

TEACHERS' NOTES

WRITTEN BY ROBYN SHEAHAN-BRIGHT



PHILLIP GWYNNE

NUKKIN YA Phillip Gwynne

Blacky's asking for trouble. There's been a wall of silence between the Nungas at the Point and the people at the Port since Dumby's death. The footy team's fallen apart, the Nungas from the Point don't come in to the Port to shop anymore and the annual summer migration of tourists hasn't happened. The town's really suffering. Blacky's unsure about applying for a scholarship, and his mate Pickles is joining his dad on his boat. Team-man's in love, and starting to talk about agricultural college because his girlfriend lives on a farm. Everything's changing, and Blacky still doesn't know whose team he wants to be on. Then he falls for Clarence, Dumby's sister. Blacky knows that a romance with a Nunga will fire up people's aggressions and prejudices even further. But what's a guy to do? He's in love.

Summary

'After that I kept thinking about interesting and weird, the difference between the two. Team-man said they were like chalk and cheese. He was wrong. They were more like milk and cheese. Chalk could never become cheese. Milk could though. And that's what had happened to me. All I had to do was to become more milky, more fluid. But not too milky. Then I'd become boring. And boring's as bad as weird. It was a tricky one.' (p 24)

'Difference' is the main theme of this novel, as it was in *Deadly, Unna?* Not only is Blacky different from his Aboriginal friend Dumby Red, and Dumby's sister Clarence, but he's different from most of the people around him. Blacky is the hero, the anti-hero, and for a time the villain of the piece – at least in the eyes of the town. His life is never going to be simple. He's smart, sensitive, tough and yet fragile too. He's been wounded twice now – once emotionally and once physically – and he's done things he's not proud of. There's no one to go in to bat for Blacky. His dad is a hard man; his mum's too worn down to assist; his siblings are all too young and too battle-shy to be any use to him. Clarence tells him he's 'weird' (p 158). He's smart, and that can be a real hazard.

Blacky's character is defined by difference – he's different to his dad, who likes fishing, and drinking and mouthing off; he's different to his mum, whom he loves, but can't understand. How could she put up with dad and the siblings year after year?

He's also different to his siblings – different to Team-man, the eldest, who's never shown much interest in anything until the eldest Tobin girl started to take an interest in him; different to Shaz, who's too 'neat' to be a member of their family; and different to the others who are too young to interact meaningfully with him. He's different to his mates, and his best friend Pickles is a complete mystery to him – he's not even sure he likes him. The men in the town are a peculiar bunch, though he likes the football coach, Arks, and he likes Old Darcy, next door, who is really the only person he talks to, because he's 'sort of in-between' (p 196) the adults and the kids. But now Darcy's dead, so he's no use as a confidante though Blacky still tries to talk to him sometimes. Blacky knows he's different to Clarence, simply because of her cultural background, but he also knows that he's never felt so connected to anyone.

This framework of 'difference' is used to explore a further range of dichotomies or contrasting ideas. Black or white? Good or bad? Weak or strong? Blacky discovers that answers to these questions are not easy ones, and that there's rarely a simple 'opposite' to any concept.

Racial issues are not portrayed simplistically. Gwynne steers a delicate balance in showing the prejudices of local people. For example, Blacky, despite his love for Clarence and Dumby, and his respect for the people at the Point, is capable of outbursts such as, 'How I hated Lovely. How I hated Clarence. How I hated them all. All those dirty boongs' (p 221), when he's been injured by Lovely. Racism and its insidious power is subtly drawn. The local policeman's consignment of Lovely to a court hearing, simply on the strength of Blacky's rather weak testimony, is frighteningly credible: 'I reckon we'll be doing society a favour if we put him behind bars.' (p 293) Veiled racism – clothed in benevolence and the awarding of hand-outs – is also acknowledged in Clarence's ironic observation, 'Got some scholarship to go to art school in town. Somebody feeling sorry for us Nungas again.' (p 317)

Fight or flight? Another theme is the resolution of conflict. How do you tackle aggression, deal with anger, fight prejudice? Should you allow people to criticise and belittle you or should you stand up for your rights? Blacky's learned a lot about passive resistance from living with his dad. He's learned from Dumby's mob too, when he took part in their dignified, grief-stricken funeral for Dumby Red. So how can he reconcile all he's learned with the fact that the guy who's beaten him up is Dumby and Clarence's cousin? The idea of a war is constantly evoked symbolically, and sport is used in both books as a metaphor, another form of conflict, which assists in the exploration of adversity. Blacky's star-crossed romance with Clarence is like that of Romeo and Juliet; they're embroiled in a bitter family feud between two conflicting cultures, like that between the Capulets and the Montagues. (The fight between Lovely and Blacky equates with the fight when Mercutio, and then Tybalt, are killed.)

