



**DO YOU DARE? SERIES – 1831  
TOUGH TIMES BY S. MITCHELL**

**TEACHING NOTES**

***Tough Times***

**It's 1831. Join Tom and his mates as they tough it out in the alleyways of Melbourne, 1931. It's the middle of the Great Depression and things are looking grim for Tom and his family. But with Fungus the mutt and other members of the Daredevils gang, Tom sets out to outflank their rival gang, the Spiders, and save the day.**

**CONTEXT**

**1.** Have the children read, “What life was like in Tom’s time” at the back of the book. This was a time, twelve years after the end of the First World War, when people all over the world lost their homes and jobs in the Great Depression. Many businesses went bankrupt and all the people working for them lost their jobs. Many families had to live apart as men went looking for work, sometimes hundreds of kilometres from where they lived. Many people had little or no food and shelter in the cities and there was little help for people who were sick and couldn’t pay. Times were very tough in Melbourne - and tough for kids too. As in all tough times there are always people who make money out of other people’s misery – like Mr. Botherway -and other people who are relatively unaffected because of where they live or the kind of work they do (ACELT 1602).

**2.** The children could be asked to try to discover what the Depression was like for members of their own family by asking and interviewing grandparents and parents. Others could be asked to find pictures of what life was like in the Depression on the Internet. Some may be able to research the topic in the school library. A class discussion could result with each group of children presenting what they have found (ACELY 1816). Questions to answer could include: were some people more badly affected than others? Do you think city people or country people would have been better off? What about people living in countries other than Australia? Why (ACELA 1478) (ACELY1677)(ACELT 1619)?

3. On a map of Melbourne, ask the children as the story proceeds to find the areas of the city where Tom's adventures are played out (ACELA 1524). Are Edinburgh Gardens still there in North Fitzroy? Where are Napier and little Napier Streets, Charles Street, Smith Street and Gertrude Street in Fitzroy? Brunswick Street? Reilly Street? Merri Creek? Rucker's Hill? St Mark's Church? Can someone research where the MacRobertson's chocolate factory used to be? What about the chimney of Wighton's Hat factory (ACELY 1712)?

4. Ask the children if they have ever had a gang like Tom's (ACELT 1596)(ACELY1713). Perhaps they could write a description of life in their gang, even if they have to imagine it. What kind of people would they want in their gang? Would they have code words? Where would they meet? What kind of games would they play? Would they build a fort or a billy cart or something else? What kind of people would be their enemies? What kind of adventures might they have and what kind of good deeds could they perform (ACELY1692)?

### **LANGUAGE**

5. Keep a class glossary of words and phrases that people use in the book that we wouldn't use now. Children can contribute to the list as the book is read. Each group of words offers an opportunity to discuss the way everyday language has changed, as well as the change in the way boys talk, and the change in food we eat and everyday entertainment and hobbies (ACELY 1687) (ACELA1500). Ask the children to notice how rich people spoke differently to poor people (examples are in Chapter 13) and adults to children. Has that changed (ACELA 1529)?

6. Older children might be asked to think why there are such changes to our language. What words do we use instead? Do you think that children another eighty years from now will still be using those words? Why? Why not? A research task might be to get older family members and friends to help them with lists of words and phrases and popular slang terms they used when they were young that are no longer used (ACELA 1500)(ACELA 1516) (ACELA 1528).

### **NARRATIVE STRUCTURE**

7. This is a boys-own story, with lots of emphasis on the narrative. It is told in the third person in chronological order (ACELT1610). Older children could rewrite parts of the story in the first person, from points of view other than Tom's –Fungus or Mr. Codling for example - and perhaps with different outcomes from the novel (ACELT 1601). Suggestions are provided in the chapter-by-chapter summaries below. The chapters have no headings. The class could be invited to suggest a chapter heading for each chapter as they are read.

8. The children could look at other ways to tell the story. Interested children might draw up a comic book version of parts of the story with speech balloons or create short plays (ACELA 1524 and ACELY1725). The eviction scenes in Chapter 15 are heavily dependent on dialogue and would be suitable (ACELY1692) (ACELT1603).

9. There are opportunities for children to compare the relative wealth of life in Australia today with life during the Great Depression and to see something of the plight of ordinary people in times of great economic upheaval (ACELT1619).

**10.** There may be an opportunity to show the children how plot tension is created. Can you predict what will happen next? At the end of each chapter did you want to find out what happened next? Or didn't you care"? Why? Why not? How do you think the author might have been preparing you for worse to come (ACELT1605)(ACELY 1680)?

