



Teachers' Notes
written by Dr Susan La Marca

How Hedley Hopkins did a dare, robbed a grave, made a new friend who might not have really been there at all, and while he was at it committed a terrible sin which everyone was doing even though he didn't know it.

by Paul Jennings

Synopsis

This story covers a very short period in the young life of Hedley Hopkins. It is a tale told with great humour and compassion and acknowledges the need in us all to belong in this world and make sense of our own place in it.

The story opens in 1956, Hedley is a recently arrived English migrant living with his parents and younger sister Kate. Though, in many ways, his family is very like the Australian families that surround them, there are subtle differences that set Hedley apart. He is lonely, and at this point ready to take risks and go against his better judgement in order to fit in. Hedley's state of distress over his situation leads him to ask for, and then accept, a dare from a gang of boys at his school. The successful completion of this dare will earn him a tacit acceptance and a place within the school hierarchy. The dare is to remove the skull from an opened grave in the sand dunes and bring it to Ian Douglas, the leader of the gang.

Completing this task is a solid thread that drives the action in the story. This sits alongside the other concerns of Hedley's existence – his changing body and relationships at school and at home. Hedley's interaction with Mr Hooper and the students from the Billabong Home for Retarded Boys, his hateful teacher Mr Tinker, his relationship with his parents and his sister and his difficulty in getting accurate, helpful information about his body all interconnect to create a story, and a character, that encourage empathy from the reader.

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This is a fast paced, entertaining read about the many threads which make up one's life. Simultaneously, it is a thoughtful exploration of strong emotions and difficult issues handled with a deft humorous touch.

Title

- What do readers make of the title?
- Is it entertaining? Engaging?
- Does reading so much of what the story is about make you want to read more? Why?
- Brainstorm a shorter title
- How hard is it to come up with a title that really represents everything that the book is about? Is this always possible?
- In choosing a particular title are you highlighting what you think is central to the book? The most important thread?
- How important are titles?
- Discuss examples of favourite titles / bad titles?

Consider other interesting titles, what they tell you about the story and how they affect your interpretation of what the story might be about.

Possible examples:

- *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*
- *Magic or Madness*
- *Boys of Blood and Bone*
- *The Hitch Hikers Guide the Galaxy*
- Compare book titles to the titles of movies or television shows. Could you have such a long title in these other media - why or why not?

This could lead into a discussion of headlines in newspapers and titles for magazine articles.

- What does each form aim to achieve? Consider length, types of words and the headlines relationship to the article. Decisions about type face and size could also be addressed.

With Hedley Hopkins the title becomes the cover illustration there is no image.

- How does this effect your "reading" of the cover?
- Do the different sized fonts and use of capitalisation effect the way your read the cover?

Structure

Chapter headings

(See contents pages for list)

- What do the chapter headings have in common?
- Do they interest the reader? Do they make you want to know more?

Short chapters /Short sentences

- Why are there many short chapters in this text?
- How does this arrangement of the story affect the pace?

Consider a section of text.

- Short sentences are a constant throughout the text. Why?
- Compare the style to other formats – Television, spoken word, song etc.
- How do the short sentences affect the pace and flow of the story?

This structure is used to very good effect at times of tension and stress throughout the novel. For example see page 43 where Hedley is terrified when he is the only one to have written a question for Rev Carpenter.

- How does the sentence structure affect the mood of this scene?

Jennings is a master at catching and keeping attention. The first dialogue in the text, on page 2, is Kate saying; *'The grave's behind the loony bin'*.

Not only does this statement introduce some of the story's main themes, it is also a tantalising introduction that encourages interest.

The end of the first chapter also utilises dialogue, short sentences and limited description to create a sense of foreboding and excitement;

'I gasp. So does Kate. "It's true," I say.' (p6)

Such an ending draws you in, makes you want to read on.

- Discuss beginnings and endings of stories, their purpose, and the various stylistic possibilities.
- Consider Jennings's approach and compare it to other authors.
- Encourage the students to experiment with their own creative efforts using discussion of Jennings style as inspiration.

