



# That Dolphin Thing

## Ian Bone

Mac is a skinny, smart, tentative fourteen year old, who can't swim, is terrified of the sea and yet finds himself in a situation where he has agreed to swim with a dolphin and his mother, an act which becomes important to the family in terms of his mother's survival of her breast cancer. Mac deals with life and his relationships through humour – satirical, ironic, deadpan. It is what defines him to himself, within the family and especially his relationship with his ill mother. But it is the misfiring of this sense of humour that gets him into the situation of facing, or running away from, his great fear. Mac is funny, but he is also using humour to deflect any real engagement with what has happened to his mother.

He is a loner with few friends at school, which allows for a lot of the story to happen in his head. When he meets a girl nicknamed 'Killer' Kusinski, he has to learn fast to maintain the unusual friendship that is pivotal.

Leaking though this first person story are the awful but matter-of-factly told circumstances of living with someone who is undergoing treatment for cancer. And in this lies another function of humour, to make bearable something horrible, and in the writing, to avoid being mawkish or sentimental. It allows the suffering to be quietly there in the background.

This is a book that should be great fun to share with students and one with which English teachers should find a ready connection, as it is concerned with the role, function and subversive, powerful nature of language, to make us laugh, to cry, to feel to think, to communicate.

It also begs for the exploration of the nature of humour – what we find funny, what we laugh at, why it can be so different for different people.

Try this one (suitably literary!)

*'What do you call a woman who can balance four pots of beer on her head?'*  
*Beatrix Potter*

### Title

*That Dolphin Thing* alerts us to what this book is about and the mode and voice of telling. Why 'that dolphin thing'? Who is likely to be telling this story? What does the use of language alert us to?

The title plays up both the way Mac talks, and the modern, American trend to call things 'things'. For example, 'It's a boy thing' 'It's a white thing', etc.

Are there any other 'things' the students can think up that might make for an interesting piece of writing? Perhaps they could brainstorm a list of titles with 'thing' in them, then begin to write from those titles, or sketch out what could come from that title.

Some examples could be 'That Pimple Thing', 'That Kissing Thing' 'How the Teacher Thing got me into trouble...'

## **Humour**

On page 99 Mac says 'There's a formula for humour that I read somewhere. Basically it says that any event, no matter how tragic it is, can be funny. It depends on the time that has passed since the horrible thing happened, and how horrible the thing was'. There are recent events that might test this thesis. How do you feel about jokes about September 11, or the Taliban? Can you think of examples of similar catastrophic events that are now the subject of jokes? Is what Mac says true, or are there things/events/ issues that are taboo regarding jokes being made about them? If so, why?

## **Satire**

Mac is ironic when describing Shell Bay on pages 9-10, such as in the absence of shells, tourists 'lovingly' referred to as martians, the line dangles, the school, the supermarket. Is his cynicism justified? Write a brief description of the town:

- from a local's point of view,
- for a tourist advertising brochure,
- for an ad for TV
- Make a sketch of Shell Bay.
- Describe Mac from a local's point of view using his satirical style.
- Use this style of humour to describe your school, family, etc.

## **Jokes**

What is the point of the joke on page 6 in terms of the story so far? Humour is highly individual. Compare which jokes in the book you find funny and which not. Are there any that everyone laughs at? Why? What do we find funny usually? Why do you tell jokes or funny stories?

Are the jokes at the beginning or end of each chapter there for our amusement only? Or do they relate to the content? Why are they there? Are they a distraction? Do you like them? Would you use them in your writing? What ones would you use? (Apply censorship as necessary!)

Consider that there is not only humour in the telling of this story but in its content too. Mac's mother's job is collecting jokes (is this a pot shot at the nature of academic research or does it have a more central narrative purpose?) The book also prompts thought about the role that humour serves in everyday life.

Is Mac using his flippant responses to avoid confronting difficult issues, that is, making jokes allows him to skate over the surface? Is this a fairly common practice or a particular personality trait?

