



Teachers' notes by
Dr Susan La Marca

When We Were Two

by Robert Newton

Plot

When We Were Two details the journey, in 1916, of two brothers, Dan and Eddie, who set out to find a better life for themselves. They aim to walk from Gunnedah, NSW to the coast. Dan had not wanted to take his 12 year old, younger brother, Eddie, and their dog Bess with him. For him, leaving was a way of escape; but Eddie, who has a brain injury, will not be left behind. They are fleeing a violent father and heading towards the NSW coast where they hope they will be reunited with their mother, even though she is little more than a memory to both of them. The relationship between the two boys is central to the text; they share an eventful, haunting past and a strong and complex bond. The journey that they endure proves to be a learning exercise for them both.

Along the way the brothers meet a varied range of characters that both befriend the boys and challenge their view of the world. Eventually, they fall in with a group of men walking to enlist in World War One. The boys' lives become entwined with these men as they find a place of belonging that they have never had before and a sense of purpose that comes to mean a great deal to them both.

As the journey progresses, Dan must face his past and embrace a different future; life does not always turn out how he had hoped. Illness, in 1916, is not something easily dealt with.

This is a book grounded firmly in a moment in time of Australia's history. It is, ultimately, about personal life crises, coping with the past, grief, and belonging. Newton masterfully deals with a range of emotions and issues through the journey of these two young boys as they strive for a better life at the beginning of a period of upheaval in the world.

The Author

Robert Newton works as a full-time fire-fighter with the Metropolitan Fire Brigade. He was first published a decade ago and in the ten years since he has produced a range of books worthy of study. His body of work indicates a continuing interest in families, brothers and a range of historical periods in Australia's more recent history. His work is both engaging and thought provoking, often humorous, and offering opportunities for study but, most importantly, offering young people books of interest that connect with emotions and situations they recognise and appreciate.

Books:

My Name is Will Thompson (2001)

The Punjabi Pappadum (2003)

The Khaki Kid (2002)

Runner (2005)

The Black Dog Gang (2007)

Positioning – Australian Curriculum

In considering *When We Were Two* and how it might be utilised in the classroom, one needs to go no further than the proposed Australian Curriculum to document its relevance. Quality, accessible and engaging Australian literature has a vital role to play in our classrooms. For example, the novel clearly meets the requirements outlined in the following statements from Australian curriculum documentation.

2.2 In developing the National English curriculum those features of present-day Australia that matter to all Australians need to be considered – a view of our nation as culturally and linguistically diverse, democratic, evolving, with a history of accomplishments, and struggles, and a commitment to equity and openness. (The Shape of the Australian Curriculum: English, 2009, National Curriculum Board: Introduction)

Literature and context: Students learn how ideas and viewpoints about events, issues and characters that are expressed by authors in texts are drawn from and shaped by different historical, social and cultural contexts. (ACARA, 2010, The Australian Curriculum: English)

Examining literature: Students learn how to explain and analyse the ways in which stories, characters, settings and experiences are reflected in particular literary genres, and how to discuss the appeal of these genres. They learn how to compare and appraise the ways authors use language and literary techniques and devices to influence readers. They also learn to understand, interpret, discuss and evaluate how certain stylistic choices can create

multiple layers of interpretation and effect. (ACARA, 2010, The Australian Curriculum: English)

Language

Newton uses language effectively to describe and evoke landscape and place, for example:

- Gunnedah p. 7
- imaginary coast p. 26
- the roadside p. 29
- hills p. 94
- trees p. 131

Discuss how Newton uses words in these examples. What is it that makes his descriptions powerful?

In an interview for Penguin Teachers' Corner, Newton describes how he decided upon the setting for the book. It is obvious that he appreciates and admires the Australian outback and this is something that comes through in his evocative use of language. He said:

'Unlike my two main characters, the setting came easy. I'd always liked the Northern New South Wales area and the stretch of towns along the Oxley Highway so I used Gunnedah as my starting place and Port Macquarie as the end. I liked the idea of that, the idea that the boys take off from a flat and dry inland town, from the cruelty and brutality of their father and head towards the sparkling blue sea.' (Robert Newton talks about *When We Were Two* Posted on October 12, 2011 <http://penguinteacherscorner.com.au/2011/10/12/robert-newton-talks-about-when-we-were-two/>)

In describing how he constructed the story, in his interview for Penguin Teachers' Corner, Newton describes how he drove through the area in which he was to set the book and

'...Whenever something caught my eye, I'd stop the car by the side of the road and I'd jot things down, small details that I could use later on.' (Robert Newton talks about *When We Were Two* Posted on October 12, 2011 <http://penguinteacherscorner.com.au/2011/10/12/robert-newton-talks-about-when-we-were-two/>)

As a writing exercise, students could use Newton's approach as a model. Take a walk, a ride on a train or a bus, and quickly note down small details that you notice during the journey and then construct a short piece of descriptive writing using your notes.