Tightly crafted / recurring motifs

The first two chapters have a well-rounded, tightly crafted structure that brings us back to the image of loneliness – strengthening and embedding this image in relation to the beach and Hedley.

At the beginning of the text we are introduced to the *'lonely beach with a lonely sky'* (p1). At the end of chapter two Hedley says; *'We don't notice the vast lonely sea. Or the lonely beach. The eye sockets of that terrible skull hold more loneliness than any heart can bear.'* (p10)

The repeated use of the word lonely pushes the word, and the depth of feeling that is attached to it, to the forefront of the reader's mind. The physical nature of the lonely beach is almost tangible. It is definitely a considerable obstacle for Hedley as it dominates his feelings about himself and his life.

Just as *'lonely'* is used repetitively at the beginning of the text (p1, p10), towards the end of the book at the beginning of chapter 27 the word *'happy'* is used to similar effect (p177).

This device of the recurring motif, symbol or descriptive word is used often throughout the text. For example the phrase *'Pommie autumn leaf'* opens the chapter on page 26 and is repeated on page 33.

Images also reappear in Hedley's own mind. On page 177 when Hedley is in trouble and unsure he says *'All I can think about is vandals and dunny men and people being horsewhipped'*.

- Why? What do these images mean to Hedley?
- How do they connect his feelings at the time to early references in the story?
- What other recurring images or motifs can you find within the text?

Supportive structure

'The waves are powerful but they can't hurt you unless you get close. Of course you never know when an extra big one is going to rush up and grab you...A wave of fate knocks you over.' (p2)

This paragraph serves to scaffold the reader's introduction to the simile in the final sentence. On page three *'wave of fate'* is used in another context to further explain the example. The allusion is continued, whenever waves are mentioned (p46, p47) and the *'wave of fate'* is perhaps at the back of the reader's minds.

Descriptive pieces use a similar pattern to support the reader's understanding:

'The slab of concrete has been moved to one side leaving a gaping black hole in the sand. For some reason it reminds me of the bloody space that is left after a tooth has been pulled out.' (p7)

The first sentence conjures up an image that is then reinforced with a more metaphorical description. This approach introduces the reader to the way metaphorical language can be used to better describe a scene.

Other examples of similar scaffolding:

- The high diving board (p8)
- Explains the saying *'out of sight out of mind'* (p83)

Language

Jennings's text is outwardly simple and fast paced yet it contains many passages filled with evocative language. Consider the following:

- *'She pelts over the dunes sending the sand shooting up from her heels like the spray from machine gun bullets.'* (p9)
- *'raw air'* (11)

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- *'Slowly, bits of memories come back like ink seeping along a piece of blotting paper.'* (p62)
- (laughter) *'The world can hear it bouncing off the sky'* (p134)
- *'I leave the room like a cork out of a pop gun'* (p137)
- *'The waves race up and down the sand and nip at our feet like liquid fingers'* (p151)
- *'Sand like dry rain.'* (p165)

At the end of these notes is a list of references to articles by and about Paul Jennings and his work. Sections of these articles may throw further light on Jennings's structure and use of language. Read a selection and discuss what you find.

The power of words is a strong theme through out the text. Victor finding words is a key to him being released and his being seen by Hedley and Kate as a friend. When he repeats those words he hears he is seen to be making little meaning.

- What do you make then of Rev Carpenter making Hedley repeat words after him (p23)?
- What meaning do these repeated words hold?
- Are both forms of repetition meaningless?

Later Victor *'enjoys the power of words'* (p156) when others repeat after him.

- How important is language to us?
- How important is it to be able communicate, to have a language that others understand?

Autobiography

Paul Jennings makes it clear that the story of Hedley Hopkins is partially autobiographical. *'You might have guessed that Hedley, the boy in the story, is me'* (p205). Jennings has obviously tried to discuss truthfully instances from his own life that had a profound impact on him.

- Do you think it is easy to write with such candour?
- Do you think it is ever possible to relate an event in a factual way or can we only give our own perception of that event?