Consider when humour fails, when it is not the expected response, such as on page 3 when Mac's Mum tells him she has cancer, and on page 16 when he shares the dolphin story. Has his mother lost her sense of the ridiculous or has Mac has no idea about how his mother is reacting? Would it be fair to say that the only way Mac can relate to his mother is through their humorous exchanges?

Page 91 'It was only a joke, Mac...' 'That's where he was wrong. It was more than joke, anyone could see that'. Did you think it was funny? Why couldn't Mac laugh at a joke against himself? What does he mean that it is more than a joke? Is it just sour grapes – he doesn't like being laughed at?

Page 127 'It seemed so unfair what was happening to Mum. She had never hurt anyone in her life, all she ever wanted to do was laugh and write long, boring essays.' Does this humour work? Why? Page 137 'We joke about this stuff because life is one big, long diaster and if we didn't laugh about it now and then we'd go under.' True? Does this reflect or offend your attitude towards life?

## **Unintentional humour**

(any examples from your own experience?)

- For Mac, the dolphin thing is the biggest joke of all because it is taken seriously. Does he need this reality in his life? Is that the role of Killer? Does Mac always play it too safe?
- Page 18 Mac is darkly funny when he doesn't mean to be. 'It just gave her a massive bruise. That's the way life works, it gives you bruises.'

### **Verbal humour**

- Page 32 Mr Rancid and the smell – word play appeals as clever to some and stupid to others. How do you rate it?
- Page 67 'consenting adults...she just wanted to punch me now and then'. Mac is still seeing her reputation, constructing her in terms of words, labels, rather than through his experience of her. Is that his problem – that he hides behind words?
- Mac does live life in his imagination and through books – that is where he goes to find out information. Does it help him? Is it part of his refusal to tackle life physically – to do, rather than to think, wonder, hypothesise?
- When does humour start to fail him? Why does he withdraw from his mother?

### **Language**

This book celebrates the playfulness of language. Here are some examples to start with. You might have other favourites. Mark ones that you enjoy as you read.

Page 4 Mac's father is a philosopher so therefore, Mac's mother says, he 'thinks of the cause before the effect', which is why he says 'kettle'. Make up some phrases that describe the particular thinking or modus operandi of other occupations.

- How hard are punch lines? What would be a good punch line to describe you?
- Is life a bad joke? Or is it as funny as that?
- Page 11 Mac uses a clever simile to describe the 'games arcade' in Shell Bay as 'more like a huddle than an arcade' Make up some your own.
- Page 24 When Mac's mother describes her walk as 'beautiful' he is appalled at her lack of precision in the use of language which she usually prides herself on. Is he being pedantic or has language failed her?
- Page 94-95. His imagination, which has been his companion, now is his betrayer, presenting the unknown depths in creepy images. Mac abuses the ocean, but words are not always enough. 'Actions speak louder than words.' How does this apply? Is it true to say that ultimately it is words that save him, that really test his courage?
- Page 186 Mum is the precise user of language and yet she says after Mac's swim with the dolphin 'You bumped me with your swim. You bumped my heart.' How do you interpret/respond to that? Do you like this inventive use of language? How else could you convey what she means?
- What do you think of Mac's song 'Dolphins don't get cancer'? Page 128-9. What sort of music do you think Dunlevy wrote to it? Do the words imply a particular style, mood?
- How many other 'things' are there in the book? Why are they referred to as 'things' by Mac?

### **Characters**

Because this is a first person narrative, the characters come to us through Mac. How reliable do you think he is as a narrator and an interpreter of other people? Is he too self absorbed to be objective about those around him? Consider the statement that Mac's mother is idealised and his brother

Oscar demonised. Mac has some nice insults for Oscar, such as 'narcissistic psychopath.' Is there any evidence that Oscar deserves being labelled as a 'psychopath'? Why does Mac react so powerfully to him? Trace their encounters to decide whether Mac's interpretation of events is the only one, or the best one.

