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THE BOGAN MONDRIAN

Steven Herrick



Teachers' Notes

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

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SYNOPSIS

Luke prefers taking photographs and swimming at the reservoir to sitting in a classroom, bored and disengaged. He regularly ends up wagging school with his best mate, Blake.

But when Charlotte comes into his world, he realises there are worse things than school – much worse.

The Bogan Mondrian is a powerful novel that explores themes of trust, courage and acceptance. More than that, it brings to the fore the misgivings of first impressions and the dangers of prejudging others based purely on appearances.

THEMES

- Relationships
- Fathers
- Hope
- Trust
- Acceptance
- Prejudice
- Courage
- Gambling
- Grief
- Domestic Violence

WRITING STYLE

The Bogan Mondrian is written in first person, present tense. Luke's narration is no-nonsense yet tender, making it extremely accessible to its YA audience. Steven Herrick clutches at readers' heartstrings with his innate ability to tell beautifully nuanced stories. It is laced with symbolism and poignancy, alluding to the judgemental nature of society and the fragility of those affected by domestic violence. It also distinguishes clearly between love and acceptance. Because it includes occasional coarse language and the consumption of alcohol and marijuana, it is best suited to secondary classrooms.

STUDY NOTES

- Chapter 1 introduces readers to Luke and his mother. Discuss the author's use of voice and foreshadowing to engage readers instantly.

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- Steven Herrick gives readers the space to speculate. Why is this important? Share some examples of this technique.
- What do we learn about Luke's dad from the comment 'the only group Dad belonged to was the footy-tipping comp at the pub' (p. 4)?
- How has Steven Herrick successfully developed the characterisation of Bruce Saunders throughout the text? Create a character profile of Bruce using evidence from the text.
- How can we tell what life has been like for Luke since the death of his dad? How do the descriptions of his home environment help depict more than just a physical setting?
- Why does Luke take Buster from his yard? As the story progresses, what role does Buster play in Luke's life? What does Buster come to symbolise in *The Bogan Mondrian*?
- Reread the description of the reservoir in chapter 2, especially on pages 12–13. Sketch this scene, using evidence from the text.
- Discuss the author's use of figurative language and the contribution it makes to the text. Examples include:
 - The water is the colour of rust (p. 13)
 - He made a sucking sound ... like the wind blowing through gaps in the wall (p. 17)
 - Not one piece of my jigsaw-puzzle face sits right (p. 23)
 - She wears her hair done up in a bun, as tidy as marriage (p. 30)
 - The fish taste as fresh as the ocean (p. 31)
 - The leather smelt deep and rich, like polished soil (p. 40)
 - It's like being massaged by sound (p. 65)
 - A white doona of cloud spreads across the valley, framed by the canyon walls. The clouds sink into Megalong Valley, yet above me is a miracle blue sky (p. 97)
 - His aftershave is as assertive as his presence (p. 120)
 - The suburb is veiled in tears (p. 168)
- Using an image of a setting, use techniques similar to Steven Herrick's to describe this scene.
- When we first meet Rodney, he is intimidating and off-putting. As the novel progresses, however, he grows on us. How does the author use Rodney to share a message about prejudging people?
- Flashbacks are interspersed throughout the story to share Luke's grief for the loss of his father and his anger at lung cancer for having killed him. As the story progresses, these flashbacks also enable Luke to

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accept his father's smoking and gambling habits without it overshadowing their relationship. What point is the author making in allowing Luke to love his father unconditionally? Why aren't Blake and Charlotte able to do this with their fathers?

- Discuss the irony of Luke's dad quietly passing away while his mother is watching Mandy win \$1 million dollars on *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* in the other room.
- What do we learn about Luke's mum throughout *The Bogan Mondrian*? Why do we only learn her name towards the end of the novel?
- Describe the relationship between Luke and Blake. How does this relationship evolve throughout the course of the novel? What instigates these changes?
- Luke often says he is from the 'wrong side of the highway'. Why and how does Steven Herrick challenge this mentality in *The Bogan Mondrian*?
- Luke dreams that his dad is trying to 'outrun the horses', with Luke helping him get 'back on the right side of the track' (p. 41). What is the significance of Luke's dream?
- Why is Blake so angry about school? Why does Charlotte say there are worse things than school? Why does Luke say, 'I should have stuck up for my mate' (p. 51) after Blake storms off?
- When Charlotte speaks about her father's violence, why does Luke say, 'I want to look away but that would deny her story and I can't do that' (p. 54)? What does this tell us about the nature of domestic violence and victims' reluctance to speak up?
- Ms Childs speaks about her favourite novels including *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* and *My Brother Jack* during English. With relation to these texts, discuss her comment that 'sometimes, acknowledging your failure is heroic' (p. 125).
- When Charlotte thanks Luke for listening to her, he doesn't really understand why. Why is this the case?
- What signs are there from Luke's mum that she is starting to come to terms with her husband's death?
- Reread the passage on page 97 in which Luke likens the block colours of the scenery he sees through the lens with those Mondrian would use. Why does Luke relate so well to Mondrian's art? Why does he later say that whenever he looks through the lens, 'the world is reduced to what's in the frame' (p. 106)?