Consider the genre of autobiography, and the place of Hedley Hopkins within that genre, in relation to the following statements:

- *'Autobiography is probably the most respectable form of lying.'* Humphrey Carpenter, 1982
- *'Autobiography begins with a sense of being alone. It is an orphan form.'* John Berger, 1992
- *'Autobiography is only to be trusted when it reveals something truly disgraceful.'* George Orwell, 1944
- *'Richard Freedman, head of the unit for studies in biography and autobiography at Latrobe University, says part of the genre's attraction is*

the notion that we will discover more about ourselves if we read about the lives of others.' Perkins, 2002

Consider and compare other biography and autobiography. Possible texts that are part of this genre that may be useful though varied in style and content are:

- Adeline Yen Mah, *Chinese Cinderella*
- David Harris and Max Jones, *A Man called Possum*
- Roald Dahl, *Boy*
- Thura Al-Windawi, *Thura's Diary*

All of these texts are true to some extent. Discuss what this means for us as readers.

- Is Hedley Hopkins wholly autobiographical? (see 'A word from Paul Jennings' page 105-6)
- As parts of the story are clearly fiction the book is a combination of genres. How successful do you think this is?
- Would it have been as effective a story without the fictional threads, as a purely autobiographical piece?
- Would it have made such an engaging story if was solely fiction?

Hedley Hopkins

Hedley is an interesting character – a bright and caring boy, his occasional poor decisions show him to be flawed and consequently a “real” and appealing creation. Hedley is an observant, empathetic thinker. He is also prone to daydreams and is very imaginative and quick witted.

Consider the following sections of text that show us these aspects of Hedley's character:

- Frightened of half moon murderers (p2)
- Having to check under the bed (p3)
- Daydreamer (p22)
- Wants to be a boy of action – make friends (p29)
- Very observant – notices that the boys smoke but that, though it is easily detectible, they are never in trouble (p29)
- Empathetic, a thinker – what if the skull was mine (p54)
- 'One day all of my life will be used up' (p153)
- Quick with repartee, sometimes - queen a whinger (p31)
- Active imagination – fear at entering Billabong – even counting conjures up images in his mind (p84)
- A good imagination, a dreamer, thinks too much (p88)

Hedley is nicknamed headless by the other boys (p36). Later in the text he alludes to headless chooks after slaughter (p66).

- Is there a link?
- Is this how Hedley behaves?

What Hedley wants more than anything else is acceptance and appreciation of who he is. After being praised by Mr Hooper for helping Victor to talk, he says 'I feel really good inside' (p104).

- Is this a basic need we all have?

After a series of ridiculous events Hedley considers himself to be – 'a wicked person. Bad. Sinful' (p143)

- Why does Hedley use such strong words to describe himself?
- Is the description accurate?

On page 186 Hedley thinks to himself 'I have told the truth. I have stepped off the diving board'.

- What does this relate to?
- What does he mean?

At the end of the text Hedley is recognised for his story writing abilities (p201).

- Do you think this is an appropriate direction for Hedley?
- What is it about him that indicates he would make a good storyteller?

Major Manners

Hedley names the skull that he takes from the grave 'Major Manners' and hears it talk to him, particularly in moments of trouble and stress when he needs a friend. Major Manners is a very effective alter ego for Hedley offering good advice on many occasions:

- The mechanics of sex (p66)
- 'Are you really like everyone else' (p108)
- 'Be nice to yourself' (p109)
- 'They are weird' (p150)

Hedley's attachment to the skull is strong - 'He is my friend' (p139)

- What do you make of this?
- The skull is finally silent (p169) – why?

'Mighty Manny' was the real name of the man to whom the skull belonged (p189).

- How does the description of Manny, the real man, sit with the persona that Hedley creates for him?

Themes

Family

Father

We are shown Hedley's family through Hedley's eyes. Therefore, we are only given his perception of them and their actions.

- What does this mean for us as readers?

Hedley's father is shown to be a complex character, perhaps stressed, possibly lonely (p37)?