Quotation or Epigram

Authors often put a quote at the beginning of their book; this is called an epigram. In most cases, such quotes relate to the story, often giving us an insight into the author's view of the story's meaning. At the beginning of *When We Were Two*, Newton gives us the following epigram:

The greatest tragedy of life is not that men perish, but that they cease to love.
W. Somerset Maugham

- Maugham lived from 1874 to 1965, through two world wars; do you think this is relevant to the saying and its meaning?
- Is this quote about tragedy, or war, or really about the importance of love, or perhaps it is more broadly about the human condition and our ability to risk ourselves for higher ideals?
- What do you think it means in relation the text? Consider its message against the views and actions of each of the main characters. Discuss, also, the wider context of the novel and the period in which the book is set.

Verse - page 134

When Dan and Eddie settle down at their night camp soon after having joined the men who are walking to join the army, one of the men asks another, Pommy, for a verse. Pommy is an avid reader and he turns the pages of the book he is reading to find something suitable to share. He settles on this piece, a song from a book by Sir Walter Scott:

*“Look not thou on beauty's charming,
Sit thou still when kings are arming,
Taste not when the wine-cup glistens,
Speak not when the people listens,
Stop thine ear against the singer,
From the red gold keep thy finger,
Vacant heart, and hand, and eye,
Easy live and quiet die.”*

- Lucy Ashton's song, in the "Bride of Lammermoor", by Sir Walter Scott

- Dan puzzles over what the song means. Do you think it has any relevance to the characters or the story? Or is it there merely as a contrast to the song that Dinger shares with the group in response? (p. 135)
- What is Dinger's song about? Who are the Push? Dinger's song is part of a longer verse that he changes in order to recite it in front of the boys. **Be warned** – there are versions of the full verse 'The Bastard from the Bush' possibly by Banjo Paterson on the World Wide Web. There are videos of the verse being spoken and the full text. It is littered with extreme swear words and racially derogatory descriptions and may not be suitable to share.

Title

The title of Newton's book is suggestive. It brings to mind a range of other texts. It is worth considering what the title may remind students of and whether they can make any interesting links that can inform our understanding and reading of the title.

- Before beginning reading, brainstorm what the title evokes for your students.

Two interesting links to the phrase, when we were two, are the famous poetry collection by A. A. Milne, that includes the first mention of Winnie the Pooh, *When We Were Very Young* (1924).

- This book evokes fond feelings of childhood for many people. Are there any links between this text and Newton's book?

Another interesting text that we are reminded of by Newton's title is the song made famous by Rolf Harris – *Two Little Boys*:

*Two little boys had two little toys
Each had a wooden horse
Gaily they played each summer's day
Warriors both of course
One little chap then had a mishap
Broke off his horse's head
Wept for his toy then cried with joy
As his young playmate said*

*Did you think I would leave you crying
When there's room on my horse for two
Climb up here Jack and don't be crying
I can go just as fast with two
When we grow up we'll both be soldiers
And our horses will not be toys
And I wonder if we'll remember
When we were two little boys*

*Long years had passed, war came so fast
Bravely they marched away
Cannon roared loud, and in the mad crowd
Wounded and dying lay
Up goes a shout, a horse dashes out
Out from the ranks so blue
Gallops away to where Joe lay
Then came a voice he knew*

*Did you think I would leave you dying
When there's room on my horse for two
Climb up here Joe, we'll soon be flying
I can go just as fast with two
Did you say Joe I'm all a-tremble
Perhaps it's the battle's noise
But I think it's that I remember
When we were two little boys*

*Do you think I would leave you dying
There's room on my horse for two
Climb up here Joe, we'll soon by flying
Back to the ranks so blue
Can you feel Joe I'm all a tremble
Perhaps it's the battle's noise
But I think it's that I remember
When we were two little boys*

(Morse - Madden arr. Braden) H. Darewski Music / EMI / Redwood Music (P) 1969
Cond. Alan Braden - Produced by Mickey Clarke

- What connections can be made between this song and Robert Newton's text?
- What characteristics or actions do the boys in the song share with Dan and Eddie?

Themes

Historical setting

There are a range of day to day matters described in the text that place it in its historical period. Students could brainstorm the events in the book that illustrate to them the time in which the book is set. Consider transport, food, jobs, language and attitudes.

