



Big River, Little Fish **by Belinda Jeffrey**

Year 9 - 10

Background

Big River, Little Fish is set during the 1956 flooding of the Murray River. The story is told through the life of Tom Downs, a boy living on the outer of a close, small community. Tom's life is closely linked to the Old Mother Murray; he was born on its banks and his mother died there giving birth to him. Tom has always been tied to the river and the people of the river through the mystery around him. His past and his future have also always set him apart.

The flooding of the river coincides with change and crisis in Tom's life. The return of his father and his need to face his own issues and discover his own self are swept up in the community's efforts to survive the force of the river.

Focus: The Community - Landscape

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)

The community on the river Murray and the landscape in which it is situated are central components of this novel. The river and the Australian landscape are strongly realised, giving the novel a strong sense of time and place.

Bill Wootton, in his review of *Big River, Little Fish*, says:

'We are in Swan Reach in the year of the biggest flood on historical record. Jeffrey creates this town for us by careful accretion. We become familiar with the car ferry (on which Tom works), the school (where Tom is encouraged by one teacher, bullied by her replacement), the Guthries' sheep farm (where Tom helps out), the pub, the motor workshop (where Tom uses his mechanical smarts to help out Ted, his adoptive father) and the shacks by the river which house various female and male town misfits. Year 10 or 11 students could have fun assembling plans of how they see the place based on Jeffrey's clues. James Roy's *Town* has gone down a treat with students engaging in this activity because of its contained, specific

settings and Jeffrey's novel should allow this too.' (Bill Wootton in *Viewpoint: on books for young adults*, 18 (4), Summer 2010, page 13).

Assessment

Follow this excellent suggestion to recreate the town of Swan Reach and its surrounds. Students could be encouraged to present their work in a medium of their choice, either as a plan, as Wootton suggests, or in writing or pictures.

Focus: The Community – The People

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)

Discuss:

- The book suggests Tom has three fathers. Consider what each man offers or means to Tom.
- What does a river or water symbolise in literature or film? What is the significance of the Murray to the Australian historical landscape? What does the river mean to the various characters in *Big River, Little Fish*? Consider the perspective of Oliver, Murray Black, Lil, Mrs Cath and Tom.

Wootton (*Viewpoint: on books for young adults*, 18 (4) 2010 page 13) says of Tom and the river:

'Tom's moments of contemplation seem to synchronise with the pace of the river but the rising flood tests him in many ways and 'Old Mother' reflects emotional anxieties as well as calling on Tom's resources.'

Oliver says:

'Water's going to rise and maybe a man can't fight what's gonna drag him under anyway.' (page 133)

- What is the effect on the reader of the imaginary character? What do you think the author's purpose was in having this character imaginary rather than real?

- Jeffrey writes:

‘Thing about words, Tom decides as he rides up the road, is knowing what’s better not spelt out between people.’ (page 193)

- This book is about both the power and limitation of words. Discuss.

Related Reading

Brown Skin Blue by Belinda Jeffrey

Jasper Jones by Craig Silvey

Town by James Roy

Newsfront (film) Directed by Philip Noyce (covers the Maitland floods in the 1950s)

Mighty Murray by John Nicholson (non-fiction)

The Innocents by Nette Hilton

Stony Heart Country by David Metzenthen

Broken Glass by Adrian Stirling

Surrender by Sonya Hartnett