Human dignity is a fundamental theme. The Pride of the Port is the name the town gives the ketch. The idea of dignity and pride in your own achievements is explored in the two plot lines. Everyone needs a sense of approbation. If you don't feel that your efforts are appreciated, you lack a basic necessity of life. Blacky desperately needs someone's support, but the adults in his life have largely failed him. Just as surely, the town is failing in its sense of itself. There is no mutual respect between the Nungas and the Port people. Reconciliation can only be based on self-understanding.

This town is in the throes of the sort of dislocation suffered by many Australian towns. The bank and the post office are closed. It needs an industry, and tourism seems to be the only option, but what do they have that tourists would find interesting? Perhaps the footy team? The spelling failures of the local signwriter? Should they commission their own 'big thing' – like a 'Big Squid', as suggested by Big Mac at the pub? Or could they establish an Elvis Museum as Radio Leonie suggested? The desperation of these suggestions is amusing, but true to life. They settle on the Chalkie's suggestion that they should restore an old windjammer to celebrate the shipping history of the past. The trouble is that the windjammer is a ketch, and it's wrecked, and the Chalkie knows nothing about seacraft, except what he's read in books. Luckily some of the local sea-salts like Blacky's father become interested, and set to the task of helping the chalkie getting it seaworthy again. In the process, perhaps the community spirit (which is what they've really been searching for) has resurfaced in time to save the town.

Male roles are an important theme. 'I wasn't used to men like him – men who didn't drink schooners down the pub, or follow the footy.' (p 77) How should a man act? Blacky doesn't know how to talk to girls, or to 'win on' to them, but Clarence teaches him what to do. Team-Man is besotted and thinks that the elder Tobin's 'rooting' is ace. The adult men in the town aren't offering any real advice to the juniors, and even the Chalkie seems at a loss with his emotions, and keeps his romance with one of the women from the Point secret for much of the novel. Blacky is hilariously sarcastic about stereotypical male behaviour. eg "“Bloody oath,” I said. There's something about bouncing along in the back of a ute. It makes you want to say things like bloody oath.' (p 269)

Love, romance and sex are related themes. 'What if love doesn't exist? What if it's some sort of conspiracy, sponsored by Mills & Boons and the people who grow flowers and the chocolate manufacturers and singers of country music and all the other people who profit from love? Let's face it, love is Big Business.' (p 194) Blacky is grappling with the uncertainties of love and the confused allegiances he feels. His choice to have a relationship with Clarence seems simple, until he's beaten up. His disappointment in love is further exacerbated by his discovery that Lovely's words about Blacky's dad were right. Blacky takes the blame for burning the ketch to punish his dad, because of what he's done to Mum and because he's cast a cloud over Blacky's own love for Clarence. Dad 'doing it with gins' makes what he and Clarence have between them somehow 'dirty'. People might see him as being no better than his dad. He therefore takes responsibility for an act of outrage that destroys the town's euphoria over their project. Their 'love affair with the ketch' is obliterated just as his love for Clarence has become seemingly impossible. Even though they manage to spend one night together, Blacky is aware that this is no happy ending.

Parent/child relationships are a constant problem in this town. None of the adults seem to understand their kids. Only Blacky and Darcy assume a relationship, in the no man's land created by their vast age difference. Blacky and his dad are 'as different as chalk and cheese'. He hopes for odd moments of reconciliation, but his dad is destined to find Blacky 'half the man' he is, and also to disappoint his son. His dad never talks to anyone, except to brag about himself; and Blacky, like most kids, tells his dad only the things he hopes will please him. So when a crisis occurs they haven't any grounds for going forward. Communication has failed. 'I'll go it alone then!' (p 326) are Blacky's parting words to his dad.

Choices and responsibility are another theme. Blacky doesn't know whether to apply for a scholarship, to go out with Clarence, or to avoid the confrontations the relationship will bring. And the message is that often kids who appear to have a choice, don't have one at all. Could Blacky escape the lot mapped out for him? Despite glimpses of possible recovery, he seems destined for some pretty tough times.

Blacky keenly suffers the frustrations of growing up. Every teenager feels helpless sometimes. 'Everybody around me was growing up – Pickles with his fishing, Team-man with his bum-fluff and his girlfriend. Everybody, that is, except for me.' (p34) Even Shaz has started her periods without his knowing. This boredom sometimes causes teenagers to 'break out', as Blacky does on the night Pickles talks him into going 'spotlightin'.