- Students could briefly research the period using the book as a starting point and write a comparative piece covering our lifetime. There are many contrasts to be made between how we live and the way the various characters in the book exist. What is still the same? Discuss.

- Consider Mr Wainwright's views of the Aboriginal people they see (p. 56), and the language used by the boy in Bendemeer to describe Ah Ling and Eddie (p. 84). Are these racist terms and views representative of the time?
- Does the book show other viewpoints?
- Is it correct to assume that any one group share a common view at any given time? Is this true today?

World War One - The Great War, the war to end all wars

- What is a stereotypical soldier?
- How do Eddie and Dan see soldiers (p. 5)?
- What of community perceptions? Consider the send off from Walcha for those leaving to join up (p. 104)
- Dan tells Bear that he was told by a returned soldier that '*...every man going off to war is scared, and if he says he's not, he's a liar*'. (p. 117) How does this view sit with various perceptions of the stereotypical 'soldier'?

Dan knows something of the uncertainty of war (p. 108).

- How does this affect his views? Do you think it impacts positively or negatively on Dan's perceptions?
- How do each of the men travelling with the boys fit with the stereotype of a soldier? Consider what the text shows us of each man. For example:
 - Tom Henshaw – bear (p.115)
 - Henry Shaw, '*natural choice as leader*' (p. 119) – '*a man worth following*'.
 - Dinger, '*rule number one – never show a weakness.*' (p. 119)
- Why is Eddie so proud to be the group's mascot? (p. 110) Is this about more than being a soldier?

Dan contemplates the men when they are washing in the cold waterfall and thinks to himself:

'Seeing them like that, reeling from the cold, it's hard to imagine them as soldiers. I'm sure there have been plenty of men who have gone to war just like them, ordinary men with sunken chests and hairy backs who have taken to killing without the blink of an eye. But these men from Walcha don't seem capable of killing. These men are husbands and father, simple men with hearts of gold' (p. 142 -143)

- Are these men soldiers? Will they be soldiers? Are they different or just like everybody else that ever joined a war?

In an interview for the Penguin Teachers' Corner, Newton explored how he set out on a journey in NSW and hit upon the idea of having his central characters meet up with soldiers on his way to war. He said:

'While I was driving I imagined who the boys might meet along the way and I remembered something I'd read. I remembered the recruiting marches that started up during World War One when the news came flooding back about the numbers of casualties our soldiers endured on the battlefields. To drum up fresh support for the war, men across Australia would go on the march. On their way to enlist, they'd pass through towns and each time their ranks would swell with more men slipping into line. Consequently, when Dan and Eddie reach the town of Walcha they do exactly that. They join a band of men and, like the journey itself, these kind men change their lives forever.' (Robert Newton talks about *When We Were Two* Posted on October 12, 2011 <http://penguinteacherscorner.com.au/2011/10/12/robert-newton-talks-about-when-we-were-two/>)

It was in the First World War, the Great War from 1914 to 1919, that the image of the Australian "digger" was born.

- Is this a different stereotype to that of 'soldier'? The Aussie digger is part of the Australian psyche, representing an ideal that is held up on occasions that celebrate the Australian spirit.
- How does this relate to the men that Dan and Eddie met on the road?
- Consider how they are described and their actions.

On the Australian War Memorial website it says about enlistment:

First World War

During the course of the First World War, standards for age, minimum height and minimum chest measurement for enlistment in the AIF were altered.

The requirements in August 1914 were 18–35 years, height of 5ft 6in and chest measurement of 34 inches. In June 1915 the age range and minimum height requirements were changed to 18–45 years and 5ft 2in, with the minimum height being lowered again to 5ft in April 1917. During the first year of the war approximately 33 percent of all volunteers were rejected. However, with relaxation of physical standards of age and height, as well as dental and ophthalmic fitness, previously ineligible men were now eligible for enlistment.

On enlistment recruits were examined for BC or D tattooed on their skin. These were British army tattoos. BC stood for bad character and D for deserter. (<https://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/enlistment/>)

- What does this tell you about the men that enlisted? The historical period? Consider this information in relation to the men in the text.

Comparing and discussing the portrayal of those who left for war and their experiences would extend and enrich the reading of *When We Were Two*. Dianne Wolfer and Brian Simmonds's illustrated book *Lighthouse Girl* would be an easy and quick book to consider as it documents the experiences of a real girl who farewelled soldiers from her lighthouse home as they sailed past her on the troop ships bound for the front.