- What events in the text might give us this impression?

Consider the following sections:

- A proud and lonely man (p37-8)
- Hedley hates his father's stories but can't tell him so – *'If I did, it would be like hitting him. If I stand up to him, he will shatter into a million pieces like a glass ornament'* (p39)
- Father is a man of his time – *'uncomfortable in his skin'* (p58-9)
- Father tells him *'You're good for nothing,' 'Not worth your weight in sawdust'* Hedley seeks solace with Major Manners (p60-1)
- Dad avoids dishes in toilet (p109)
- Dad still concerned about public disgrace (p197)

Hedley's father says he is hopeless; the boys from Billabong appear hopeless to Hedley yet Mr Hooper is encouraging of their work (p95).

- What is all of this teaching Hedley?
- How does it make him feel?

Hedley's father interrupts Hedley to tell his story about a worker who he had to sack, in his opinion the man was *'simple', 'good for nothing'* (p110)

- Why does he interrupt?
- Why does he feel the need to continually hold the floor?

Mother

Mother is at times distant and cold yet does appear to be aware of Hedley's concerns and needs, though she is not able to support him effectively.

Consider the following sections:

- *'Her looks can kill'* (p14)
- In stories you run away to the circus but in real life you have to take it (p59)
- Mum thinks Ian's gang look common (p111)
- A hand on the shoulder is like a hug or a kiss (p199)

At the end of the text, Mum stands up for the Billabong boys who had saved her children (p188). So too does Hedley's father (p193).

- Is this ultimately a message about the importance of family?
- Do you think Hedley's parents will be truly accepting of the Billabong boys in the future?

Sister Kate

Hedley makes it very clear he cannot be seen to be playing with his sister (p4, 26).

- Is this a "playground rule" that is true of any era or are attitudes different today? Are there exceptions?

Hedley is dismissive of Kate due to her age and her gender (p6).

- Is he right to feel superior?
- In what ways does Kate affect the story in support of Hedley?

Friends

At the beginning of the text we are introduced to Hedley's troubles revolving around his lack of friends (p5).

It appears he would do anything for his friends. Even though he knows it is wrong he agrees to go through with the dare (p36).

- To what extent will someone go to make friends?
- Why is it so important?

Amongst many other things, this text is about Hedley discovering what true friendship is. In his time of need Victor is there to help (p144).

- Is Victor a true friend?

On page 149 Hedley considers the true nature of friendship and comes to a realisation about Victor and his sister Kate.

- Consider this section – what do you think Hedley has learnt?

Victor *'is our only hope. He is kind. He is innocent. But he's not smart'* (p162).

- Does Hedley come to a decision as to what characteristics he prefers in those around him?
- What characteristics do you treasure in a friend?

Towards the end of the story Hedley also finds friendship with Mouse. His original gut feeling, that Mouse could be a mate, holds true (p198).

- At this point Hedley feels, *'Life is good'* but was friendship all that he needed?
- What else has Hedley found?

Finding a Voice

The text of Hedley Hopkins is very much about Hedley discovering his own self. This idea is connected very strongly to his perception of himself and his ability to speak out in support of those he cares about. This awakening, or growth, is

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aligned to his own physical and sexual awakening and the growth of other characters in the text, particularly Victor.

Explore the following passages that highlight this theme:

- Reverend Carpenter putting words into Hedley's mouth (p23)
- Hedley's father's inability to talk to him in a meaningful way
- This is expressed in his father's ineffective stories (p19)
- And his failure to help his son understand his changing body (p201)
- The view of the period that children should be seen and not heard (p18)
- Victor's echolalia
Finding his voice (p145)
- Victor's leading of the others to lift the grave slab (p156)
- Hedley finding his voice to speak out and own up (p184)

Loneliness

Loneliness is a key theme of the text. The term is used to describe and link Hedley's feelings with the landscape around him (see descriptive language section). Hedley is lonely on a number of occasions for various reasons.

