

Unit written by Dr Pam Macintyre & Dr Susan La Marca

Brown Skin Blue **by Belinda Jeffrey**

Year 10 - 11

Background

Do not be put off by the confronting subject matter. In Jeffrey's hands, you are walked through potentially tacky situations with sensitivity and poise...Jeffrey offers even more: a tour de force climax and genuine class in rendering a dream-like watery sequence, which evokes dire hazard, memory, colour, stillness, writhing movement and catharsis. And of course, crocodiles. Read it and roll.

Bill Wootton in *Viewpoint: on books for young adults*, 17 (3) pages 30-31.

Barry Mundy has been sexually abused as a child. Now at seventeen he is quietly courageous as he looks to find himself by laying old ghosts and tracking down his father. Five names on a piece of paper are all he has to go on. Barry tells his story in a still, compelling voice that reveals that he thinks a lot more than he is willing or able to say. He has found friendship and satisfaction in working on the crocodile cruise ships with Boof, Cassie, a terrier called Bait, and with the attractive but confusing Sally. This is simply a terrific book – emotional, powerful and ultimately triumphant, in Barry's quiet way.

Objectives

Through reading, writing, listening to and talking about literature, students extend their understanding of the world and of themselves, and they see how cultural beliefs and values are formed.

Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2009) *VELS English Domain Level 6*. <http://vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/vels/level6.html#>

Students engage in extensive analysis of literary texts, in terms of contextual aspects such as social impact, purpose and message. They also analyse literature texts for technical aspects such as language, plot and character development.

ACARA (2009) *Shape of the Australian Curriculum English. Years 11-12*, page 13

Focus

Identity

Barry is aware that he is on the cusp of adulthood and wants to be certain about the sort of man he will become. He has had a rough life but there is little rancour or self-pity in his telling of his story.

He wonders about his future: *'I have this fantasy that everything angled and prickly about the boy of me might disappear when I become a man'* (page 23).

- What are the *'angled and prickly'* things and how do you think Barra will move beyond them?

'It's not always that simple to whack a label on the way someone looks and say, "He's a so-and-so, and I'm a such-and-such"' (page 16).

- Talk about labels students might put on Barra. Is it hard or easy? Does it change over the course of the novel?

Focus

Metaphoric understandings: Symbolism

Stories operate at levels beyond the surface. Why has the author had Barra work on a crocodile boat?

- Trace references to the crocodiles, and talk about how their symbolic meanings for Barra.
- What do we associate with crocodiles and with what emotions do we view them?
- Is how Barra sees them different, such as on page 4: *'they know their territory.'*

Page 15 *'But if a croc gets you, there's no second chances'* (but he does get one later doesn't he?).

Page 13 *'Boof is like my first croc close up...'*

Page 28 *'But once you know there are crocs in there...it changes the way you look at it.'*

Page 31 *'...I know all the crocs like they're friends to me now.'*

The pivotal chapter 28: *'I'm a boy in a river of tears never cried and I have my own cards to play. I have been this moment all my life.'* (page 197). Tease out what Barra might mean here.

Language

This book is a delight to read because it is written with great control over the words. There is Barry's voice, the vernacular of the Top End, the tangible evocation of the heat and humidity, the emotion that is superbly controlled and all the more powerful because of it.

Invite students to be aware of the language as they read – use post it notes to mark examples they like or think especially powerful or evocative, such as the example of personification below of how sexual abuse is never spoken about.

- *'It scuttles under the floorboards of our houses and shanties and van, like cockroaches. It sits thick and heavy around everything like the dirt'* (page 2).

Similes can be powerful in the students' own writing. Encourage them to substitute similes for adjectives and adverbs and see the differences. Have them write their own to describe particular feelings, places, people and experiences.

Assessment

Sometimes bad things happen to good people and I love characters who let us into the world of black and white and grey and blue. Characters who are unafraid of facing who they are and what they want. This is a quote from Belinda Jeffrey on her website.

Propose the creation of such a character, who is different from the individual student, and who is struggling with who they are and what their life trajectory will be. Students can of course, draw on their own experience, but they will need to get in the skin of someone different to themselves and place that character in a location/situation that will test them. They will need to give voice to the character in terms of thoughts and dialogue.

Offer choice in the way this character is created and expressed: it could be written as a narrative, a poem, a play; acted as mime/role play; drawn as in a graphic novel/storyboard; animated using Powerpoint/Movie maker etc.

Students will present their character to the class and answer three questions about the decisions they made in imagining this person.

Further Reading

Pryor, Boor & McDonald, *Meme Njunjul the Sun*

Lucashenko, Melissa *Killing Darcy*

Metzenthien, David *Finn and the Big Guy; Johnny's Heart Heroes; Falling Forward*

Author's website <http://belindajeffrey.wordpress.com/brown-skin-blue/>