Loyalty/ Mateship

- What does it mean to be loyal? Does the term have a different meaning today compared to what it might have meant in Dan's time?

Dan and Eddie make meaningful connections quite quickly with a range of characters they meet along the road:

- The soldiers stand up for Dan and Ed and protect them from the police – take their word (p. 130)
 - Ah Ling and Eddie *'like two best mates'* (p. 95)
 - Henry wants Dan to meet his daughter Bridget (p. 161)
 - They take the cart for Eddie – anything for a mate (p. 164)
 - Dan helps Bear find the right words for his letter home (p. 123-4)
- Is this loyalty?

The Australian Government website discusses mateship in relation to the Australian experience, it says:

Mateship is a concept that can be traced back to early colonial times. The harsh environment in which convicts and new settlers found themselves meant that men and women closely relied on each other for all sorts of help. In Australia, a 'mate' is more than just a friend. It's a term that implies a sense of shared experience, mutual respect and unconditional assistance.

Mateship is a term traditionally used among men, and it is a term frequently used to describe the relationship between men during times of challenge. The popular notion of mateship came to the fore during the First World War.

During this period the word 'mate' became interchangeable with the word 'digger', which had its roots in the gold digging fields of the 1850s.

(<http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/mateship-diggers-and-wartime>)

- Is the connection between Dan and Eddie and the soldiers they meet mateship? What about the connection they have with Ah Ling?

Rite of Passage / Bildungsroman

Bildungsroman is described as:

'In literary criticism, bildungsroman (German: "education novel") or coming-of-age story is a literary genre which focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood (coming of age).'

(Wikipedia - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bildungsroman>)

'a novel about the moral and psychological growth of the main character'

(Websters dictionary - <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bildungsroman>)

When We Were Two is such a text. The study of the book would be an opportunity to introduce the term and the phrase 'rite of passage', and their meanings, to students.

At the opening of the book (p. 11) Dan takes Eddie's hand as he is feeling a little scared, *'it's as if we're crossing an imaginary line'* (p. 11).

- What does this imaginary line represent for Dan?

On page 67 Dan reflects *'...a new way of thinking comes over me and I begin to understand that no matter how you go forward, whether it's by car or by foot, whether it's fast or it's slow, it's a damn sight better than going back'*.(p. 67)

As the book progresses Dan discovers a range of ways of viewing the world, of living his life, which one feels will stay with him for some time.

- Is this what is meant by coming of age? Growing up?

Consider other occasions that impact on Dan's views and values:

- The men who made the road (p. 94)
- Feels part of something decent and good (p. 131)
- Let go of the past (p. 150 – 51)
- Jigsaw pieces in my head (p.160)
- Eddie knew all along about the river (p. 168)

Why does the wooden soldier in Eddie's hand look smaller? (p. 91)

Dan's journey is a rite of passage for him, a search for identity, under difficult circumstances. Events that take place during this novel will impact on his life and form his character. Parallels could be drawn between Dan's search for self in the novel and the search for identity evident in the Australian nation during the period that the novel is set. World War One was a time of great upheaval and a period of change in which Australia sought to create a new identity for itself as a country connected to, but also separate from, mother England.

Brothers

The theme of brothers is central to this book. Newton conveys, in a very real way, the depth of love and commitment in such a relationship and the obvious closeness between the boys, while demonstrating how frustrating and difficult such relationships can be. Amongst the pride and love in any longstanding relationship there can also be guilt and pain stemming from the events and actions that make up the fabric of the relationship, its past and present. Newton masterfully portrays this coexistence of a range of feelings in the relationship between Dan and Eddie.

Newton describes in an interview for Penguin Teacher's Corner how he settled on brothers for the central characters in his book:

'For a long time I tossed around who I might take on this journey. I coupled together someone old and someone young, I imagined a boy and a girl and I wondered about the possibilities. In the end, however, I settled for two brothers, Dan and Eddie Wheelan, a decision which no doubt stems from my own life, growing up in a family of boys. I remember being very protective of my younger brother who endured a learning disorder and who was constantly singled out for special treatment and suffered all kinds of torment and teasing. In that way, I suppose, I had a good idea of the bonds that exist between brothers.' (Robert Newton talks about *When We Were Two* Posted on October 12, 2011 <http://penguinteacherscorner.com.au/2011/10/12/robert-newton-talks-about-when-we-were-two/>)

- Students could discuss and consider the examples of the brothers, or sisters, they can think of from other books or films. Is the relationship between siblings always so complex? Is the relationship we have with a sibling like no other?