### **CHARACTERISATION**

**10.** But the plot isn't all there is to the story. We care about Tom and his family and we want him to win out against the Napier Street Gang, the 'toffs' and the Mr. Botherways of the world (ACELT 1605).

**11.** What kind of a boy is Tom? (ACELY1792). Have the children notice how much attention he pays to his family life and how determined he is to help even when the adults have run out of ideas. How is he different from Frank and Samson (ACELT1605)? Why is Frank the leader of the gang? Notice the many occasions on which Samson has funny things to say which relieve tension at the same time as showing us what a smart boy he is under difficult circumstances. Which boy is most like you? Why? What do you like most about the Daredevils? (ACELY1675)(ACELT 1610 and 1620) (ACELA1500).

**12.** Mr. Codling is a mysterious character, greatly misunderstood by the boys, who provides the great lesson of the book in human understanding and the withholding of judgement. His character provides an opportunity for older children to talk about what going to War might do to someone; and to think about what might happen to a grown up who had to deal with seeing and experiencing terrible things in a war and then losing his wife and beloved child on the same day. Could some people suffer so much that they never stop screaming in agony even if the pain is not physical? This character and his role in the story can be directly compared with that of Boo Radley in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Some children might like to keep a first person journal of the events from Mr. Codling's point of view and read it out to the class at strategic points. (ACHHS105)(ACELT1601 and 1620)(ACELY1675).

**13.** The dog Fungus is used affectionately as a comic foil to the drama of the story, relieving tension and providing young readers with a ready -made character who is both familiar and loveable. The children could consider how the story would be different if Fungus was the main character and the story was written from his point of view (ACELT 1604, 1607).

**14.** A good deal of the plot swings on the character and failings of Tom's Dad. Find the parts of the story that tell you that Tom's dad doesn't always do the right thing. (ACELY1692) (ACELY1609). But he is a good and loving man at heart. Find the parts of the story that tell you that (ACELY1713). Have you ever wanted to protect someone grown up and fight on his or her behalf, even though you are just a kid? Write your own story about it, imagining that you could save that person from their problem (ACELT1607). How would you do it? What would change as a result of the problem being solved (ACELT 1596)?

## **EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING**

Some projects that might assist with experiential learning are suggested under chapter discussions. For instance some children with mechanical or practical interests might plan and build a billy cart. The class might eat a sago pudding or try bread and dripping. Chokos might be brought to class, examined and drawn as people.

## **DISCUSSIONS FOR EACH CHAPTER**

### **Ch. 1.**

We meet Tom and his dog Fungus, then the other members of the Daredevils, Samson and Frank as they gather to play a game of cricket in an alleyway in Fitzroy. Frank has reluctantly brought along his cousin Joan.

Younger children might like to draw Fungus given the description at p2. There could be a display of the best and funniest pictures. What do we learn about Samson? Why doesn't Frank like Joan? Why does Frank think girls are like a flock of bloomin' parrots (ACELT1604 and ACELY1692))?

What does "bloomin' " mean? What word would we use instead?

Some of the class might research Don Bradman, Tim Wall, Stan McCabe and Douglas Jardine. Who were they and why were they famous (ACELY1712)?

What does Tom like about Joan (ACELY 1692)?

We hear about the fearsome Mr. Codling and his goat when Joan hits a sixer into Mr. Codling's yard. The children could write a story about Mr. Codling as if he is innocent of the terrible things told about him, using the first person (ACELT1610 and 1798).

### **Ch. 2.**

Why were there a lot of rats? Why don't we see so many rats today?

Ask the children to find out what sago pudding was. Someone's parent might be prepared to cook a sago pudding at home and bring it in for the class to taste (ACELY1713).

Who was Charles Kingsford Smith? Would you like to learn to fly? Write a story about someone who dreams of becoming an aviator in the early days of flight. Ask the children to research early flight in Australia (ACELY 1712). Some boys may be interested in finding and reading some of the "Biggles" books from a few years later.

Tom's dad comes home with some bad news. The family considers what their option will be when the money runs out.

There are many examples here and throughout the book of Australians living in much greater poverty than they do now. The class could do a research project on living conditions in Australia in the Depression using the circumstances of the characters in this book as a starting point. They could use headings like housing, family life and food, transport, clothing, sport and entertainment, employment, help from the government. Children could be asked use photos, video clips, and interviews with older people and websites to put together a class report, citing their sources for the information they find (ACHHS070) (ACELT1619).