Notice how Ian Bone uses words to characterise people. Think about how differently you picture/react to Sharon Kusinski than to Killer Kusinski – how language is cuing us to respond. Think also about the nicknames for the teachers, such as Mr Rancid – could be straight out of Dickens. Is Shakespeare correct '... that which we call a rose/By any other name would smell as sweet'?

- Ian Bone himself talks about 'signs' that are based on puns, double meanings (page 48). How are jokes signs, and how do we know how to read them as signs?

Language, humour and character are all carefully melded in this novel. Father is a philosopher and there are some philosophical moments, such as 'Tiny victories come at the most unexpected of times.'

- Do you enjoy these? Would you use them in your own writing, or conversation?

Killer Kusinski plays a joke on Mac concerning killing the dolphin, because he tries to act tough in the library – but does he? There is a lot of misinterpretation – of language and of 'reading' people and their actions. How we react to, interpret someone is often as much about ourselves as it is about the other person.

- Do you have experiences that confirm, contest this?

For Killer, Mac is a know-all, a townie – but is he really? 'I thought you might have been different...you were funny... but I guess you're as much of a dick-head as the rest of them' (page 46).

- Why should being funny have made Sharon think Mac would be different – and different from what, and in what way?

### **Killer Kusinski** 'the girl behind the myth' (p130)

- Why does Killer help Mac? Is she purely altruistic? Does she sense a common bond that they have both failed people they love? Does it convince you? Why or why not? Is it to assuage her guilt over the failure to save her sister?
- Killer presents a tough image to the world and yet speaks gently, and sings to the dolphin whom she believes is her sister. How do you explain these apparent contradictions in her character?

Killer appears to be hard and fearless and yet is afraid of singing in front of the town (page 115). 'It's like everyone can see into you, or something.'

- Why should this make her fearful? What exactly is she afraid of revealing? What do you understand about the nature of her relationship with her dead sister? Consider the 'conversation' on pages 152-153.

### **Mac**

- Imagine that Mac is a member of your class. Would he be your friend? Would you like him? Why or why not? How do you imagine you would react to him? Would he be funny or a pain in the

neck? Write or draw how you envisage him.

On page 138 Oscar says of him 'You don't know how to be honest. Everything you say is a spin, a joke or a downright lie.'

On page 141 Belinda says 'You get away with everything'... I'm talking about everything... Take that stupid dolphin thing. "I'll swim with the dolphins with you, Mum". You were never going to do that, but she couldn't see that. You practically broke her heart...'

On page 161 Sharon says of him 'You are so weird, you know... You live your life in movies.'

- Who is right about Mac? Are they fair? Can you live your life always considering others? How do you get a balance?
- Who is Mac? How do we get a picture of him? What about the scenarios he constructs in his head, such as on pages 40-42? Why does he put on voices, live inside his head mostly?
- Do you agree with him when he says on page 21 that he doesn't want to think about what's happening to his mother? 'It's not my area. I'm the son with the snappy sense of humour. I crack jokes, she laughs. It's an arrangement we have.'
- "'How are you feeling?' 'How's the lump?'" I imagine she's trying to forget about it. I know I'm trying to.' (page 22) Is he right? Would she be putting it out of her mind, imagining that it didn't exist? Is this how you would react or would you want to know all about it, talk about it?
- 'Mum doesn't need blubbing about the place and people feeling sorry for themselves. She needs her children to get on with their lives and act normal, for crying out loud.' (page 23) Is Mac incredibly insightful here or incredibly stupid?

He doesn't hug his mother because he says 'she needed to conserve her energy' (page 54) – or is it about him conserving or denying his emotions? How do you interpret the 'weird look' she gives him?