Death is a reminder of our own mortality. Blacky's two best mates – one old and one young – have died, and Blacky suffers a confused grief over both. 'Darcy's dead. And then I started to think about me dead. I wanted to wake him up. I wanted him to tell me that I wouldn't die. That I'd live forever.' (p 137) He's frightened; what Lovely did to him was as close to death as he's been, and he's scared of it happening again. How close is fear to hate?

Activity: Are there any other important themes?

Plot

Gwynne is a disarming writer. Just when you think that he is writing a novel of first love in a romantic vein, he hits you with Blacky's savage beating by Lovely, Clarence's jealous cousin, who warns him against seeking out 'black velvet'. Not only does Lovely beat Blacky up on Clarence's sixteenth birthday, but he sows other seeds of doubt in Blacky's mind by implying that Blacky's dad takes sexual refuge with the 'gins' out at the Point. This is a novel that pulls no punches. It shows weakness in all the characters and defies expectations of how the narrative might resolve itself.

The plot line tracing the theme of community spirit comes to an abrupt ending too. There's a ro-

mantic sense of everyone in town coming together when they decide to restore the windjammer (ketch), as a tourist attraction. Even Blacky's dad gets involved. 'The Port, I decided, wasn't such a bad place after all. I looked around at my fellow workers, my fellow residents and then at the ketch. We'd accomplished a lot today. Bloody oath we had!' (p 235) You feel that the town is progressing towards a new sense of self-worth and pride, when another act of senseless violence also destroys that dream.

Activity: Did you imagine the plot going in the directions it did? What possible alternative endings might the novel have had?

Structure

The novel is structured chronologically. Each scene furthers the action in a carefully orchestrated way. The two plot lines work their way towards a joining point, connected by Blacky. Each chapter builds towards a crisis in Blacky's life.

Activity: Imagine if the plot were told as a series of flashbacks. What effect would that have on our understanding of events?

Characters

Blacky is a deep thinker. He's a fish out of water and he's always known it. He's cleverer than his classmates but because he's poor he doesn't have an easy entrée to the advantages of education. He's frustrated by the expectations of impending manhood, but also sarcastic about them. He desperately needs someone's support, but that's a commodity in short supply in this town.

Clarence is confident, loving, pretty and talented. Her quick wit and positive attitude help her to deal with racism and offer her easy entry into people's lives.

Dad is a loud mouth who loves boating, boozing and brawling, and who generally makes Blacky's life hell.

Mum is a frustrated and yet resilient person, who must have loved dad once, but life's been tough on her. She can't do the things she wants to, like accepting the nomination to be on the committee revitalising the Port, because she has all the kids to look after.

The '*siblings*' are not really distinguished from each other; apart from Shaz and Team-man, Blacky doesn't describe them in detail.

Team-man was a bit of a thug who 'used to apply his headlock to farmer kids and make them admit to random acts of bestiality'. (p 23). Now he's rejecting the sea and wants to study Ag science because his girlfriend, Tobin the Elder, lives on a farm.

Shaz is 'a very neat person. It was a miracle really, a bit like a flower blooming in a desert, neatness like hers in a family like ours.' (p 19)

Arks (Mr Robertson) has never grown up. Football is his life. Without a team, Arks is a non-event.

Big Mac uses his position of authority in the town, as publican, to throw his weight about.

The Chalkie is the new teacher and a bit of an enigma since he doesn't like any of the things men in the town are supposed to like in order to get on.

Pickles is a larrikin with few ambitions. His friendship with Blacky is largely based on 'hanging out', rather than on having anything in common.

Shirl, Pickles' mother, is a sad woman whose youthful attractions have faded. She resorts to the bottle to cheer herself up, and to give herself a sense of self-worth.

Mick is Pickles' dad and a friend of Blacky's dad. Not a 'sensitive' type.

Lovely is a 'bad bastard' (p293) but we're never really aware of what's made him like he is.

Other characters include Tommy Red and Thelma (Clarence's parents), Slogs, Rocker, Bungeye, Mad Dog and other 'mates'.

Activity: Try to write a conversation between Lovely and Clarence that takes place after she's been to visit Blacky and seen what Lovely has done to him.

Activity: Write a description of how Blacky's mum and dad might have first met.