### **Ch. 3.**

It's Melbourne Cup day, and it seems this is one tradition that has not altered very much. This is the period when Phar Lap was the greatest racehorse Australians had known. Someone could research what happened to Phar Lap and where he can still be seen. If the class is in Victoria it may be possible to organize a class excursion to the Melbourne Museum where Phar Lap and associated memorabilia are on display (ACELY 1712).

'Strewth' – what would we say today instead? What is a boil (p37)? What is five bob?

Have the class consider what they would have done with Tom's sixpence. Should he have bet it (ACELT1609)?

The class can use the "Conscience Alley" game to tease out the moral and other dimensions of this and other dilemmas faced by Tom throughout the book. A student as Tom walks slowly between two rows of classmates, one row whispering advice, for example, to bet the sixpence, while the other row whispers opposite advice, including reasons to follow the advice. Students then swap sides and take the opposing position. Discussion then follows about what they have learned or what might have changed in their views as a result of the game, including from the children who play the role of Tom (ACELT 1621).

### **Ch. 4.**

We meet the Napier Street Spiders, and a very unsavoury lot they are. Have the class write the meeting as a play and have class members take the roles and act out the drama of this meeting, with perhaps the teacher taking the role of Miss Bright (ACELT 1805).

The children could note the use of humour in the exchanges between the boys and talk about what made them laugh most.

What was 'bread and dripping' (p51), rotgut, a sly grog shop?

Dad has gambled the family's last fifteen pounds on Phar Lap. The family faces eviction. Tom has to do something. This is the big dare of the book. How could he save his family and himself? Have the children each write down a prediction of how Tom might be able to save his family (ACELY1680).

Older children might like to think about the characters of each of Tom's parents. They could write down as many adjectives as they can think of to describe what kind of a person the mother and the father are. Encourage them to think past physical attributes and actions by giving examples like kind, brave, weak, funny, stubborn, sad, happy, practical, sensible, wise, angry, smart (ACELT 1619). After a short period the class could brainstorm the adjectives they have come up with under each of the parent's names on the board. Each one is lovable in his /her own way. Ask them to decide what makes Tom love his Dad and his Mum and fight for his family.

### **Ch. 5.**

The Daredevils meet and try to help Tom solve his family problem. Joan earns her membership of the gang by performing a big dare. What does she do and why are they impressed? Would you have let her in your gang? Why? Why not? Ask the children to discuss this in pairs (ACELY 1804).

Write a story about the dare imagining what would have happened if Joan had lost her footing. Write it in the first person pretending to be Frank Tom or Joan (ACELT 1625) (ACELY 1675).

What was the "Susso" (p58), a "mug" (p60)?

### **Ch. 6.**

Why can't Tom's mum get a job? Would this happen today? Why? Why not? Class discussion.

We meet Mr. Botherway, the person who decides if they are to be evicted from their home. He asks for and gets a bribe from Tom's mother, leaving them no money for food or milk.

Tom sells his collection of swap cards to the pawnbroker for a miserable threepence. As the chapter ends the author reminds us of another threat in Tom's life...what is it? This is called creating plot tension. It makes the reader want to go on reading to find out what will happen to a character he has begun to care about. Ask the children to predict what damage Razor McGee might be planning next (ACELT 1605) (ACELY1680).

### **Ch. 7.**

The Daredevils start to collect glass bottles to sell, using the Brown Bullet for transport. Why are they doing this? What problems do they meet? Have a class brainstorm to list all the bad things that happen (ACELY 1680).

Ask if anyone has ever built a billy cart? Some members of the class might like to draw up a plan for building a billy cart and even try to build one with their mates at home (ACELY1713).

When the billycart loses its wheel, Tom “slumped to the ground....He felt completely deflated, like a bicycle tyre with a four inch nail through it.” Ask the children to think about what other things deflate quickly (balloons hot air balloons, jumping castles), and to create alternative metaphors for how Tom felt, using them. If the author hadn’t used the word deflated, but other words like “flattened” (say by a bus or a steam iron or a steamroller) or ‘smashed ‘ (say by a jackhammer or a falling rock) have the children consider metaphors that would apply to these different verbs. Perhaps having compiled a list of possibilities they could vote on the one that best describes how they think Tom would feel (ACELT 1767).