- Mac is always using imaginary scenarios to deal with reality such as on the opening page, and the description of Mum on page 63. He makes comparisons with TV soaps. How much do such portrayals influence our view of the world? Do they interrupt our sense of reality or construct it?
- 'I just wish people wouldn't tell me what I'm feeling all the time. ...Or what I'm supposed to be feeling' (page 89). Is part of Mac's problem that he is young (fourteen) and therefore perceived by others who are older as naïve and inferior?
- On page 106 Mac realises his carefully constructed world is falling apart. His escapes and defences aren't working. What do you predict will happen to him?
- Why does he want impress Sharon? Surely he is not falling for her? She's an older woman!
- Is Mac's forgetting of looking after his mother the same betrayal as Killer's of her sister?
- Is it convincing that Sharon would confide in him? Does it matter?
- Mac feels the pressures of responsibility – writing the words for the song. When he has to act – write a song or swim with the dolphins – he is frozen. Is his problem that he hides behind words (cf hiding in the library), using thinking to escape acting?

- Consider page 140. Has he suddenly turned into the model son by deciding to act?

### **Swimming with the dolphins/the dolphin as symbol**

‘They are magnificent creatures, and societies throughout the ages have recognised the special link we have with them’. (page 26)

‘They’re just sea creatures, Mum. I mean yes, they are amazing, but so are butterflies’. (page 179)

‘We do nothing for their environment, yet we expect them to heal us all the time.’ (page 180)

- What is the significance of swimming with the dolphins? Do you believe that dolphins have special powers? Perhaps you might like to find out about the various encounters between dolphins and humans and what is claimed about them. Watch old episodes of the television show *Flipper* to examine how popular texts construct dolphins and compare with more scientific interpretations.
- Are the dolphins irrelevant, just a symbol of the power of belief, or faith? Why do you think the author chose dolphins? Find out whether there are cultures that have dolphins as totems or spiritual symbols.
- Consider why dolphins are so popular – consider those in Port Phillip Bay, at Monkey Mia – and why people connect with them so strongly. Have you ever swum/surfed with dolphins, either as a planned or accidental event? Did the contact have special significance?
- On page 61 Mac’s Mother says ‘it’s not about the dolphins’ What do you think she means?
- Dolphins are often used as a symbol. Is there any particular reason for the choice in this instance? What would you choose as a symbol of hope, beauty, the natural world, uncorrupted by nature? Or is that reading too much into the intent of the dolphin?
- On page 180 Mum says ‘But there was also a little part of me that wanted some magic, maybe even a miracle, because there was anything but magic in my life at the time.’ Is there such a thing as being too realistic, or having too much realism?
- Consider the song that Mac writes, the dolphin – as a dolphin and as Sue Cossington – Sharon’s nickname, etc. Does Ian Bone play it straight or is there a whiff of satire at play?

### **Country town**

- Mac paints a picture of a country town as being tribal in nature on page 8. He must be classified as a townie or farm kid, or surfer. Do the same systems of classifying belong in all towns, suburbs, cities, neighbourhoods? What ‘tribe’ do you belong to? Did you choose it or did it choose you?

### **Fear**

- Is fear what the story is really about?
- Is Mac a coward? And all his clever wit a way of disguising it as is Killer’s bravado and tough image?
- Think about ‘I don’t want to be stuck in the library, or whatever, for the rest of my life. I don’t want to be a wimp forever.’ Why is being in the library being a wimp?
- Why was Mum there at the pier? Is it that she is facing down her fears too? Or is she a necessary witness to Mac’s transformation – her knowledge that his words would work for him, not

against him?

- Consider the importance of letting go: 'a huge feeling as if anything might happen. And I had no control over it.' (page 182) How important is control to you?
- In the epiphanic moment of the book lurks humour – on the part of the dolphin. Is this simply to save the climax from pathos or is it consistent with the complete structure and ethos of the novel?

### **Symbols**

- The pier is not so much a symbol but a site of separation, of a bridge between one reality and another. Do you agree?

### **Related literature**

*Holes*

Louis Sachar

*Tin Soldiers*

Ian Bone

*Fat Boy Saves World*

Ian Bone

*I Love You Jason Delaney*

Judith Clarke

*Mr Enigmatic*

Jenny Pausacker

*My Excellent Lives*

Chris Wheat

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