Martin Luther King Jr said:

'We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools.'

Whereas Charles Chincholles said:

'That all men should be brothers is the dream of people who have no brothers.'

- Which one of them is right? Or perhaps they are both right.

Knowing what he knows and feels, how can Dan hurt Eddie? (p. 9)

Dan apologises to Eddie when he remembers his actions at the river bank so many years earlier (p. 44) but when Eddie does not hear him and asks for it be repeated Dan says it was *'nothing. It was nothing at all'*. (p. 45)

- Why?

When Dan says to Eddie that *'I shouldn't have fallen asleep'* (p. 87) to what is he referring?

The boys discuss being lucky because they have each other (p. 97) comparing their own luck to the boys who have attacked Ah Ling who are *'rotten'*.

- Why are they lucky?

When Eddie is first unwell, Dan notes that *'Eddie's all I've got'* (p.166).

- Why does he say this when he has both a mother and a father even if they are not currently with him? Why does he feel that Eddie is all he has?

Masculinity

The concept of masculinity is dealt with deftly within the text. Newton recognises the complex nature of what it means to be a man, even within a time in which many may have thought it might have been more straightforward.

- Revisit the text to collect evidence of how the men in the book perceive themselves and, from their actions, come to an understanding of how masculinity is represented in the text. The text holds contrasting examples; consider the boy's father, Ah Ling, Dinger and Bear.

Family

Very early in the text we learn that the family life of the boys has never been entirely safe. Dan and Eddie would avoid their father and, while sitting in the town's main

street, would watch other families interacting (p. 7). One gets the sense that this only bought home more closely to Dan how much he did not have.

On page 83-4 Dan realises that even the memories he clung to of happy family picnics were probably not real.

Our views of Dan and Eddie's mother and father are filtered through their perception. We do not hear the voice of either parent directly, but form an opinion of them through the comments and asides we experience through Dan's eyes.

- Does this mean we cannot trust what we read? Might there be another side to the story? Consider what we do know from the text – what do you think Dan and Eddie's parents are really like?

Father

Part of Eddie's disability is an uncanny ability to repeat, word for word, conversations that he has heard. Often, he does not appear to recognise what he is doing.

For example:

- *'it's no wonder ya mother left ya'* (p. 8)
- *'bloody soft like her'* (p. 19)

There are two occasions in the text where Dan describes his father's cruel treatment of two of the boys' closest pets – Nugget (p. 160-1) and Bess and her pups (p. 24).

- What do these two incidents tell us about the boy's father?
- Is it significant that both scenes involve defenceless animals?

Dan describes his father as a man, like Mr Wainwright, who doesn't like anything (p. 67).

- Can this really be true? Is there any indication in the text as to why Dan's father is so angry about everything and everybody?
- What has Dan learnt from his father? Consider the passage on page 73: *'My father never taught me much...he taught me what not to be.'*

Mother

Dan's relationship with his mother is complex. While he appears to recall her fondly, he is also hurt that she left him behind.

We are introduced to the boys' mother on the very first page of the book where Dan refers to her need for freedom (p. 1). He goes on to imagine how she might have been feeling when she left.

Later in the book, he recalls her describing how she would like to fly away to the sea. (p. 122).

- Why? What does the sea represent to Dan's mother?

Dan goes on to say:

'The idea that my mother might leave had never crossed my mind. Even still, I remember being crushed by what she said that day. I suppose it was more the way she said it. It was as if the flying away was something she dreamed about at night, something she prayed for when she closed her eyes.' (p. 122)

- This is a very powerful description, put simply. Why is it so effective?

The boys' mother had a great impact on their life with her songs (p. 4, 14) and Eddie, if he was hurt, would sing songs of hers that he remembered (p. 88, 91). Eddie needs Dan to sing when he is hurting/dying (p. 158).

- Why are the songs so powerful for both boys, but especially for Eddie?

Dan has a postcard that his mother sent him a few months ago. It is one of the only things he has brought with him upon leaving home and its message is part of what keeps him going (p.15).

- Why does Dan leave the postcard for his mother at the end of the novel? (p. 192)

Dan notices that Mr Wainwright responds to his wife in the same way their mother did: she would *'shrink a few inches in front of me'* (p. 51).

- What does this mean? Is the physical act a metaphor for changes to the person?

On page 93 Dan imagines his Mum's journey in some detail (p. 93).

- Why does he not want to contemplate the end of his own journey?

Dan recognises the sadness in Ah Ling's eyes as something he remembers from his mother. He says:

'I remember it in my mother's eyes when the tears dried up and her heart began to break.' (p. 96)

- To what does this refer? Why have the tears dried up?
- Why does Dan have such strong memories of helping his mother cook (p. 136-7)?

