

Unit written by Dr Pam Macintyre & Dr Susan La Marca

## **So Yesterday by Scott Westerfeld**

**Year 9 – 10**

### **Background:**

Seventeen-year-old Hunter is a 'cool taster' for a multinational sports clothing firm. He narrates the puzzling and sometimes threatening events that surround him and Logo Exile friend, Jen, as they track down Mandy, their employer, who has disappeared in perhaps sinister circumstances. When Jen and Hunter go looking for Mandy, little is as it appears, and they are drawn into pursuing the anti-client, the Jammers.

Where else should this happen but in the heart of cool, New York? Westerfeld is a clever, witty writer who never talks down to adolescents. There are no preachy lessons about being an individual and resisting the group. More subtly, Westerfeld acknowledges that belonging and fitting in is important. But there is also a lot of fun in understanding the created, manipulated measures of being cool and perhaps subverting them.

To be cool or not to be: is it a conscious choice, or the result of accepting manipulation and artificiality? This novel treats adolescents as the savvy people they are, and is ideal for discussion.

### **Objectives**

*The study of English involves students in reading texts...with increasingly complex and abstract issues and ideas.*

*[Students] learn about the way language shapes and reflects attitudes in different times and places.*

Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2008) *The VELS, Discipline-based learning, English, Level 6, p. 38*

### **Focus**

#### **Being cool**

- There is much to stimulate discussion with students about the state of coolness, such as p112 'Cool is all about context'. Do they agree and can they think of any examples?
- p237 Jen says '...cool hunters...market research, focus groups, and all that crap. They squeeze the life out of everything'. Talk about what she means and identify points of agreement and disagreement in the class.
- p119 Hunter is anxious because he is alone at a party. 'No one likes to feel left out'. Is that what being cool is all about? Not being left out?

- Although Hunter is a cool hunter he is rather scathing of the 'coolsters'. For example on page 219 he says *'I recognized one of them from our coffee shop, probably one of those guys writing a first novel set in a coffee shop'*. Is there 'cool cool' and 'pretentious cool'? Brainstorm other examples of 'coolsters'. Does everyone agree?
- On page 55 Jen wonders about how fast uncool happens. She didn't think making something 'cool' was such an industry, that it just happened naturally. Discuss opinions. Set up a class blog of current uncool happenings - with links if appropriate.

**Ideas:** Westerfeld has packed the book full of provocative ideas about how contemporary society seeks to position us, providing rich sources for sharing responses.

- For example he writes that *'Two seconds after switching on a television show, we know whether it's from the late 1980s or last year and whether it's cop show or a sitcom or a made-for-TV movie...all this from subtle clues of lighting, camera angles, and the quality of the videotape. Instantly'* (p.124). Visual literacy is increasingly warranted in society (and is part of curriculum documents) so here is chance to see how visually literate students are. Compile a test of quick excerpts for the class to see if the above quote is true, OR set it as a task for them. There are plenty of clips available on YouTube.
- Hunter says that *'most magazines make more money from selling their subscriber list than they do off newsstands. It's big business to know how people perceive themselves...a magazine is also a bible for a lifestyle: it tells readers what's going on, what to think about, and, most importantly what to buy next'* (p202 ). Do a class survey about what magazines are bought and read to test the validity of Hunter's assertion. Graph it to present a sociogram of the class's recreational reading interests.

**The pyramid:** P19 describes the pyramid or 'cool hierarchy': a good place to start discussion:

- Innovators are at the top of the pyramid, that is the first to do, but being an innovator is not an easy thing to be, p.21-22.
- Trendsetters – always ready to jump on board – when they pick up the trend it becomes cool. They have to determine whether innovation is cool or just crazy.
- Early Adopters
- Consumers
- Laggards – are proud in mullets and resist all change. On page 177 Hunter says that they are so ancient, so yesterday, that they're totally cutting edge, such as skaters, while on page 236, Mwadi prefers to call them 'Classicists'. What's in a name? Is one term pejorative and the other accepting? What do you think?
- Discuss whether the class agrees with the description of the components of this pyramid. Are there any categories missing? What about Logo Exiles? On page 11 Hunter says that Jen was in *'Logo Exile uniform'*. Isn't that a contradiction in terms? What about Hunter being in *'cool hunting camouflage'*? What is that 'uniform'?

**Humour:** Westerfeld's satirical wit is fun to explore.

- For instance, on page 116 are Hunter's ideas about the contents of the magazine *Hoi Aristoi* – *'essays on mink coat maintenance'*, *'bargain buys for the bulimic's bathroom'*. Humour also has a more serious function and this excerpt is a good springboard for examining target ('scuse the pun) audiences. For example, compare the ubiquitous catalogues of Best and Less, Kmart, Target, Myer, David Jones. Who

is depicted in them (demographic) and who is not? Who are they aimed at? Imagine that they include articles, and devise some titles (as did Hunter) that would be aimed at/revealing of their audiences.

### Assessment

- Students are to create their own magazine (titles/articles/ads) targeted at a specific audience that they know well (music, sport, movies, games, TV) – either seriously or satirically.
- In partners, devise descriptions of well known brands, objects, franchises, movies, etc a la Westerfeld (p11 ‘a certain computer company whose name is a fruit often used in making pies’; p17 ‘trilogy of movies about cyber reality and frozen kung-fu whose title ends in X’; p34 ‘a certain Swedish mega group whose name is a four-letter word’, etc.)
- Have a class presentation of them and record which are easily decoded. Invite the class to assess the cleverest.
- Add to the list of innovator’s Hall of Fame on the last page of the book. Identify other ‘firsts’ the class has often wondered about and find their origins. Develop a class wiki.

### Related Reading

- Klein, Naomi, *No Logo*
- Gibson, William *Pattern Recognition*
- Bone, Ian *Song of an Innocent Bystander*
- Spurlock, Morgan *Supersize me!* (documentary)  
*Don’t Eat this Book*

# SO YESTERDAY

A NOVEL BY SCOTT WESTERFELD