Consider:

- *'I am just a boy'* – alone within the church family (p21)
- Jesus is his new friend – not what he hoped for (p22 –3)
- *'I am in the car with three other people but I still feel lonely.'* (p25)
- father lonely too (p37)
- *'I understand what it must be like inside a lonely grave. It is like the inside of my head'.* (p65)
- *'a solitary Christian entering the arena'* (p69)
- feels skull *'likes me'* (p81)
- misses his grandmother who was going to come to Australia but changed her mind after a dream of dying on the boat (p125)

Belonging

Hedley continually feels different from the others, unable to fit in to the group/s he sees around him. *'I am a freak. An outsider'* (p44).

- Do such feelings haunt us all sometimes?
- Why?

Consider this piece of text:

'I run and run and run until my breath cuts into my lungs like a saw. You can't get away from things like shame and guilt because they are inside you. But for some reason the running makes you feel that you are escaping' (p45)

- What does it show us about Hedley?
- Can you identify with his feelings?

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Major Manners says *'They are weird'* (p150).

- Who is he talking about?
- Do these views set Hedley even further apart from everyone else?
- Does he really belong?
- Where does he belong?
- How important are these feelings to any individual?

'Sometimes things are not what they seem to be' (p97)

The idea of things not being what they seem, of people displaying an outward exterior that masks their inner self, is prevalent throughout the text. Many of the characters are judged according to this outward exterior but it is their actions that show us their true worth.

- Can you think of any examples of this?

Consider:

- Mr Tinker *'is different on the outside to what he really is on the inside'* (p57).
- The boys from Billabong.
- Mouse
- Kate
- Hedley's parents

Actions are also not always what they seem. For example, Victor was throwing lollies not stones at Hedley in the grave (p97).

- Can you think of any other instances in the book where actions are misinterpreted?

Hedley's dad says *'vandals destroy what they cannot understand'* (p64).

- Who is this true of?

In the light of this definition there are vandals both in Hedley's story and in the story of Manny's people.

- Identify the different *'vandals'* and what it is that they destroy.
- Can you transfer this definition of vandals to other stories you have heard or read about?

Emerging Sexuality

Hedley's story deals openly with his own emerging sexuality and the guilt and misunderstanding that this entailed during the 1950's.

Consider Hedley's reactions to his emerging feelings:

- *'Staring at drawings of naked flesh is wicked. It makes me feel good in a bad way. Every time I do it, I say I will never do it again. But I always do'* (p14)

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- *'I try and try and try but the thoughts about naked ladies just keep coming like the smell of fresh cakes.'* (p14)
- *'They were in some dark and evil place like the inside of my mind'.* (p15)
- *'I have been born very bad'* (p16)
- wants to *'be normal'*, worth doing a dare (p16)
- *'bad thoughts'* come from the devil (p42)
- *'I love thinking about naked ladies but I know it's wicked'* (p121)
- *'a terrible magic stirring'* (p123)
- Why does Hedley feel bad and wicked?
- Do you think a young person his age would feel similarly alone and confused today? Why or why not?

When Hedley comes to the realisation of what makes babies (p170), he decides *'I am normal'*. This is a great relief for him (p171).

- Can you identify with his view?

When Hedley's father tries to talk to him about the physical and emotional changes he is going through he is unable to communicate with his son; he is awkward and embarrassed (p201).

- Can you imagine similar scenes occurring within families today?
- Do other issues/ concerns cause greater barriers to communication within families in the 21st century?

1950's Suburban Australian life

The following instances in the text place the action clearly in the 1950's:

- *'tinkers cuss'* (p4)
- talk of the Blitz and the Gerry Bombers in London (p4)
- to Hedley his father is *'always talking about the war.'* (p4)
- the expression *'our Kate'* (p4)
- wireless and shilling (p7)
- the expression *'strike a light'* (p9)
- comics of the period (p13)
- best clothes for church (p17)
- children should be seen and not heard (p18)
- dunny man (p27)
- importance of Queen and the Commonwealth (p31)
- jacks (p32)
- grandfather who fought in WW1 (p55)
- stiff upper lip (p59)
- horsewhipped (p65)
- slaughtering a chook (p66)
- Kate plays with dolls and cane hoops (p16)
- swap cards, marbles, jacks, British bulldog (p67)
- *'teachers are to be respected'* (p80)