At the end of the book, Dan watches his mother and sees that she has a new home with a man and is expecting a baby (p.191).

- Why does he only leave the postcard and go to join the soldiers?
- Did he do the right thing? Why/Why not?

Freedom

At the very opening of *When We Were Two*, Dan is leaving his childhood home and leaving behind Eddie.

- Why?

Dan thinks to himself: *'Maybe it's the idea of leaving, the walking away, but I'm suddenly swamped by a feeling of a freedom'* (p. 1)

When Eddie follows him *'Everything comes rushing back – Eddie and my father – and I feel the weight of them around my neck, find it hard to breath'* (p. 3).

- Why does Dan feel like this?

Despite these feelings, he eventually allows Edie to come with him.

- Why does he change his mind?

The depth of Dan's need to escape was physically powerful.

- What outweighs this?

Later in the book, Dan remembers that his Mum dreamt of flying away to the sea (p. 122).

- Are Dan and his mother alike?
- Why do you think Dan's mother fled towards the sea? The sea is a powerful symbol for many things – what do you think it means to Dan's mother? To Dan?

Intellectual disability

Eddie's intellectual disability is the result of having been partially drowned, something that Dan feels responsible for as he was looking after his younger brother when it happened.

Greeves makes the most of this unfortunate event, making Dan confess that Eddie's disability is his fault (p. 32). Dan claims later that he will tell Eddie the truth about what happened the day Eddie partially drowned at the end of their journey (p. 63).

- Why is what happened to Eddie so central to Dan's life?
- It is as if he cannot move forward until the issue is resolved.

Dan says that *'the very things that made Eddie different, also made him special.'* (p. 73)

- What are the different responses to Eddie and his disability? During the journey he is responded to in a variety of ways. Go back to the text and explore the reactions from the different characters.
- What do the different reactions tell us about the characters themselves?

Illness

Eddie's illness becomes apparent early in the text. There are a few occasions before his final collapse when he is obviously unwell:

- Eddie stumbles (p. 62, 111)
- Eddie admits to getting dizzy (p.112)
- His head hurts badly (p. 139-40)
- He is bleeding from the ear (p. 141)
- Eddie is having trouble keeping up and his ear is bleeding again (p. 148)
- Eddie collapses (p.154 – 158) with a stroke
- Eddie dies (p. 169)

Consider the reactions to Eddie's illness.

- What would happen in your community if someone had similar symptoms?

Humour

When We Were Two is a serious book about a pivotal time in Dan's life. Though the text alludes to a range of confronting issues and emotions, it also manages to be very funny at times. For example:

- Eddie putting his neck out bowing (p. 71)
- Ah Ling teaching Eddie about medicines (p. 80)
- Eddie trying to kill the hair piece (p. 118)
- *'It's very hard to chew your lunch with no teeth.'* (p.120)
- Playing cavemen (p. 132)
- Biggest arsehole (p.138-9)
- Flag with centre hair piece (p. 144) – *'tree rats'*
- Racing Dinger up the hill (p. 151-3)

Each of these incidents is humorous, sometimes laugh-out-loud funny, at other times dry and laconic.

George Bernard Shaw said:

'When a thing is funny, search it carefully for a hidden truth'.

- Is this true of the humorous situations in the book?
- Do any of the episodes mentioned show us something about the characters through their actions or words?

Moral choices

Throughout the book, the boys make a range of choices and react to particular people in ways informed by their own moral compass – their view of the world and the rules one should live one's life by.

- How would you describe the morals of the main character, Dan?
- What does he hold dear? What views rule his world? What events do we read of in the text that clearly inform his moral compass?

Consider:

- The boys taking Greeves' cart (p. 42)
- The apple story (p. 44) *'You've got to look inside them and see'*
- Eddie recognises that the boys that attack Ah Ling are bad on the inside but questions why (p. 97)
- Part of something good (p. 131)

Henry says:

'A man learns nothing about himself when things come easy.' (p. 120)

- What does he mean?

Grief

Grief permeates this book. Grief about what happened, what might have been, and over events that take place within the text. For any reader who knows the history of war and what it meant for those who participated, there is also an overlying sense of grief about what is to come for many of the characters.

In trying to help Dan cope with his own past, Dinger describes the death of his baby daughter, saying:

'As painful as it is, there's no making sense of something like that. And take it from me, you're a fool to even try.' (p. 167)

- Is this true?
- Do you think Dinger's experience helps Dan?

