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Break of Day by Tony Palmer

Level Year 8 – 9

Background

When I was growing up, my parents were very close friends with a couple called Les and Dorothy Armitage. Les was a 39th battalion veteran, and when I was old enough to understand, my father would sometimes tell me his stories. Later, when I went to college, my best friend from those years was John Canty, whose father (James Canty) was also a 39th veteran ... So, I knew the story, and I knew what it meant to those who were touched by it...During World War I, my grandfather spent four years in a prisoner-of-war camp in Poland. And one of my great-uncles was seriously wounded three times, once at Gallipoli and twice in France. Another uncle was court-martialled for striking his sergeant. Soon after his hearing he was sent back to his battalion where he was killed in action at Polygon Wood. When my grandfather and the surviving uncle returned to civilian life, they never wanted to have anything much to do with ANZAC day. They didn't think it was wrong, but they just wanted to leave that part of their life behind them. I'm fascinated with how their veteran experience is woven into the world-view of those of us who never saw or experienced what they experienced. I was hoping I might be able to depict its complexity in Break of Day.

*I can only hope my novel lets us all take in the deep breath of sorrow, pity and awe, and know that family and friendships are perhaps the most precious gifts we will ever have. Tony Palmer on the website:
<<http://www.breakofdaykokoda.com/>>*

Rural Australia during the Second World War is the initial setting of this engrossing story of family, friendship, enmity, bravery and tragedy. It is told in the first person by, and through the eyes of Murray Barrett, who is eleven years old at the beginning of the story. The reader follows him to war and its aftermath.

The story opens with a group of soldiers negotiating their way to Isurava in Papua New Guinea along the muddy and treacherous Kokoda track as they engage with the Japanese. It then moves back in time to show how Murray, his older brother, Will, and their adversary since childhood, Sid, came to be young men at war, and how war tests their integrity.

Objectives

At Level 5, students read and view imaginative, informative and persuasive texts that explore ideas and information related to challenging themes and issues. They identify the themes and issues

explored in these texts, and provide supporting evidence to justify their interpretations. They produce personal responses, for example, interpretive pieces and character profiles. Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2005) VELS English Domain Level 5 p 23.

Focus: Character

Break of Day features Kokoda and the battle for Isurava, and there are plenty of follow up possibilities to delve into this history given by the author at the end of the book, and on the website mentioned above. But *Break of Day* is also a book that looks at war through the eyes of richly created characters, which will be the focus of this unit.

This accessible novel is a fine study of characters, their motivations and how war changes them and their views of the world. The author sketches even minor ones with a deft touch, such as Frank, in the opening scene in New Guinea – a ‘rough diamond’, perhaps even a petty criminal, but whose sense of responsibility, comradeship and humour allows the faltering Eddie to keep going, and whose friendship with Murray continues after they settle back into civilian life.

Murray – we follow Murray from boyhood, to a precipitous manhood through war. ‘Sometimes a single moment in time can tell you all you need to know about someone. Even if you don’t realise it when it happens’ (p12).

- Using this quote from the author as inspiration, chart the pivotal moments in Murray’s life, in two separate sequences
 - **at home** – where he sees himself as a coward – for instance, his apprehensiveness about playing cricket (p16) when he is unable to shoot the farm dog (p37), running away from the cricket match (p61), the incident with the boar (p90) not being able to hit John Creswell (p141) etc.
 - and **during war** – the opening scene (p1 onwards), when he runs away (p116), in the thick of battle, when he stays with Sid rather than abandon him (pp 165).
- Putting these events alongside each other what do you conclude about Murray’s motivations and character? What does his throwing away of Jack’s medal (p.204) tell us?
- Imagine you are Murray five years into the future. Write a letter to Frank, telling him about your life.

Uncle Jack – the brothers find a photograph of him as young man looking ‘as if there was nothing in the whole world that could ever shake him’ (p24).

- What does he do in the novel? Locate examples such as his finding of Owen (p67) binding an arm with his shirt (p72), his role during the march (pp104).
- Will wishes he had spoken to Uncle Jack about his war but 'what would he have been able to tell me that could change anything?' (p48) **Role play** that conversation between Will and Uncle Jack. You need to get into the characters of both Will and Uncle Jack before you role play them. To 'initiate' yourself into the role, choose an object that would be important to Will or Uncle Jack, that you think represents something fundamental about them.

Will - During the war memories of home support Will (p49); he worries about his parents; he urges Murray not to follow him into war (p50); he attempts to make peace with Sid (p52); he supports the inept Murray during the cricket match (p59).

- Create two portraits of Will – one of him as a teenager and the other after his return from war when we realise he would have shot Sid Archer in cold blood. You can draw, paint, do a photo montage, or computer generated images of him. Compare with others' images and discuss similarities and differences and reasons for them.

Sid Archer – is the arch cricket rival of Will's, a cruel boy who initially hides behind the privilege of wealth and power.

- Why is he such a bully? (p57).
- Was his death inevitable do you think?
- Imagine Sid survived the war and returns to the valley. He becomes responsible for training the junior cricket team. Describe him as a coach – his philosophy, his strategies, his relationships with the team.

Ada Creswell - keeps the family together and is willing to sacrifice her personal happiness for the sake of her family.

- Write her personal journal during the time she decides to marry Sid, goes to Sydney, and then leaves him.

Assessment

Each character in the above exploration has a suggested assessment activity. Ask students to choose one of these for their formal assessment piece.

Further Reading

War and brothers

Metzthen, David *Black Water*
Morpurgo, Michael *Private Peaceful*

War

Gallipoli (television series)
Harrison, Charles Yale *Generals Die in Bed*
Macinnis, Peter *Kokoda Track: 101 days*
Metzthen, David *Boys of Blood and Bone*
Mulligan, David *Angels of Kokoda*
Rosoff, Meg *How I Live Now*

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Break of Day

George Orwell's *1984* and *Animal Farm*
and many more will make a list!