity"? What are the benefits of belonging to a group? Why are some people excluded from groups of friends?
- What makes us feel like worthwhile people? What part do our friends play? How important is our family in building our self-confidence? Do young people have to be successful at school to feel worthwhile?
- Ask each member of your class group to write down a list of the most important things each one expects to do in the next ten years. How many of these things are critical to each per-

son's happiness? Prioritize your lists and compare them. After watching the film, make up a list for Muriel and discuss whether her priorities change, and whether any of them are reflected in your lists.

Hibiscus Island, where they are horrified to see the "mental case"! The irony that Tania has already been betrayed by husband "Chook" seems to escape Muriel. How does the film present Tania, Cheryl, Nicole and Janine? Why do we laugh at them? Discuss the meaning of the word "stereotype". What do we mean if we say the film satirizes the girls' stereotypical behaviour?

AFTER VIEWING THE FILM

- The early scenes in the film establish Muriel as a very ordinary girl, and a "loser". Make a list of the aspects



of her life that have driven her to live in a fantasy world of ABBA songs. Did you laugh at her when the girls insisted that Tania's bouquet not be wasted on Muriel? Did you also find the group's rejection of her in the nightclub amusing? Explain your reactions.

- Later in the film, Muriel (who now calls herself Mariel) tells Rhonda, "If I can get married, it means I've changed, I'm a new person ... And if someone wants to marry me I'm not her anymore, I'm me." What is Muriel's vision of an ideal world? Why do you think she dreams of her future in those terms? What is the difference between living in a fantasy world, and living with strong dreams and hopes for the future?

MURIEL'S DILEMMA

- Everybody wants to be successful and to feel worthwhile. Our self-esteem can be shaped by so many influences. Why does Muriel want to be somebody else? Do you think she is to blame in any way for her own unhappiness?
- Muriel's determination to show everybody "I'm not nothing", results in her stealing money from her father and following Tania and the girls to

- Is your peer group concerned with image? Who are the popular people at your school? Are they always the most successful, attractive and talented people? What influence do things like taste in clothes, hairstyle and music have in deciding your friends?
- Why is Rhonda so refreshing? What are her qualities? How does the film develop her character beyond stereotyped behaviour? What is significant about Rhonda and Muriel's popular performance at the Hibiscus Island Karaoke?
- Why doesn't Rhonda reject Muriel? What is significant about the fact that Rhonda had left Porpoise Spit years earlier and lived in Sydney? Why does Muriel invent the story about having a fiancé? Although Muriel thinks she's "useless", Rhonda remembers her as, "So quiet you could hardly talk; you were too shy to even look at people. You were at the bottom of the class in marks. You've come up from that to the top", and now assures Muriel, "You're amazing" and "You've made it." What must Muriel learn to accept?
- Why does Muriel blossom when she goes to live with Rhonda in Sydney?

Her job in the video shop might seem mundane, and customer Brice who falls for her is hardly Prince Charming, yet why are both developments significant?

MURIEL'S DECISIONS

Muriel must confront two crises - Rhonda's illness and the investigation of her father, Bill for taking bribes.

- Changing her name to "Mariel," she now devotes herself to Rhonda, yet still indulges in her wedding fantasy, compiling an album from dress shop photographs. Why is Rhonda furious when she discovers Muriel's album?
- Does caring for Rhonda help Muriel to shake off her low opinion of herself? Rhonda clearly appreciates her friend - how does Muriel respond to her thanks?

The news of Bill's dilemma amuses us. Why? Where does the family crisis leave Betty, Muriel's mother? What does she feel about Muriel?

- Note how the film maintains a consistently humorous view of things. Can you remember Rhonda's reaction to news of her illness? What happened when Muriel rang her mother to find out about Bill's problem with the police?

Muriel cannot escape her family. Her father is being investigated by the police. What kind of a man is Bill "The Battler"? He is a very effective comic character and we often laugh at the things he says, yet he is hardly an admirable father or husband. How does the film turn its satirical humour against him? Make a list of the things you don't like about him. What does he want from life? Is he similar to Muriel in any way?

MURIEL'S WEDDING

- The film's climax occurs when Muriel gladly accepts the offer to marry David, who requires a wife to qualify for Olympic competition. Why does Muriel accept the offer? Why does Ken (David's trainer) realize she is ideal for their purposes?
- Muriel's wedding is hilarious - look at the roles given to the bridesmaids, the groom, Bill's "giving away" of his daughter, the wedding vows - and the "blushing bride"? Yet there are two sobering images. What part does Muriel's mother Betty play in the ceremony? What is the impact of Rhonda's harsh ... "Go to hell."