The gang feels beaten, but only temporarily. Tom sees a poster for a trick competition for dogs and now they have the three shillings to enter. Maybe Fungus can win the ten pounds required to keep the bank at bay. But their plans are interrupted by the arrival of the Spiders.

Tom loses his cricket cards, Frank his billycart, and the gang its bottle collection in the fight that follows; but they have the satisfaction of seeing Razor McGee lose the bum out of his pants to Fungus. Ask the class to choose their favourite part of the fight and say why.

### **Ch. 8.**

The boys happily talk about the fight on the way home. It may be possible to find an old print of a Laurel and Hardy film so the class can enjoy the comedy Frank mentions on p 98.

But when Tom returns home he is grounded by his mum for fighting.

His baby brother is sick and poor people can’t get help from doctors for free. His dad has to ask the chemist for some medicine he can’t pay for. Have you ever been that poor? Ask the children to consider who else in the world could be compared with Tom’s family’s poverty in modern times (ACELT 1619).

The chapter ends on a happier note: Petey’s cold improves and Tom goes to bed with a plan – something to do with oranges. What could it be (ACELY 1605)? Ask the children to come up with a plan for Tom involving oranges.

### **Ch. 9.**

The next night, Tom and Fungus escape out the window. They are meeting the rest of the gang at the back of Mr. Codling’s house. How do you think the gang is feeling before the adventure? How do you know? How would you feel (ACELY1713)?

The plan is for Joan to climb Mr. Codling’s orange tree and drop the oranges to the waiting gang. They will sell the oranges outside the expensive fruit shop and make a fortune. As they are almost finished the task, the killer goat appears, roaring loud enough to wake the neighbourhood. But the gang is saved –by whom? How? And who has been watching them all along.....?(ACELY1713)

Have the children rewrite the adventure so it doesn’t have such a happy ending. Give them the opportunity to write in the first person from the point of view of any of the characters, including Fungus; and to change around the plan to steal the oranges if they so wish (ACELT 1625) (ACELY 1675 and 1698).

What shape would the moon be if it were shaped like a toenail clipping (p110)? Why has the author chosen this metaphor rather than a more conventional one (ACELT 1617)?

#### **Ch. 10.**

Chapter Ten begins with more threats at school from Razor McGee and the Spiders. At lunchtime the gang's shop is a great success and many oranges are eaten and sold before Mr. Moltisano appears. To the children's amazement he buys all their stock from them. Why was that a smart move on Mr. Moltisano's part (ACELY1680)?

The gang now has enough money to pay Fungus' entry fee in the competition and three shillings each. Only Tom is anxious. What is his problem? How would you feel (ACELY 1680)?

#### **Ch. 11.**

The day of the dog show. The family has eaten well on Tom's three shillings but when Mr. Botherway makes an appearance, Tom's dad refuses to offer him a bribe and it looks as if the family will be evicted from their home. Ask the children to consider the different positions taken by Tom's parents on bribery. A "Conscience Alley" game could help them understand both points of view. A class discussion could then consider what is wrong with bribery and why it is called corruption (ACELT 1621) (ACELT 1620).

The chapter ends with a horrible discovery: Razor has stolen Fungus. What will happen next (ACELY 1680)? Have the children talk about how the author has created "plot tension" so we want to find out what will happen and keep on reading (ACELY1605).

#### **Ch. 12.**

This chapter marks the beginning of the climax to the story, because it brings together and resolves two of the major tensions or threats in the narrative – the threat posed by Razor McGee and his gang to the aspirations of Tom's gang, and their fear of Mr. Codling and his goat.

The Daredevils are hunting for Fungus deep in the heart of Spiders' territory. It's a very grim and miserable place. Older children could consider how the description of the hunt and the alleyways and houses deepens their fear for the Daredevils, including finding the details that build up to create that impression (ACELT 1621). They are trapped at the end of an alleyway confronting Tank and Razor. Ask the class to draw Tank and post up the most fearsome of the images.

"Tank's top lip curled like a slug in a dish of salt" (p148): ask the children to notice how this simile has been chosen by the author to deepen our feeling of repugnance towards Tank (ACELT 1621). When Tank pulls the knife, even Razor is worried. How do we know (p150)?

Mr. Codling intervenes to save the daredevils and Tom realizes that Mr. Codling is a friend, not an enemy, and has been misunderstood. Ask the children to consider whether there has ever been a time when they have misunderstood someone because of how they look or sound (ACELY1692).



