

Unit written by Dr Pam Macintyre and Dr Susan La Marca

***Dare Devils* by Bill Condon**

YEAR 9 - 10

Background

Tony Thorns, 16, new kid at school, new friend of loner Jack Watson has a dodgy heart and not long to live. However, he is never maudlin and doesn't want to live longer; he wants to "live bigger". Tony has a list of things he wants to do before his heart condition catches up with him and he invites Jack to be a partner in working his way through his wish list. Joining them briefly is Cassandra – bright, angry and potential love interest for Thorns, except that he says "I didn't want to start something and then not be around".

"Bill Condon is a bit of a dare devil himself, to write a book like this. He smashes down at least a couple of barriers in teenage fiction. He does death and sex. Sensitively. Without a hint of condescension. And with wry humour"

Bill Wootton in *Viewpoint: on books for young adults*, 15, 2, 2007.

This book is fast and easy to read, full of witty dialogue and excruciatingly funny moments. It also engages with the big questions about friendship, courage, and love and how best to live life. At only 209 pages it is a gift for entertaining classroom study.

Objectives

To explore and engage with the Personal Learning component of VELS:

Students reflect on the ethical aspects of dealing with others such as being honest and encouraging freedom of choice, and the advantages of acting responsibly in social and learning situations. They develop their skills in learning with and from their peers.

Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2005) *VELS, Personal Learning – Physical, Personal and Social Learning*, Level 5 Learning Focus, page 16.

They explore the power of language and the ways it can influence roles and relationships and represent ideas, information and concepts.

Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2005) *VELS English Domain* Level 5 p. 22.

From the author of CBCA Honour Book *No Worries*

Focus: Friendship

"You really want to be friends with someone who is going to die?" (p. 15)

Jack joins Thorns' adventures to tick things off his list, but this friendship is not one-sided. Non-entity, never-be-noticed Jack, learns to embrace life, take risks (a very embarrassing one where gay Sophie is concerned) and that disappointment can make you stronger.

An exploration of the various friendships in the novel fits clearly with the Personal Learning strand of VELS. Students should be encouraged to consider the various friendships whilst making links to their own experiences particularly in relation to their peers.

Focus: A Wish List

Thorns' list includes:

- Win a scrabble tournament
- Ride a race horse on a race track
- Fall in love with a girl and be loved back
- Have sex
- Drive a racing car

Jack is encouraged to make his own list, which includes:

- See his sister again
- Find a girlfriend

Hermann says that there is only one thing left on his list and that is *"to be useful. Just once more."* (p. 89)

What do these lists reveal about the characters?

Assessment

Readers' Theatre

The book has richly written dialogue that begs to be heard to appreciate its skilfulness and what it reveals economically about the character's motivations, behaviours etc. The response medium of readers' theatre would be an excellent way of extending these attributes of the book. The following excerpts would make good starting points:

- Mum meeting Mr Morris, page 100-104
- Climbing on the school roof, page 48-55

From the author of CBCA Honour Book *No Worries*

Possible criteria for an assessment rubric – level of understanding, interpretation and presentation.

Epitaphs / Last Words

Despite its brevity, *Dare Devils* uses language cleverly, evocatively and playfully. For instance, Jack is worried that his own epitaph will be: “*Here lies Jack Watson he played a lot of video games*” (p. 161). This is one of the things that encourages him to see he needs to grab hold of life. There are famous ones that could be researched such as Spike Milligan’s “*Duir mé leat go raibh mé breoite*”. Gaelic for “*I told you I was ill*”.

Similarly, Miles Halter in John Green’s *Looking for Alaska*, is interested in people’s last words. Such as Che Guevera “*Shoot coward you are only going to kill a man*”. Miles does this because he feels that “*last words tell me a lot about who people were, and why they became the sort of people biographies get written about*” (Green, p. 156).

Invite students to write what they think their epitaph might be now, and project what they would like it to be at the end of a long life. Or ask them to make some cryptic or funny last words for famous people such as Britney Spears, Ricky Ponting or Kevin Rudd.

Possible criteria for an assessment rubric: inventive use of language, expressive use of language.

Collage Wish list

Create a collage of ideas for a wish list for your own life in words and pictures. You may like to use a metaphorical as well as an actual list, much as Thorns does in the book, such as the roof climbing for conquering Everest.

Further Reading

Bone, Ian	<i>That Dolphin Thing</i>
Brugman, Alyssa	<i>Walking Naked</i>
	<i>Bucket List</i> (movie)
Dessen, Sarah	<i>The Truth about Forever</i>
Downham, Jenny	<i>Before I Die</i>
Fusillo, Archimede	<i>Sparring with Shadows</i>
Gleitzman, Morris	<i>Two Weeks with the Queen</i>
Green, John	<i>Looking for Alaska</i>
Rosoff, Meg	<i>Just in Case</i>