Narrative Point-of-view: Gwynne uses first person in a deliberate manner; he disarms the reader with confidences that demonstrate the slippery nature of truth. He also confesses to the narrator's frequent attempts to convince the reader to share his or her opinions via techniques such as symbolism. 'I'd like to say it was a filthy white singlet, because that would give a good indication of Big Mac's character, but unfortunately it was spotless, like something out of an Omo ad. But don't let that fool you. Take it from me, Big Mac was a pig.' (pp 3–4) Does this sort of deliberate conversation with the reader make you trust the writer more?

Genre: This is a sequel to *Deadly, Unna*? What narrative work does a sequel have to do? How do you foreground aspects of the plot for readers who haven't read the previous book? How successful has the author been in this instance?

Language: Gwynne gives his narrator, Blacky, a deliberately ornate turn of phrase, in order to indicate something about his personality, to 'send up' speech conventions, and to write in a more arresting manner. For example, instead of 'I woke up feeling horny again', he writes, 'I woke up, tumescent, thinking of sex again.' (p 1) Instead of 'his hair looked like a rat's nest', he writes, 'His hair looked like it'd been colonised by a family of small marsupials.' (p 5) What does such language tell you about Blacky? Try to adapt your own patterns of speech to these two statements.

Exposition: Gwynne structures his novels in closely designed scenes. The first chapter reveals the full range of issues to be explored. Blacky strolls up the main street, and takes in the school bus, and what he sees conveys the poverty of Port society, such as when he mentions the closure of both post office and bank. He also establishes the stratification of the place by making it clear that the Nungas no longer mix with the townies even on the football field. He mentions the desperate acts that boredom and petty resentments have driven young people to commit, eg Dumby Red's breaking into the pub, and the burning of the school. Some kids, like Pickles, have no options in life; he'll leave school and go fishing with his dad. But the offer of a scholarship to Blacky is a cause of tension – will he or won't he accept it? Team-man's behaviour with the Tobin girl sets up the idea of romance to be explored later when Blacky falls in love with Clarence. Subtle prejudice is revealed by Dazza's assertion that he's not Aboriginal, he's a Maori, though he knows nothing about Maori culture or his mystery dad.

Humour is used by Gwynne to alleviate what might have been sombre. Blacky's family life is far from happy, with his dad's drunken rages and the threat of poverty never far away. But Blacky makes it seem amusing. 'We were more like a market-research sample than a family.' (p 34) He describes being strapped for cash in terms of the 'pov-meter' and the lowest register on the pov-

meter is when they're reduced to buying lamb grillers. Even religion gets the irreverent Blacky treatment, 'I liked being an Anglican because it sounded like it had something to do with fishing, with angling.' (p 60) He describes tourists in David Attenborough style, as 'The annual migration of great herds of campers across the vast plains of South Australia.' (p 73) He talks about the dim prospects of the town in a sarcastic way: 'Did I care if the town went under? Yes, I suppose I did. The Port was a dump, but it was my dump. It was where I lived.' (p 74) This sentence takes on a greater weight of significance when the reader learns that Blacky is forced to leave the town at the end of the novel.

Blacky frequently dramatises things in his own imagination, to make them seem more interesting. When the local policeman speaks of retiring from the force, he thinks, 'The force! I suddenly had this image of the sergeant as a Jedi knight, the Port's very own Obi-Wan Kenobi, light-sabre by his side.' (p289)

Symbolism and **metaphor** are used often. Consider the idea of Romeo and Juliet representing Blacky and Clarence's romance as star-crossed lovers. Another metaphor is that of the stars in the firmament – Dumby Red was a 'star' and now he's a dead star. 'And even though he's dead, light's still coming off him.' (p 190) Aboriginal beliefs inform the action, eg the presence of the Nukunu, the 'bad spirit' (p 191), which Clarence imagines in the cave, seems to set the scene for the violence between Blacky and Lovely.

Activity: Which aspect of style did you enjoy in the novel, and why?

Questions for Discussion after Reading the Novel

1. This novel does not paint shades of black and white, but grey. What are Blacky's faults? What are Clarence's?
2. 'City people come to the country because it makes them feel good about themselves. They look at us country bumpkins, with our bad haircuts and K-Mart clothes, and they feel superior.' (p 112) Do you agree with Blacky? How could city and rural dwellers develop more understanding?
3. 'The old don't-you-want-to-talk-about-this.' (p 227) Discuss different approaches to relationships. Do girls always want to 'talk about' things? And are boys always the opposite?
4. What do you think of the Chalkie? Is he clever, naïve or a mixture of both?
5. 'Knowledge is power. Knowledge is powerful.' (p 284) Discuss the difference in meaning between these two sayings.
6. The cover image is a photograph of a happy, smiling Aboriginal face, like that on *Deadly, Unna?* But Clarence's portrait is in a cool, blue colour rather than the earthy vibrance of the other cover, featuring Dumby Red. What mood is evoked, and what part does colour play in this?
7. 'If you start running now, you'll never stop. You'll be running away forever.' (p 328) What might happen to Blacky now that he's left town?
8. Choose any one of the many themes covered; make a list of all the points raised and debate it with your classmates. eg racism; aging; rural unemployment; self-worth etc.
9. Which character was the most unattractive to you, and why?
10. Reconciliation is a complex issue. Read about it, and then discuss with reference to this novel.

