

TEACHERS' NOTES

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DEADLY, UNNA?

Phillip Gwynne

The story and its themes

Deadly, Unna? is one year in the life of fourteen year-old Gary 'Blacky' Black. Like most boys his age, he plays football, worries about what to say to girls, shirks responsibility and has problems at home. However, through his brief friendship with Dumby Red, one of the local Aborigines, Blacky learns important lessons about human dignity, racism, justice, death, courage, family and friendship.

As the novel opens, Blacky is worried about the imminent grand final and the responsibility he carries as the team's new first ruck. His opponent will be the unstoppable 'Thumper'. To protect himself, Blacky has devised the 'Thumper tackle' which is the ultimate defence of the coward: it looks like he is trying to tackle his opponent but is really an elaborate dodge.

Blacky spends much of that winter dodging responsibility in a similar manner. By the end of the following summer, however, he understands the importance of making a stand and is able to do so. His brothers and sisters join him in his stand and the novel ends with Blacky at peace with himself, happy in his relationship with his siblings, and confident that he will be able to deal with the problems that will come with the morning.

The setting and structure

The novel is set in recent times on a peninsula in South Australia. Blacky and his family live in the 'the Port' where the whites, or Goonyas, live. Dumby lives out at 'the Point' with the Nungas, the Aborigines.

The Port is a typical sleepy coastal town. In winter, the only action in town is the local football competition; in summer, action revolves around the beach and the stimulus provided by the annual influx of 'campers'. The novel is therefore divided into two sections: Winter and Summer. In winter, in the football team, the short friendship between Blacky and Dumby develops and Blacky begins to see and resent the racism in his community. In summer, he is smitten by the camper, Cathy, and in his desire for her approval, he forgets his Nunga friends.

The summer also brings the tragic death of Dumby. Blacky's determination to attend Dumby's funeral marks a turning point. He knows his actions will put an end to his blossoming friendship with Cathy and bring the full weight of his father's rage upon him. Nevertheless, he does get to the funeral and the experience gives him the courage to make a further stand. It is clear when he and his siblings paint over the 'BOONGS PISS OFF' graffiti, how much he has matured. He is standing up for something important. Although he knows that he can't change the attitudes of the Port overnight and the slogan may well reappear, he also knows he has at last taken responsibility for something he *can* change, 'not forever, but for tonight anyway'.

Year levels

Deadly, unna? is suitable for study at years eight and nine.

Questions while you're reading

These questions could be tackled by small groups and the answers given orally to the class, or they could be set as short answer questions for classwork or homework.

1. What picture do we get of Blacky in the first chapter? Consider, for example, his sense of humour.
2. In Chapter 4, Arks takes Blacky for some extra rucking practice. Before this Blacky has given the impression that he is always making fun of Arks. How does he feel towards Arks at the end of this chapter and why does he say to Arks, 'Don't worry, we're gonna win this one'?
3. We first meet Dumby Red in Chapter 5. What is your impression of him in this first meeting? What is Blacky's impression of him?
4. In Chapters 6, 7 and 8 we get a good view of Blacky's family life. How would you describe it? What sort of relationship does he have with his siblings and why is Best Team-man called Best Team-man?
5. Why had Blacky never been to the Point? (Chapter 10)
6. Why does Blacky no longer go near his father's boat? (Chapter 11) How does he feel about his father's reaction? (p.76)
7. Why, after his spectacular mark, does Dumby pass the ball to Clemboy?
8. Why do you think there are so few Nungas at the Grand Final Do?
9. How does Blacky feel when he sees Clarence sitting underneath 'BOONGS PISS OFF'? (pp121-122)
10. Why does Blacky decide to give up football?
11. How would you describe Big Mac's attitude to the Aborigines in the back bar on page 156? And what is his reaction to Tommy Red's story on page 160?
12. Why do you think Blacky doesn't laugh at the joke this time? (page 161)
13. Why do you think Blacky denies knowing Clarence in Chapter 28?
14. What is the attitude of the people of the Port to Dumby's shooting? (Chapters 29-30)
15. What advice does Blacky get from *The Brady Bunch* and how does it help him?
16. When Blacky arrives at the Point, he realises that at least one of the things said about Aborigines in the front bar is wrong. What is it?
17. What happens to Blacky while he is viewing Dumby's body?
18. How important do you think it is that Blacky says 'Nukkin ya' to Clarence on page 234?
19. Why might Darcy be smiling when he says, 'I daresay they should young'un. I daresay they should'? (p.251)

20. What could be the meaning of Blacky's dream in Chapter 38?

Questions for reflection

After reading the book, the class could discuss these questions:

1. On page 9, Blacky remarks about how labels such as 'gutless wonder' stick. What do you think about such labels? How important are they and how should people deal with them?
2. When Clarence asks Blacky why stars die, he says because they burn out (p.125). Could this metaphor apply to Dumby? Was he a bright star which burnt out?
3. Discuss how Blacky feels about responsibility. Compare, for example, how he feels on pp50-51 and 59 with how he feels at the end when Darcy talks about 'they'.
4. Blacky uses the name 'Best Team-man' ironically for his brother, Tim. He also refers to him as a 'lemming'. What are the positive qualities of being a 'team-person' and what are the negative qualities?
5. What examples of prejudice and discrimination do we see in the novel? Would you behave differently?
6. What do you think the author is wanting readers to think about when they are reading this book? Consider themes such as racism, prejudice, friendship, family relationships, courage and doing what's right.
7. There are many humorous characters in this novel: Darcy, Pickles, Arks, Shirl and Grills Lillie, to name a few. What do these characters add to the story? Are they necessary?
8. Is there any problem associated with telling a story about a teenager as a first-person narrative? Does it sound believable? Would it be any better told in the third person?
9. Many novels written for young adults these days have fantasy or supernatural elements. *Deadly, Unna?* however, relies on a realistic narrative and richly and carefully drawn characters. How do you respond to this? Do you prefer 'realistic' novels?
10. Cathy seems to be the typical stuck-up, spoilt rich girl. Do you think her character suffers for being a stereotype or cliché?

Creative and personal writing

1. Imagine it is after Dumby's funeral and Pickles has asked him why he went to a 'boong funeral'. What might Blacky say? How might he explain his actions and the change in his attitudes?
2. What do you understand by the term 'prejudice'? Have you ever suffered from it and have you ever been guilty of it?
3. We hear a lot these days about the need for 'Aboriginal reconciliation'. Once you know exactly what this term means, write about what *you* think needs to be done to achieve reconciliation between indigenous and white Australians.
4. Blacky learns that he doesn't need to be a football hero or to brave a storm at sea to avoid the 'gutless wonder' label. Write about a time when someone proved his or her courage by standing up for what is right.

Subjects for research

1. The Point, especially in its proximity to the Port, sounds like one of the many Aboriginal reserves or missions that are now Aboriginal communities. Some of these have tragic histories of hardship, suffering and neglect. Perhaps there is such a community near you. Conduct some research on a place such as Lake Tyers in eastern Victoria.
2. Conduct research into the 'Stolen Children' inquiry. The correct name for this report is: *Bringing them home: National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families.*
3. Research the current conditions under which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders live in Australia. A useful website is the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation at: www.austlii.edu.au/rsjlibrary/

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