When Eddie dies, Dan says:

'...it's like Dinger's thrust a knife through my chest....I look up at the sky and scream.' (p. 170)

He cannot imagine life without Eddie, it's as if he has lost a part of himself: *'Saying me instead of us'* (p. 174).

- For Dan, his grief is a physical pain. Can strong emotions affect us physically?

Dinger suggests that Dan take Eddie with him in his heart – for a swim in the ocean (p. 181). He also suggests that, *'You take him with you and he'll make you strong'* (p. 188).

- Is this just a way of feeling better about your grief?
- Is it about memory?

Eddie's resting place is without fanfare -

- Burying Eddie (p. 183-7)
- Prayers for Eddie (p. 188-9)
- Do you think Dan farewells his brother in a way Eddie would have appreciated?
- What else might have Eddie have liked at his burial?

The Journey and Those We Meet Along the Way

Life is a journey and the contents of a book are often a microcosm of that journey in miniature offering us a moment in time that reflects the real world. Joseph Campbell famously wrote about the hero's journey in fiction in his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. For Campbell, the journey in fiction follows a formula that is both satisfying and understood on a very basic level by humans.

In a conversation on Penguin Teachers' Corner, Robert Newton has said about the book:

'When We Were Two had been brewing in my head for a while. I'd always liked the idea of a road trip story. I liked the idea of the journey itself lending a

certain pace or tempo to the narrative, a forward movement where things would be constantly changing. I also liked the idea of the leaving itself, the running away to something better. (Robert Newton talks about 'When We Were Two' Posted on October 12, 2011

<http://penguinteacherscorner.com.au/2011/10/12/robert-newton-talks-about-when-we-were-two/>

- Do you get a sense of the forward movement Newton describes when you read the book?
- Do the boys ultimately run away to something 'better'? Consider both their physical and spiritual selves.

One attraction in Dan and Eddie's journey is the various people they meet along the way. For example:

- Archibald Greeves (p. 23), Dan dealing with him (p. 42)
- George and Mary Withers (p. 34)
- Harold and Maureen Wainwright (p. 50-1)
- Gracie helps (p. 64) – a *'perfect memory'* (p. 65)
- Ah Ling (p. 70) fixes Eddie's neck (p. 76)
- Boys of Bendemeer (p. 84)
- Soldiers (p. 115, 119)

Each of these characters contributes something towards what the boys learn about themselves and each other during the journey.

The journey causes Dan and Eddie to face a range of decisions and various hardships, some of which they may never have faced at home. Eddie forms a bond with Ah Ling and tends him with great care and attention. Dan thinks to himself:

'...if I live to be a hundred years old, nothing will beat my brother Eddie and these moments in the back of the cart' (p. 88)

- Why is this scene so important to Dan?

The boys learn many lessons on the road from a range of different characters.

- Ah Ling tells Dan that belief is the most important thing (p. 98)
- What does Ah Ling mean?
- What other lessons do they learn during their journey?

In Port Macquarie, Dan has a brief encounter with a young boy called Charlie (p. 189-92).

- Who does Charlie remind him of?
- Why do you think Newton included him in the story at this point?

Dan reminisces over those he has met along the way and what has been most important. (p. 192)

- When he meets up with Henry he says *'I'm good now, boss. Good as gold.'* (p. 193)
- What is it that draws him back to the soldiers?

Reviews of the Text

When We Were Two has received excellent reviews in the press. Following are three examples: two from *The Age* newspaper and one from the YA reviewing journal *Viewpoint: on books for young adults*. The reviews are by three different reviewers.

- Consider the nature of a review. Its usual purpose is to alert the reader to a new text, to give them a sense of the story, its plot and themes, and a view on the book's ability to engage its chosen audience. A good review does all of this succinctly and clearly, without giving away the ending or any twist.

Read the three reviews.

- Which do you agree with most?
- What similarities do they share?
- Students could be set a word limit and asked to produce their own review of the book. Attempt to mirror the form or approach of one of these reviews, engage and inform your audience.

UNDER AGE Michelle Hamer



WHEN WE WERE TWO

Robert Newton

Penguin, \$17.95

Robert Newton's latest young adult novel is a beautifully paced, poignant tale of courage, loyalty and love. It must rank as one of the best books of its genre this year. In a simple, uncluttered narrative, Newton follows the journey of 16-year-old Dan, who decides to run away from his abusive father. His younger brother, Eddie, who has a mild brain injury after an accident years earlier, follows him and the two soon head towards the coast in search of their lost mother. It's the era of the Great War; there are dangers on the road but also great kindness and adventure. Dan, who tells the story in the first person, is a likeable, admirable character who carries a heavy burden of guilt and responsibility for his brother. The people the brothers meet along the way offer glimpses into early Australia. When they fall in with a group of men marching off to enlist, Dan finally feels he has found a place to belong and Aussie mateship is brought to the fore. Newton's writing doesn't miss a beat from beginning to end, never getting bogged down in description or detail. A strong, important story of loyalty and strength for readers aged 12 and up.

