

Unit written by Dr Pam Macintyre and Dr Susan La Marca

***The Black Dog Gang* by Robert Newton**

Year 7-8

Background

Set in 1900 in The Rocks area of Sydney, this book explores with humour and a deft touch the lives of a group of young boys – The Black Dog Gang. Frankie is poor but loved, an intelligent child with a love of words. His neighbour Mickey, a complex, troubled character, is both neglected and abused by a violent father.

Together the boys join forces with other local lads to make a place for themselves in what is a harsh but exciting world of poverty, dirt and hard work. When plague breaks out in the town, the government offers money for captured rats in an effort to get rid of these disease carriers. But the boys, ever resourceful, decide that perhaps breeding rats will be a quicker way of making money. This plan has dire consequences for Frankie's family. Mickey, meanwhile, survives a series of brutal treatments at the hand of his father and there comes a point where he cannot take anymore. This is a story about family, friendship and loyalty. With accurate reference to time and place, Newton has created an historical piece that rings true as an insight into life and its meaning in any time.

Historical context

The Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) offers scope for the use of quality literature to support the exploration of ideas, issues, values and opinions. These explorations can work well across discipline areas and, in the case of this book, encourage students to see links across the humanities and the study of the English language and even discussions about social issues of poverty and disease control. The interdisciplinary strand (of VELS):

... identifies a range of knowledge, skills and behaviours which cross disciplinary boundaries and are essential to ensuring students are prepared as active learners and problem-solvers for success at school and beyond. This strand focuses on ways of thinking, communicating, conceiving and realising ideas and information.

Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2005) VELS, *Interdisciplinary Learning Strand*, Level 6, page 93.

And the Physical, Personal and Social Learning strand suggests:

Students explore and consider different perspectives and articulate and justify their own opinions on local, national and global issues. They use reflective thinking to refine their own opinions, values and allegiances. They apply their knowledge and skills in a range of community-based activities.

Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2005) *VELS, Physical, Personal and Social Learning - Civics and Citizenship*, Level 2, page 24.

In the more specific discipline of humanities it is suggested that learning is embedded in the activity when:

...students use a range of primary and secondary sources to investigate the past. With support, they frame research questions and plan their own inquiries. They comprehend and question sources and make judgments about the views expressed, the completeness of the evidence, and the values represented.

Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2005) *VELS, Discipline-based learning, Humanities – History*, Level 4, page 56.

Focus: ‘Around the Rugged Rocks’ – Primary sources (this powerpoint can be found with *The Black Dog Gang* Teachers’ Notes)

The accompanying PowerPoint titled ‘Around the Rugged Rocks’ offers primary source material to support and extend the study of *The Black Dog Gang* in line with the positioning statements from the VELs.

These photographs, most of which were taken in 1900 when the book is set, offer support for students in their visualisation of the action. Those that depict living conditions, dress, customs and even architecture provide starting points for discussion and further research. As *The Black Dog Gang* is historically accurate in its description of streets and behaviours as well as events, relationships and comparisons can be drawn between the primary sources on the PowerPoint and the book.

Assessment

In line with the VELs focus of interdisciplinary study and the use of historical records, a joint study with humanities could be created. Fuelled by the historical accuracy of *The Black Dog Gang*, research could be conducted on a number of themes that are present in the book that also touch many other countries and historical periods. Themes such as - poverty, class, education, the importance of family or plague, could be researched and explored. Reference back to the book and comparison between the research findings and the book will strengthen students understanding of the book and the issues it contains.

Focus: Dialogue

The dialogue in *The Black Dog Gang* is rich and rewarding; offering an insight into the characters it encourages an understanding of the people and the lives that they lived. In a society not dominated by modern technologies talk was communication and entertainment in its many forms.

The interactions between the boys from the gang, in particular, are worthy of further study and analysis. The following scenes could be the basis for further discussion:

- The discussion that takes place when forming the gang (pp.64-7)
- Fight scenes (p23 and pp.37-8)
- Discussion of strap (pp.31-3)

Assessment

To explore the power of dialogue students could write a brief scene of dialogue between two characters. Without extra descriptive writing the students must use the character's words to convey setting, attitudes and values or emotions.

Much of the dialogue in the text is humorous. Rhyming slang and old-fashioned expressions offer an insight into the time. Students could explore the use of colloquial language, the wonderful turns of phrase of the Australian working poor. Slightly cheeky, but always clever, these descriptions lend a historical authenticity to the text and engage readers in the world of words.

Some examples of this language are:

- *'ragged arse school'* (p21)
- *'tougher than a blacksmith's hammer'* (p21)
- *'Protestant heart as orange as the setting sun'* (p26) (describing Hardcastle the teacher)
- *'as careful as a pair of chooks on Christmas day'* (p41)
- *'more cheek than a tart at the Governor's Ball'* (p5)

To further extend students understanding of this very Australian style of speech, students could explore examples in other texts. Poetry, movies or TV, even older relatives may offer examples. The students could be encouraged to write their own. This could be extended to incorporate the very Australian rhyming slang, eg:

- Apple sauce – horse
- Steak and kidney – Sydney

- Dead horse – tomato sauce
From <<http://jendi.bowmeow.com.au/rhymingslang1.html>>

The changes in the way we have communicated could be explored with students rewriting a section of dialogue from *The Black Dog Gang* using the words of our own time. Reworked versions of famous texts could be shown as impetus for this work – modern versions of Shakespeare, Jane Austen etc. alongside the original works.

Related reading

Historical setting

Not all of these texts are from the same historical period, but all are set in Australia and all are comparable, or relevant, to the historical setting of *The Black Dog Gang*.

Mama's Babies by Gary Crew
The Bamboo Flute by Garry Disher
Runner by Robert Newton
Playing Beatie Bow by Ruth Park
The Harp in the South by Ruth Park
Market Blues by Kirsty Murray
Children of the Wind series by Kirsty Murray

Plague

Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague by Geraldine Brooks
The Plague of Quentaris (fantasy on the plague theme) by Gary Crew
Lady Dance by Jackie French
Plagues and Federation: The Diary of Kitty Barnes, The Rocks, 1901 by Vashti Farrer
A Company of Fools by Deborah Ellis
Forged in Fire by Ann Turnball
Plague 99 by Jean Ure

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