

Unit written by Dr Pam Macintyre & Dr Susan La Marca

Blueback

by Tim Winton

Year 7

Background

Abel Jackson lives for and from the sea. He and his mother have depended on the quiet and bountiful waters along the coast of Western Australia for their livelihood. Still only young, while diving for abalone, Abel befriends an immense fish who lives in the cove. Throughout his life, Abel relies on the sage advice of the groper, who he names Blueback. The fish helps Abel to understand that his life's calling is to uncover the secrets of the sea. It is Blueback who gives Abel the strength and inspiration to return as an adult and save his homestead. *Blueback* is a tale of friendship, commitment, love of nature, and a quest for knowledge.

Blueback is a deceptively simple fable about a boy who finds wisdom, meaning and strength in the bonds of family and the natural world.

In true fable style, this is a simple story, but one so beautiful, poignant and moving it is impossible to ignore. DAILY TELEGRAPH

Winton . . . convince[s] us of the preciousness of our oceans not through lectures but through his characters' steady wonder. NEW YORK TIMES

Objectives

The study of a text by an Australian writer of Winton's stature is relevant and important. The most recent document outlining the nature of the new National curriculum for English states:

The presence of Australian literary texts and an increasingly informed appreciation of the place of Australian literature among other literary traditions will be part of the national English curriculum. (ACARA (2009) Shape of the Australian Curriculum: English. Literature, page 8).

The document also stresses the importance of a rich experience to support the development of literacy that includes engagement with, and the exploration of, a wide range of texts. It says:

For the Literacy Strand in particular, an increasingly rich vocabulary that describes a variety of strategies for creating and understanding texts is a key resource to be developed through the school years. Students should engage with and produce a wide range of texts, understanding how they differ depending on their purpose, the nature

Blueback

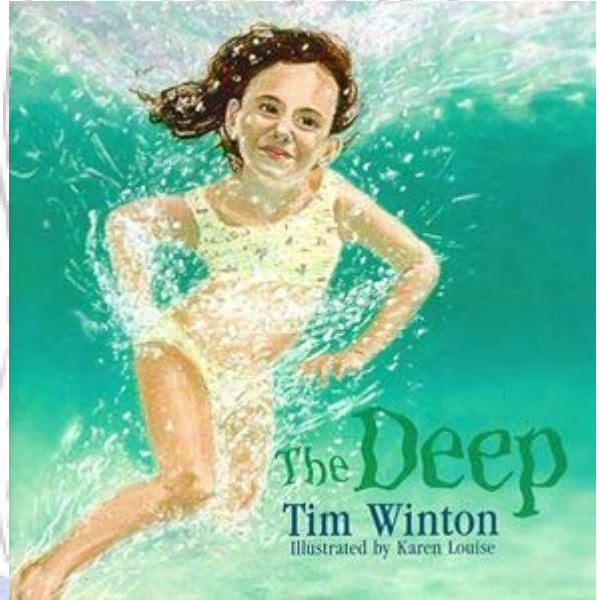
of the audience, their subject matter, context and the mode or medium in use. (ACARA (2009) *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: English. Literature*, page 10).

Focus

The Sea

The sea is a focal point in the life of Abel in *Blueback*. It offers him sustenance of many kinds and it is his understanding of the sea and all of its creatures and his relationship to them that drives him.

The Deep by Tim Winton, illustrated by Karen Louise, is an exploration of a young girl's fear of deeper water. It is another example of Winton's interest in the coastal environment and, in particular, the relationship of people to the sea. In the book, young Alice and her family live near and play in the sea constantly. It is the centre of much of their life, but Alice fears the ocean and can only play at the edges, never venturing into the deeper water where the rest of her family feel at home.



- Use *The Deep* as an example of both how we interpret the sea, in this case through illustration and words, and also how man interacts with this environment.

Other picture books - *Where the Forest meets the Sea* by Jeannie Baker and books such as *First Light* by Crew and Gouldthorpe could be contrasted with *Blueback* to explore both how we interpret the sea and man's interaction with it.

The sea has been used as a symbol in fiction to represent man's struggle against the environment, or his own troubles, over countless centuries and in a variety of cultures. Man has had both a link with, and an aversion to, the sea that has often influenced the way we live our lives. As a geographical obstacle, the sea has both dominated civilizations and divided people. In conquering it, different groups have been able to explore and colonise previously unknown lands.

John F. Kennedy (1917 - 1963), said of the sea:

'All of us have in our veins the exact same percentage of salt in our blood that exists in the ocean, and, therefore, we have salt in our blood, in our sweat, in our tears. We are tied to the ocean. And when

we go back to the sea -- whether it is to sail or to watch it -- we are going back from whence we came.'