The Age, October 2011

When We Were Two

by Robert Newton

Penguin Books, 2011

9780143566830 \$17.95pb



Fifteen-year-old Dan and his younger brother, Eddie, are running away from an unhappy home dominated by a cruel and uncaring father. Initially Dan is reluctant to take Eddie with him, but finds that to leave him behind would be unconscionable. Together they head for the New South Wales coast, with Bess, the dog, in tow. Dan hopes that they will find their way to their mother, whom he thinks is living in Port Macquarie.

Like Tim Winton's *Fish Lamb* in *Cloudstreet*, Eddie's mind has suffered after a near-drowning, and his total affection for Dan, his simplicity, and his engaging innocence affects anyone the boys come into contact with. They have some good and bad experiences. Eddie's disability is mocked by some, and at times, Dan has to rescue him from his naivety. Finally they meet up with a group of men from small country towns who are marching together to enlist for the 1914-1918 war. Under their benevolent guidance, Port Macquarie is in sight. At this point the novel reaches further than we have foreseen. Dan sees his mother, but his reaction is different to what we have expected. Eddie's fate darkens. A future is possible for one of the brothers.

Newton's story is a touching exploration of brotherly love. Dan is sometimes irritated, but ultimately loving of his brother. He believes he is responsible for Eddie's situation, guilt that keeps him awake at night. He is eventually comforted by Dinger, one of the men, who shows him how to move beyond the past. Many of the men they are travelling with remain relatively undifferentiated, but Dinger is a strong creation. The novel also provides an insight into the uncluttered mind of an innocent, immature boy. Eddie is often tentative in his relationships, but he is able to form strong bonds with those who make an attempt to understand him. Newton's insights into a child like this are strikingly imagined. Eddie's honesty and childish purity is a foil to the complexity of real life.

Stella Lees is associate editor of *Viewpoint*

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Viewpoint: on books for young adults 19 (4) Summer 2011

WHEN WE WERE TWO

Robert Newton
Penguin, \$17.95



LOCAL writer Robert Newton has created several books for younger readers. *When We Were Two* is an elegiac, death-haunted novel that explores masculinity, grief and coming of age. Set against the backdrop of World War I, the story follows Dan, a feisty 16-year-old who decides to run away from his abusive father, across the Australian countryside. He doesn't want to take his younger

brother, Eddie, but Eddie isn't giving him much choice. A vague plan forms to find their mother and a trek across the mountains begins. When the brothers run across a band of would-be soldiers on their way to enlist in the Great War, their adventures pick up pace. Immediate tragedy and distant catastrophe loom over their fragile days of innocence. Newton's novel is nicely turned: small events and characters glimmer against a massive situational irony; they are briefly lit, before being devoured by the machinery of war.

Related Reading

Road Trips

Gwynne, Phillip	<i>Swerve</i>
Steinbeck, John	<i>Of Mice and Men</i>

Australian Rural Setting

French, Jackie	<i>A Waltz for Matilda</i>
Jeffrey, Belinda	<i>Big River, Little Fish</i>

World War Period

French, Jackie	<i>A Rose for the ANZAC Boys</i>
Catran, Ken	<i>Jacko Moran: Sniper</i>
Masson, Sophie	<i>My Father's War</i>
Metzenthien, David	<i>Black Water</i>
	<i>Boys of Blood and Bone</i>
Morpurgo, Michael	<i>Private Peaceful</i>
Wilkinson, Carole	<i>Fromelles: Australia's Bloodiest Day at War</i>
Wilson, Mark	<i>My Mother's Eyes: The Story of a Boy Soldier (illustrated)</i>
Wolfer, Dianne & Brian Simmonds	<i>Lighthouse Girl (illustrated)</i>

Brothers

Funke, Cornelia	<i>Reckless</i>
Levithan, David	<i>Are We There Yet?</i>
Metzenthien, David	<i>Black Water</i>
Morpurgo, Michael	<i>Private Peaceful</i>
Swindells, Robert	<i>Shrapnel</i>
Zusak, Markus	<i>Wolfe Family trilogy</i>