- typewriter on the desk in the school office (p86)
- blasphemy explained (p87)
- Hedley's class has 54 pupils (p88)
- Reciting times tables – ruler if you're wrong (p108)
- *'Eat everything or get nothing'* (p110)
- Chinese burns (p113)
- 5 week trip on a boat to get to Australia (p125)
- Hedley given the strap (p137)
- One of only three children in his grade with a watch (p152)
- FX Holden (p177)

This large number of references succeeds in developing the flavour of the period.

- Discuss how this makes the reader react?
- Is it difficult for a young person to relate to the period, or is a good story good regardless of when it is set?
- Discuss the importance of context for a story.
- Could the Hedley Hopkins story have taken place anywhere else – another country, another time?

Though many of the material objects within the story date it to a particular time and place, discuss the concerns of the story that are universal and timeless, eg. friendship and family.

A small oral history project amongst family members (grandparents) could be conducted to compare the events of Hedley Hopkins to the memories of family members of the period.

- Ask participants if they remember items from the above list.
- Explore similarities and differences between then and now.

Discuss the various sayings and phrases that are scattered throughout the text. Some are now old fashioned and forgotten; others are still used commonly today.

- Consider the changing nature of language. What influences these changes?
- Explore modern day versions of these sayings or phrases that have replaced them in present day speech.

Some from the text are:

- *'Talking to yourself is the first sign of madness'* (p67)
- *'not right in the head'* (p79)
- *'one loaf short of a dozen'* (p79)
- *'Eat everything or get nothing'* (p110)
- *'strike a light'* (p9)
- *'tinkers cuss'* (p4)

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Throughout the text, reflecting the era in which it is set, is reference to the clear distinction between gender roles.

- Discuss these different roles and varied expectations in comparison to today's views.

Some examples from the text are to be found on the following pages:

- girls fifes, boys drums – girls things/boys things (p77)
- bike he never rides
- girls needlework/boys handwork (p106)

'Pommie' migrants

'Kate has plenty of friends even though she is a Pommie like me. A Pommie is what Australian kids call someone from England. They say we talk funny. But for some reason it doesn't seem to matter to Kate's friends.' (p16)

- Why do you think is the case?
- Perhaps it has nothing to do with being a 'pommie'. Maybe Hedley is different in other ways. What do you think?

What does it mean to be a pommie in Australia in the 1950's?

Consider:

- Hedley's family are not foreigners – part of the Empire (p28) but Hedley feels like a foreigner, 'a misfit'.
- Pommies are whingers (p31)
- Father too proud to take a labourer's job (p38)
- Perceptions of Australia (p38)
- Hedley links his being called a pommie to the billabong students (p73)
- Hedley links his own experiences to that of other migrants (p105)
- Wellingtons/gumboots (p107)
- Jennings's own views on current migration and detention? (p206)

Racism

Throughout the text examples of racism which existed during those times is evident. The following examples may be useful impetus for discussion:

- Europeans – always kissing and garlic (p28)
- 'a touch of the tar brush' (p40) used by his father to describe Mr Hooper.
- Father's attitude towards French – frogs (p107)
- Father wont let them out of the cabin as they sail through the Suez canal as he is worried the Arabs might kidnap the children (p126)
- Attitudes towards Aboriginal people – savages (p190)
- Settlers were head hunters (p191)

- Are these all examples of racism or ignorance?
- Can you make connections between these 1950's views and the perceptions or ideas prevalent in our own society?

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- As discussed earlier on, terminology changes. This is particularly the case in relation to derogatory remarks about race. Discuss.

The Mentally Disabled

Recent television advertisements from the organisation Scope have encouraged viewers to see the person not the disability. Consider the various characters in Hedley Hopkins and their interaction with the boys from Billabong in relation to this view.

