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THE SPANGLED DRONGO

Steven Herrick



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian
in context with the Australian curriculum
(English)

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SYNOPSIS

Sam is obsessed by soccer, much like his best friend Goose and Jessica, who has just moved in next door. As his friendship with Jessica grows, Sam realises that there is much more to life than soccer.

The Spangled Drongo is a humorous yet tender story about the importance of friendship, family and hope.

THEMES

- Friendship
- Hope
- Grief
- Soccer
- Love
- Humour
- Poetry

WRITING STYLE

The Spangled Drongo is a verse novel told through the first-person perspectives of Sam and Jessica. The narrative is humorous, yet compelling and sensitive, as Sam comes to terms with the loss of his parents. Through his relationship with Jessica, Sam can quietly process his grief and begin to heal. The combination of verse with soccer allows *The Spangled Drongo* to appeal to a broad audience, including reluctant readers, while its themes of hope and friendship offer depth for more discerning analysis. It is suitable for middle readers aged 9+.

STUDY NOTES

- ‘The Last Game of the Season’ (pp. 3–4) introduces readers to Sam and his love for soccer. After reading this poem, discuss how Steven Herrick has been able to project Sam’s voice into the narrative so quickly.
- Sam is superstitious. What does this mean? Do you have routines you habitually perform before playing sport? What does *The Spangled Drongo* reveal about such superstitions at the end of the text?
- Herman hates his name, preferring to be called by his nickname, Goosebones. What is your nickname? How did you get this name? Discuss how names can help shape our identities.
- Although Jessica doesn’t speak in ‘Goose and Jessica’ (pp. 9–10), what do we find out about her in this verse?

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- Why does Sam wait until p. 11 to tell us a little more about himself? Why do you think he gets sidetracked when telling his story?
- Sam uses a photo to talk about his mum and dad (p. 21). Using a photo of your parents, write your own poem to share the relationship they have with you.
- Auntie Amshara compares school, soccer and the beach to curry (pp. 27–28). Reread her verses about these subjects. As a class, brainstorm other possible topics for short poems and write your own.
- Create a character portrait of Auntie Amshara, using evidence from the text to support your ideas. How has she been able to guide Sam in her role as guardian without trying to replace his parents? Why does Sam say she is ‘unusual, like curry’ (p. 29)?
- Discuss the author’s choice to tell this story from both Sam’s and Jessica’s perspectives. How does this help readers to relate more closely with the characters and the story?
- When discovering that Sam has no parents, why does Jessica say ‘it took me days of thinking to work this through’ (p. 36)? What does this poem tell us about the kind of friend she is? How is her ability to empathise such an important element of the text?
- Write your own two-line chants that Sam could recite before each soccer game (see pp. 42–43).
- What is it about Jessica that Sam is so drawn to? Why does he try not to think about her? Why is this impossible?
- Sam says that the first Friday on the roof started a friendship with Jessica. What are the perfect ingredients for a good friendship? Discuss with a small group and share back to the class.
- In pairs, play your own game of 20 questions about a subject of your choice (see pp. 57–58).
- How does Sam’s friendship with Jessica help broaden his interests beyond soccer? How do the verses in the text show this character development?
- Reread ‘Perfect Sunday’ on pp. 59–60. Discuss the formatting of the text in context with the subject of the verse. Why have these decisions been made?
- Write your own class poem like in ‘Jessica and the Last Day of School’ (pp. 61–62).
- In the role of either Sam or Jessica, write a piece of prose that describes your Friday nights on the roof and why they are so special to you.
- Using ‘Birds’ from pp. 63–65 as a guide, write your own verse about your Christmas holidays.
- Why does it take until p. 63 for the title of the novel to surface? After finishing the text, discuss the significance of the title. What is it that Sam and Jessica are really looking for?

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- What is the significance of the ring that Jessica gives Sam (pp. 66–67)?
- Why does Sam offer Jessica the last chocolate biscuit in ‘Blush’ (p. 68)?
- How important is Ronaldo to Sam? Write a reflection of the place a pet of yours has played in your life.
- Why does Sam think that having his birthday on New Year’s Eve is both good and bad? What is good and/or bad about the timing of your birthday? Write a verse to share your thoughts.
- When Sam thinks of soccer, he now thinks of Jessica too. Why is he unsure whether he likes this fact?
- Play your own game of ‘10 words quick’ (see p. 79).
- Why is the relationship between Sam and Jessica such a special one? What makes the best friendships? Share with a friend, and then with another pair.
- What relationship does Sam develop with Jessica’s parents? How would this help Sam over time?
- Why is Jessica not embarrassed by her dad when Sam is around? What does this tell us about the role of families and true friends in *The Spangled Drongo*?
- Why does it take until ‘Last Night’ on pp. 84–87 to find out what happened to Sam’s parents? Discuss the effectiveness of this verse, including the placement of it in the text. Why is it important that Sam can talk about the loss of his parents to someone other than Ronaldo and Parrot?
- How do the stars help Sam to deal with his grief?
- Write a verse about your typical first day back at school after the summer holidays.
- Why is Jessica chosen as the captain for the soccer team? How might Goose feel about this?
- Why does Sam start praying after not having done so since he was five? Why has he stopped visiting his parents’ graves? What is it that draws him back to the cemetery?
- How is the theme of hope addressed in *The Spangled Drongo*?
- What kind of friend is Goose? How does he grow and change throughout the course of the text? Choose a verse of two from *The Spangled Drongo* to write from Goose’s perspective.
- Why does Sam say, ‘I know I love soccer but there is more to life’ (p. 119)?
- Why does Sam ask Jessica to visit the cemetery with him?
- What does Sam mean she he says he has ‘family beside me/behind me/with me’ (p. 136)? Write a reflection about the importance of family to you.

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- How has Steven Herrick used the roof and counting of stars to tie the themes of *The Spangled Drongo* together?
- Like Mr Raindorf, publish a class newspaper in which students write articles specific to their interests.
- How are photos used in the text to symbolise the importance of family and love?
- Using the six chapter headings of *The Spangled Drongo*, create a story map outlining the major plot points and character development in the text.
- What role does soccer play in Sam's life? What is the connection between his love for soccer and the fact he wears his dad's soccer jersey to bed every night? What hobby or interest reflects the relationship you share with your parents? Share in a written reflection.
- While much of *The Spangled Drongo* is light-hearted and humorous, it also contains sincere and tender moments. Highlight those parts of the text that appeal to the emotions of the audience. Discuss the appeal of humorous texts that are anchored by serious moments.
- Try writing some of the episodes from *The Spangled Drongo* in prose form.
- Create a word cloud on a selected character using an online tool such as Wordle (www.wordle.net).
- Write a reflection on friendship, using examples from your own experiences as well as ideas that arise in *The Spangled Drongo*.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

I wrote *The Spangled Drongo* when I was coach of my son's soccer team. I loved the group dynamic and felt this community was the perfect platform for a book about a boy coming to terms with the grief of losing his parents. A game of soccer means so much on an immediate level, but of course is insignificant in the greater scheme of things. I kept thinking that childhood should be about these significant insignificances – the game of soccer; spotting your favourite bird in the backyard; and hanging out with your friends. Maybe these daily pleasures help build in us the resilience and strength to overcome loss and grief?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven Herrick is the author of twenty-five books for children and young adults. His books have twice won the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards and have been shortlisted for the Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year Awards on nine occasions. He is widely recognised as a pioneer of the

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verse-novel genre for young adults. He is also the author of six travel books. He spends nine months of the year visiting schools in Australia and three months on his bicycle, travelling around, pedalling slowly and thinking about his next book. www.stevenherrick.com.au