Writing Exercises

1. Gwynne uses dramatic, stylistic effects. 'Instead of thinking about flying high above the pack and plucking the ball from the air, I thought about sex. Instead of thinking about threading through the opposition's back-line, evading the desperate tacklers, I thought about sex.' (p2) He then reinforces his point by writing, 'Makes you think that's why they invented footy in the first place – to stop boys like me thinking about sex'. (p 2) Try to write a passage using this sort of repetitive phrase leading to a definitive sentence. You could also debate the meaning of this passage in an essay. Is sport a means by which we control excesses of emotion?
2. Language can be worked in new ways. On p 76, Blacky lists clichés that adults use to fob kids off. eg 'You're a long time dead.' (p 76) Write a list of clichés. Then try to re-word them, or find clichés with similar meanings. Darcy's cliché could be re-worked as 'Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you die!'
3. Write some advertising copy for the town's new tourist campaign, focussing on the windjammer and local history, and based on research about South Australian coastal history.
4. 'I didn't think we'd ever really be friends. Our differences were too profound: different sex, different ages, different species, and I guess we wanted different things out of life too. But we seemed to get along okay, the shag and me.' (p 187) Try to write a passage like this, in which you deliberately withhold a piece of vital information from the reader, in order to create a dramatic and amusing punch line.
5. Rewrite a section of the novel in third person. How does this alter the telling?
6. The use of Romeo and Juliet as a metaphor is important in the novel. Write a passage using metaphor or symbol.
7. Try to write your own version of the newspaper article describing the burning of the ketch that appears on p. 286.
8. Write a poem by Blacky telling Clarence how he feels about her.
9. Create a story of how Shirl would describe her typical night out, written in her voice.
10. Create a script dramatising one of the scenes in the novel, and have a group from your class perform it.

Further Reading Ideas for Possible Class Discussion:

1. *Deadly, Unna?* is also about 'contexts and cultures'. Read and compare this title to *Nukkin Ya*. Research Phillip Gwynne's other work and discuss the themes that have most concerned him in his novels?
2. Have you read other novels with similar themes, plots or characters? Do they resolve these issues similarly? Discuss with relevance to discussion questions above. (eg Mark Svendsen's *Snigger James on Grey*)
3. Have you seen any films about Aboriginal culture or about other forms of cultural diversity, eg *Looking for Alibrandi* by Melina Marchetta (book and film). Discuss and compare.
4. You can learn a lot about the careful editing necessary in your own work by studying a skilled writer's work. Read the entire section from which the following passage has been drawn. 'It was an

education, I can tell you. I felt like an anthropologist on a field-trip. These people, the Simcocks, lived in the same country as me, the same state as me, they even barracked for the same footy team (the Crows of course) but they may as well have been Plutonians (I'm sick of Martians).' (p 31) Note down any techniques used to make this passage entertaining or meaningful. Choose other passages that particularly impress you and analyse them.

5. What decade is this novel set in? How can you tell? What clues indicate the time period in which it is set? How important is this to your understanding of the novel?

Further Ideas Using Technology

1. Try to investigate the novel's regional coastal setting in South Australia. Look at maps and then try to find websites and information about towns there.

2. Find Internet sites that deal with Aboriginal reconciliation or with another theme covered in the novel, eg rural unemployment.

3. Arrange a 'virtual interview' with the author, in which you (the teacher) collect a series of questions from the students in your class to be forwarded to the publisher by email [education@penguin.com.au] for Phillip Gwynne to answer.

4. Search the Internet to see what information you can find on Phillip Gwynne, eg The Ozlit site [http://home.vic.net/~ozlit/] or the CBCA site.

5. Investigate the Puffin Books website at <http://www.puffin.com.au> and locate resources that deal with Gwynne and other Australian authors. Each student could also review *Nukkin Ya* and send a copy to the Puffin site via the 'Write a Review' option that appears under each title on the site.

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Nukkin Ya Phillip Gwynne

Published by Penguin Books Australia Ltd