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Black Water by David Metzenthen

YEAR 9 - 10

Background

There are many accounts of war written for young people, including David Metzenthen's earlier novel, *Boys of Blood and Bone*. What marks *Black Water* as distinctive is its focus on domestic Australia during World War 1. The inhabitants of one small, not especially affluent coastal community have to get on with their lives in extraordinary circumstances: there are pressures to join up; relatives are missing in action; family members who return from war are very different from whom they were before; and ideas of war and the enemy are far different from the reality. Events are presented through adolescent Farren, who shows considerable resilience in the face of what life deals to him. However old-fashioned this society of the past appears to a contemporary audience, it is a community that cares about and supports its members, one whose values are about connection and purpose.

'This is a heartfelt, emotional story of a short but tumultuous time for Farren and his family. This time during the Great War is captured beautifully by the author, and his ability to create a picture of a moment in time is exceptional.' Bronwyn Owen. *Teachers' Notes,* p2.

Objectives

To engage with the following VELS statements:

> *[Students] develop a critical understanding about the ways that writers and producers of texts try to position readers to accept particular views of people, characters, events, ideas and information. They discuss the ways in which persuasive texts present opinions and evidence, justify positions and persuade….*
> *And practice writing expressively and in detail about challenging ideas and information.*
> Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2005) *VELS English Domain – Learning Focus, Level 5* p22.
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> *They produce personal responses, for example, interpretive pieces and character profiles*. Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2005) *VELS English Domain – Reading, Level 5* p23.

Focus: Author Study

David Metzenthen's body of work for adolescent readers spans nearly two decades and makes a major contribution to writing for young people in Australia. His preoccupations are interesting ones and a study of his oeuvre would be rewarding. His first, *Danger Wave* (1990) signals his connection with the coast, and the second *Lee Spain* (1991) his interest in the effect of war on young men, though tangentially through Lee's troubled father's past in Vietnam. This interest in Australians and war has been continued in *Boys of Blood and Bone* and now *Black Water.*

Many books for young adults present young people at school, but Metzenthen has often focussed on those in the work force and the trials, relationships and rewards offered by working, such as in *Falling Forward, Johnny Hart's Heroes* and *Finn and the Big Guy.*

Also pivotal is his evocation of place; this is a powerful strength of his writing. Often the settings are small towns from the mountains in *Tiff and the Trout* to western Victoria in *Stony Heart Country*.

Metzenthen has also created two fascinating 'wild child' characters in Souki, in *Black Water*, and Dirk in *Wildlight*. This could be fruitful to examine as well, as could Souki being an example of an enduring motif of early twentieth century Australian literature for young people – that of the redemptive child. Metzenthen's boys are rich creations too. While they are 'tough' they are also sensitive to others, and their own emotions. And in all of Metznethen's work is the importance of finding one's place in the world, where we belong and feel connected.

Focus: Brothers

'He wished Danny was here, and although Danny couldn't do anything about the storm, either, he could do family things, brotherly things, talking things, that would help'. (p54)

- What are 'brotherly things'?

'For the first time in Farren's life, or for the first time that he remembered, he wanted to hug Danny, put his face against Danny's and feel what was special about him, feel it coming through Danny's skin, which was tanned brown as army boots where it wasn't scarred like folded tin. And then he would know Danny was home forever, and that they were still brothers, like always.' (p107)

- Farren's need is a physical necessity. Why?

Focus: Community

Metzenthen builds the picture of Swan Bay and its varied activities and characters in palpable detail. Consider the opening paragraph of chapter one, the sense of belonging that place gives to Farren despite the death of his mother. There is the fishing community that he and his father are part of, and that rallies when the storm hits. Farren aims to become a fisherman and to experience the rhythms and patterns that give meaning to life. The Victory Hotel, at which Farren works, is part of this community too, and even the missing and lost loved ones – at war, or as a result of the storm – serve to unite the community across age and class.

Consider Mrs Price as an example of this. Isla is quickly drawn in to life in Swan Bay, and Robbie and Farren readily go to her aid when she is so ill. Souki is absorbed into the community too.

- Discuss the shared values that bind this community and find examples of them at work in the book.
- Do such values still operate in Australian society?
- What brings people together today and gives them a sense of belonging?

Response

The dialogue is a large part of the evocation of the era, the small town setting and the characters, and it needs to be heard to appreciate its colourful nature. There are sections of the book that would make wonderful pieces for Readers' Theatre, such as pp47-48 – the conversation between Maggie, Charlotte and Farren and between Danny and Farren on pp138-140. There are many others to choose from.

Assessment

- *Black Water* is a book that creates questions for the reader as we are invited to fill the gaps in the lives of Danny and Farren. Because we see the action through Farren's eyes, the motivations of the characters and their possible futures are not always clear.
- To explore these aspects of the novel students could create correspondence between two of the protagonists from a particular time in the story. They could choose to:
    - Write letters between Danny and Farren when Danny is still at the front, travelling home or in the hospital.
    - Write letters between Danny and Farren when Danny is on Furneaux Island after the action of the book takes place.

- Create postcards, drawings and letters to represent the correspondence between Souki and Farren after Souki has gone back to Furneaux Island.

- Students could be encouraged to use the dialogue styles and vernacular of the period using the book as a model to inform how they feel the characters would communicate if corresponding. Some background research into the period may also be necessary to help them achieve an authentic voice.

Related Reading

Romulus, My Father by Raymond Gaita
Nights in the Sun by Colin Bowles
Stripes of the Side-Step Wolf by Sonya Hartnett
No Worries by Bill Condon
Jetty Rats by Phillip Gwynne
A Bridge to Wiseman's Cove by James Moloney

Brothers

Private Peaceful by Michael Morpurgo
Break of Day by Tony Palmer
Lost Property by James Moloney
Flash Jack by Maureen McCarthy
The Story of Tom Brennan by J C Burke
Fighting Ruben Wolfe by Markus Zusak
Tricksters by Margaret Mahy