From the Scope website:

Scope is a not-for-profit organisation providing disability services throughout Melbourne and Victoria to over 3,500 children and adults with physical and multiple disabilities. Thousands more people intermittently access our information, support and assessment services.

Scope is committed to overcoming the personal, structural and attitudinal barriers that prevent those with disability from participating in community life and works to make our community more inclusive, more accessible and more welcoming.

An explanation about Victor helps Hedley recognise Victor as a person with a problem, like anyone – ‘*The poor kid isn’t a murder. He just can’t talk*’ (p90)

During Hedley Hopkins the teachers at Billabong were just beginning to have students from their school attend mainstream education.

- How does the segregation of the students from Billabong compare with the statement from Scope that details what they are working for within today’s society?
- Do you think real change has been achieved since the 1950’s?

Scope itself recognises the changing nature of terminology in relation to people with disabilities. Scope was formerly known as the Spastic Society of Victoria. On the website the say about their name change:

However, with the passage of time has come changing public attitudes. The most common use of the word "spastic" has insidiously assumed misrepresentation that intends the word as an insult. Similarly, reservations about the name were frequently expressed by young parents, as well as supporters in the corporate and private sectors.

There is great power in the words we use to describe things and the meanings that are attached to these words. Throughout history those in power have used words to segregate and marginalise different sectors of society.

Within Hedley Hopkins there are examples of terms that are used both in a derogatory manner and as official terms.

From the text consider the following names and terms:

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- Loony bin/loony (p2, 42, 50 & 83)
- Spastic (p33)
- Mongol (p41)
- *'Billabong home for retarded boys'* (p83)
- How do the various words and their usage make Hedley feel?
- How do those around him react?
- How do the words, and the way they are used, make you feel?

Madness, or being loony, is a term used in many different ways throughout the text.

- Hedley thinks he may be *'mad'* or going mad (p68)
- Kate says *'only a loony would touch a skull'*
- How are these words *'loony'* and *'mad'* being used?
- Do they always mean the same thing?

Consider Hedley's father's views. He calls the boys from Billabong *'morons and idiots'* (p79).

- Is he arrogant or ignorant, or is it more complicated than this?

Later in the text Hedley's father thinks Victor is *'brave and smart'* (p193).

- What has changed his view?

Sgt Clifford says the Billabong boys are *'a danger to the community'* (p180) and that *'They have no place with normal people'* (p184).

- Why does he think this way?
- Are his views only a reflection of the times?
- What might have happened to the Billabong students without Hedley's confession and Mr Hooper's intervention?
- Why does Major Manners (skull) say *'no such place'* when Hedley mentions the loony bin? (p81)

Difference

Being different is another strong undercurrent throughout the book. Mr Hooper is considered different - the only teacher not to wear a suit (p71).

- Mr Hooper says of the Billabong students: *'They don't tease others who are different'* (p73), contrast this to Mr Tinker's reactions to Mr Hooper's ideas (p73).
- Do we all have something that sets us apart from the mainstream?
- Does it matter?
- What do you think Hedley learns about himself and others in relation to difference?

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Hedley says of the Billabong boys:

'Each one of these children is different and yet in some way they all seem to look alike' (p93); and *'I am starting to like them. They don't seem as if they could hurt a fly. They really are like big babies more than lunatics.'* (p95)

- What has changed Hedley's perception?

Related texts

Time Bomb by Nigel Hinton

- Post war life in Great Britain. A young boy disillusioned with the adult world.

Lockie Leonard series by Tim Winton

- Lockie is a young Australian boy, an outsider in a small town community.

Benny and Omar by Eoin Colfer

- Cultural differences, friendship and disability are also covered, though differently, in this fast moving, amusing story about a young Irish boy in Tunisia.

Misery Guts by Morris Gleitzman

- A different view of migrating from England to Australia, explores issues of family, relationships and friends with humour.

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robbed a grave,
 made a new friend who might not
 have really been there at all,
 and while he was at it,
 committed a
 terrible sin
 which everyone was doing
 even though he didn't
 know it.

Paul Jennings