At the end of the Chapter we are reminded of the remaining threat to Tom's happiness. Ask the children to predict whether Tom will indeed be there on Monday. They should give reasons for their predictions (ACELY 1680).

### **Ch. 13**

When Tom arrives home to bath Fungus for the Dog Show it is to find his family being evicted from their home. He is to leave on the train to live with his grandparents that night. As the neighbours intervene to prevent the eviction and Tom's dad threatens to beat up Mr. Botherway, Tom slips away on his mission to save the family.

After they are thrown off the tram the Daredevils run all the way to the Edinburgh Gardens in North Fitzroy where the dog show is being held. For the first time in the story Tom and his friends are about to find that there are still rich people in the middle of a Depression who have no idea what it is like to be poor. The children could try to identify things people say in the course of the Dog Show that demonstrate this (ACELY 1680).

As Tom tries to register Fungus he is turned away but then helped by the involvement of Mr. Robertson of MacRobertson's Confectionery. He tells Mr. Robertson what he is trying to do.

After the sadness and fear Tom has felt this part of the story provides amusement for both the hero and the reader.

Sometimes imagery can be used to make someone seem funny rather than threatening or ugly or beautiful. Ask the children to try to find an example in the description of events in the dog show (p175: "a large, snooty woman in a green dress that made her look like a huge choko") (ACELT 1621) (ACELY1801).

Fungus creates chaos at the dog show. It is very entertaining reading. The children could discuss what makes everyone laugh. It looks like Tom has lost his chance to save his family until suddenly Mr. Robertson presses ten pounds into his hands and offers his dad a job on the following Monday. Why does he do that? Find some adjectives to describe Mr. Robertson's character (ACELY 1680).

### **Ch. 14**

The rest of the story ties up its loose ends (called a *dénouement*). Tom arrives home to a mob scene in front of his home and is able to show that he has saved his family from eviction. It becomes clear to the policemen there that Mr. Botherway has been demanding bribes from many people and they take him in.

As everyone relaxes, Tom is able to dream of a happy summer doing the things with his friends he likes best. Ask the children to write a character profile of Tom and each of his friends, finding a quote and an incident for each in the story that best sums up the nature of the person he is describing (ACELT 1604).

The children could be asked to make a list of their favourite things to do in the long summer holidays (ACELY 1713).

## WRITING STYLE

Written in the third person, and providing excellent opportunities for studying dialogue,

*Tough Times* encourages empathetic identification with a young hero and his friends in circumstances that are not far removed from the games and dilemmas of modern young boys.

Tom is a likeable and courageous character who takes on the adult and the young world around him to keep his family together. There are moral and ethical dilemmas to study, including those based around parental quarrels, corruption and gambling.

The imagery is carefully chosen to appeal to the experiences and imagination of young boys and works to excellent effect.

There is lighthearted dialogue and use of humor throughout the story to entertain young boys and increase sympathy with sympathetic characters. Amusing names like “Fossington-Wolsely” and “Ointment Head” take the threat out of situations and work to comic effect for young audiences, not to mention extensive use of mildly rude words like “bum” and “pee”.

The story highlights the manners and speech of eighty years ago and offers children aged eight to eleven opportunities to expand their vocabulary and to understand the ways in which vocabulary changes with time and in accordance with the cultural norms of the time.

## OVERALL MESSAGE

**Be loyal to your friends and family. When times are tough don't give up on them or yourself. At the end of the day kindness and courage -sometimes from unexpected quarters -defeats the darkest parts of human nature.**

## FURTHER INFORMATION

### ON LINE

[www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/great-depression](http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/great-depression) and [www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/charles-kingsford-smith](http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/charles-kingsford-smith)

### FILM AND AUDIO

Damien Parer (1981) video (17 minutes) *Bread and Dripping*; interviews intercut with historical footage.

Watch a Laurel and Hardy Film. Prints can be downloaded from [www.laurel-and-hardy.com/downloads/downloads.html](http://www.laurel-and-hardy.com/downloads/downloads.html)

ABC Radio National Rear Vision : The influenza pandemic of 1918-19. May 2009. Transcript and audio available.

### BOOKS

W E Johns' “Biggles” books were first published in Britain from 1932. Information available through [www.biggles.info](http://www.biggles.info)

Penguin Books: Our Australian Girl Series –Ruby, by Penny Matthews

## ACTIVITIES

Go to: [www.bilycarthq.com/how-to-build-a-billy-cart/](http://www.bilycarthq.com/how-to-build-a-billy-cart/)