The sea can be both a friend and a foe. Its sheer size occasionally makes Abel feel insignificant by comparison. He feels like 'a speck' when compared to the ocean and the coastlines '*long lonely stretches ... made him feel small*' (page 65). It can also be a dangerous place, where even experienced seaman like Mad Macka can meet an untimely end. Macka tempts fate by diving alone, a decision that sees him unable to be helped quickly enough when he has a heart attack (page 38, 40 – 42).

Despite the many threats and dangers posed by the sea, it is a source of great pleasure and wonder for Abel. In many ways it is as much a part of him as the Bay is a part of Dora. It is observed about him:

'He dived in new places, from new islands and boats and beaches, but he felt the same old sea on his body, through his hair, in his ears.'
(page 110)

Assessment

Consider the sea in fiction, poetry, song or film. How is it represented? What words are used to evoke the feel of the sea in *Blueback*? (e.g. page 28) Are there any common elements across different texts?

Focus

Life's Journey

Blueback is the story of Abel's journey through life. The book documents the major events in his life and the people and places that are instrumental in making him the person that he becomes. Central to everything is Abel's relationship to Longboat Bay. When he is away from the bay at school, it is as if life is almost on hold for him; he is '*holding his breath*' (page 93) waiting until he can return to the Bay to resume existence.

There are a number of instances in the text that illustrate the continuum of life and the interconnected nature of all existence. Abel being given Macka's boat by his family is one example (page 59 – 60). We also learn that Abel has grown to look like his dad (page 103) and that Abel's daughter is named Dora in memory of her grandmother (page 139) – one generation takes over from, replaces, the last. Abel choosing to stay in the bay (page 136) after travelling the world is another example of the circle of life, in that we all return, in some way, to where we begin.

Life is seen as an interconnected cycle of continuing growth and regeneration, but also progression. When she is dying, Dora says '*we come from water*' (page 145). Everything is elemental when we pare back the layers to our essential inner core. As well as the suggestion of the cyclical nature of life, there is also the suggestion that no matter what we do, or where we go,

nothing essential changes. Perhaps this is also a nod to the idea that we are, in essence, elemental and unchangeable. About Abel we are told:

'In time he became an expert, someone foreign governments invited for lectures and study tours, but inside he felt like a boy with a snorkel staring at the strange world underwater, wishing he knew how it worked. Blueback still swam through his dreams.' (page 117)

Consider the length of time the bay has existed, what it has experienced, the events it might have seen. Dora muses on this herself when she contemplates the lives of their ancestors and their time on the bay (page 128). Abel's ancestors used the bay in a vastly different way to Abel and his mother.

Assessment

Write a short imaginative piece, possibly based on historical evidence, about a time in the Bay's past or perhaps its future.

Related Reading

Picture Books

Baker, Jeanie *When the Forest meets the Sea*
Crew, Garry & Peter Gouldthorpe *First Light*
Toft, Michelle *A Sea of Words: An ABC of the Deep Blue Sea*

Non Fiction

Nicholson, John *Cedar, Seals and Whaling Ships*

Fiction

Billingsley, Franny *The Folk Keeper*
Bone, Ian *That Dolphin Thing*
Cooper, Susan *Green Boy*
Dickinson, Peter *The Gift Boat*
Gwynne, Phillip *Jetty Rats*
Hemingway, Ernest *The Old Man and the Sea*
Mahy, Margaret *Katangata Twitch*
Orr, Wendy *Nim's Island series*

Film and Television

The Simpsons *Wife Aquatic* (Television episode)
Free Willy (Movie)
Finding Nemo (Animated Movie)
Shark Tale (Animated Movie)
King-Smith, Dick *The Water Horse* (Book and Movie)

Blueback

Other Resources

Blueback has been adapted by Peta Murray for Terrapin Puppet Theatre and Spare Parts Puppet Theatre

The Sea in Poetry

<<http://www.poemhunter.com/poems/sea/>>

About Tim Winton's work

Ben-Messahel, Salhia (2006) *Mind the Country: Tim Winton's Fiction*, University of Western Australia Press.

McGirr, Michael (1999) *Tim Winton: The Writer and His Work*, Macmillan Education.

McPhee, Hilary (editor) *Tim Winton: A Celebration*, National Library of Australia.

Rossiter, Richard and Jacobs, Lyn (editors) (1993) *Reading Tim Winton*, Angus & Robertson.

Saxby, H. M. (1997) *Books in the Life of a Child: Bridges to Literature and Learning*, Macmillan.

Thomas, Roie *Theistic Existentialism in the Fiction of Tim Winton*

(Thesis) Available at: <http://eprints.utas.edu.au/7745/2/Roie_Thomas.pdf>

Tim Winton