

Unit written by Dr Pam Macintyre & Dr Susan La Marca

Swerve by Philip Gwynne

Year 9 - 10

Background

Hugh is a talented, young cellist with a promising future and an important entrance exam looming that everyone expects him to do very well in. His progress is assured. But Hugh's newly discovered grandfather, Poppy, asks him to go on a road trip to Uluru; a trip that Poppy feels he needs to make, and he suggests this trip is taken in not just any car, but in a 1969 Holden HT Monaro. Though it goes against what others might expect of Hugh, this is an opportunity and a trip he cannot refuse.

The journey that Hugh and Poppy embark on is about the road, the car and the miles travelled to their destination, but it is also about the landscape through which they travel and the people they engage with along the way. Hugh and Poppy have their lives to play out and characters like Bella, a hitchhiker they pick up on the way who has her own drama, are part of this story. This is an engaging book that drags you down a dusty, red outback road on a journey that is fun and interesting and, ultimately, moving.

'Swerve is a terrific little 'road-movie' of a book...Gwynne's writing is strong and vivid, his characterisation sharp and efficient and his dialogue truthful, often witty and always to-the-point. The premise is exciting, emotional, engaging and believable. Its pace is breathtaking, exhilarating, riveting. Swerve moves along with the same kind of grunt that might be associated with its most unusual character; the "...yellow with black stripes...tiger out of its cage..." 1969 Holden Monaro GTS 350VB....its to do with what lies at the heart of any good book.... Great storytelling'

(*'Swerve by Phillip Gwynne'* by Chris Thompson in *Viewpoint: on books for young adults*, 17, (4), Summer, 2009, page 16)

Objectives

Gwynne's book engages with the Australian landscape in a meaningful way, and with a range of characters that both reinforce and confront the idea of Australian identity. As such it sits well with the most recent draft document on the Australian English curriculum which states:

Studying literature helps shape personal, cultural and national identities (ACARA (2009) Shape of the Australian Curriculum: English. Literature, page 8).

Literature, which is fundamental to the English curriculum, uses language to represent, re-create, shape and explore human experience.... Through reading, writing, listening to and talking about literature, students extend their understanding of the world and of themselves.

Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2005) *VELS English Domain Level 6*, page 26.

Focus

Swerve

As a foreword of sorts a dictionary definition of 'Swerve' appears on the page preceding page one. It is the definition from the *Macquarie Concise Dictionary*, it says:

'to turn aside abruptly in movement or direction; deviate suddenly from the straight or direct course'. (unpaged).

How does each of the characters in the text 'swerve'?

Focus

Character

*Every character in Swerve has their own story and all of them add to a dense and layered tale. In some ways they all let each other and themselves down, but the cleverness of the writing makes the ambiguity of each character just one more thing to like about this book. ('Swerve by Phillip Gwynne' by Chris Thompson in *Viewpoint: on books for young adults*, 17, (4), Summer, 2009, page 16)*

Swerve is full of intriguing and entertaining characters, and it is Gwynne's engaging language that brings them to life.

In particular, Gwynne's physical descriptions of various characters enliven the story. Some are humorous, others enlightening.

For example:

- the Bodybuilder and the Porn star (page107)
- the hippies in the van at Uluru (pages 190-191)

Assessment

In *Swerve*, it is Gwynne's main character Hugh's observations of those around him that give us the descriptions of the various characters that inhabit the story.

Write a very short piece, no more than a paragraph or two, which explores a 'character'. Imagine that you see this intriguing person while passing through

somewhere on your way to nowhere in particular. What catches your eye? What stays with you?

Focus

Road Trip (Coming of Age/Rite of Passage)

The road trip in *Swerve* is a journey of many kinds.

- Consider the role of the road trip in the lives of Hugh, Poppy and Bella. What does it mean to each of them?
- What do they each learn on their journey? Could they have learnt the same things staying at home? Why is the journey a crucial component of the learning experience?

The road trip, or the traditional journey, is an interesting motif in fiction. Movies such as *Bran Neu Dae* or *Priscilla Queen of the Desert* are good examples of Australian road trips that are also journeys of discovery which define a coming of age or a pivotal moment in the lives of each of one or more characters. The movie *Little Miss Sunshine* is a similarly quirky tale of a car, its unusual occupants, and a road trip to a destination that represents many things to all concerned.

This motif is also present in other great fiction, poetry and song. Brainstorm possible examples. The following titles all contain a physical journey of some form, but they are all different. You may like to include them your discussion:

- *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy
- *Paper Towns* by John Green
- *The Road not Taken* by Robert Frost (poem)
- *A Place Like This* by Steven Herrick
- *All That Glitters* by Ron Bunney
- *Bran Neu Dae* (film)
- *Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (film)
- *Little Miss Sunshine* (film)
- *City of the Beasts* by Isabel Allende
- *Solace of the Road* by Siobhan O'Dowd
- *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac
- *Travels with Charley* by John Steinbeck
- *Blue Highways* by William Least Heat Moon
- *Thelma and Louise* (film)
- *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain
- *Tracks* by Robyn Davidson

Assessment

Discuss any, or all, of these quotations in relation to the text. Encourage students to create arguments in relation to these statements by referring to specific examples from the text.

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

Robert Frost (1874 - 1963), *The Road Not Taken*

If you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there.

Lewis Carroll (1832 - 1898)

Faithless is he that says farewell when the road darkens.

J. R. R. Tolkien (1892 - 1973)

*We don't receive wisdom; we must discover it for ourselves after a
journey that no one can take for us or spare us.*

Marcel Proust (1871 - 1922)

The longest journey is the journey inward.

Dag Hammarskjold (1905 - 1961)

*Success is a journey, not a destination. The doing is often more
important than the outcome.*

Arthur Ashe

Related Reading

Cameron, Peter *Someday this Pain will be Useful to You*

Condon, Bill *Dare Devils*

Dessen, Sarah *Just Listen*

Earls, Nick *48 Shades of Brown*

Earls, Nick *After January*

Green, John *Looking for Alaska*

Green, John *An Abundance of Katherines*

Green, John *Paper Towns*

Herrick, Steven *A Place Like This*

Metzenthien, David *Jarvis 24*

Murphy, Kirsten *The King of Whatever*

Dowd, Siobhan *Solace of the Road*

Tasjian, Janet *The Gospel According to Larry*