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- Discuss the difficulties faced by Luke in trying to help Charlotte. Why is it not as simple as just going to the police? Why does he tell Blake and Tracey about Charlotte? Why is Charlotte's mother so against speaking out? What does this tell us about the complex nature of domestic violence?
- Discuss how Steven Herrick addresses the theme of prejudice evoked from outward appearances; many believe that rich people like Charlotte's dad can get 'around the police' (p. 96) and be influential in the community because of his wealth, while the value of people like Rodney is quickly denounced. Luke later says, 'Wherever Rodney goes, he's a marked man, while Charlotte's dad sails through life with his Audi, designer suits and luxury house' (p. 182). Likewise, Betty is immediately seen as Vietnamese rather than Australian. What is Steven Herrick's point in using these characters in this way? How does Charlotte support his purpose when she says to Luke he's from 'the right side of the highway' (p. 91)?
- Both Blake and Charlotte are disappointed in their fathers, whilst Luke accepts his father's gambling problem, but accepts and loves him all the same. In what ways is *The Bogan Mondrian* an exploration of the role of fathers?
- Why does it take so long for Luke to tell Charlotte about the death of his father? Why does he tell her the story of his dad letting him drive the Holden to buy fish and chips? How does Charlotte help Luke to realise just how special his relationship with his father was?
- What role do minor characters such as Betty, Tracey, Mr and Mrs Grady and Mr Rosetti play in Luke's life? Why do you think Steven Herrick has included these characters in *The Bogan Mondrian*?
- Reread the description on page 118 of Charlotte's recital. What language features has Steven Herrick used to share Luke's appreciation of her music?
- How does Luke feel about his mother having someone over for dinner? How do we know this?
- Why does Charlotte lash out at Luke? Why, even when he's not there, does Charlotte's father '[stand] behind her, threatening, goading, challenging' (p. 131)? Why does Luke feel so unable to help her when this first happens? Why does this anger Charlotte? What is she afraid of?
- Discuss Tracey's comment that using violence makes things worse.

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- Why won't Luke let Charlotte tinker with her father's bicycle? What is he really concerned might happen?
- Why do Blake and Luke glue-bomb the Audi? Why does Luke panic and rip the posters off the car?
- Like the students in Ms Child's class, write a short story on family life, either inspired by a book or by your own family.
- Read the synopsis of Luke's story on pages 225–227. Why do you think he received such a good mark for his text?
- What does Buster's death reveal about the nature of violence? How does this serve as a catalyst for the novel's resolution?
- In what ways are Buster and Rodney similar?
- Throughout the text, photographs play an important role in the story, for example, the photo of Luke's dad leaning on his Holden. What does this photo represent? Discuss the author's use of photography as a motif throughout *The Bogan Mondrian*.
- Luke makes a photo gallery to represent the bond between him and his dad. Create your own photo gallery that symbolises the relationship you share with someone close to you.
- The gravestone of Luke's dad says 'Quit while you're ahead'. Discuss Luke's comment that his dad 'was never ahead, so he quit' (p. 190).
- Luke tells Rodney that 'if a sailor drowns ... swallows carry the soul to heaven' (p. 231). How does Steven Herrick use birds in *The Bogan Mondrian* to represent the love and freedom that comes with acceptance?
- How important is it that Rodney discovers Luke is Bruce's son?
- Discuss the importance of Luke's realisation that although his dad drank, gambled and smoked, he still loved his family 'more than anything on earth' (p. 214). How does this help him 'keep all the good things about my dad with me. Everything else is in the past' (p. 223)? How does this help Luke to heal? How might this also help Charlotte and her mum to heal?
- Why does the novel end with Charlotte coming to paint Luke's ceiling in a Mondrian style, and with Luke seeing contentment in his dad's face as he leans against the Holden in the photo? How does this scene help synthesise the themes in *The Bogan Mondrian*?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven Herrick is the author of twenty-four books for children and young adults. His books have twice won the NSW Premier's Literary Awards and have been shortlisted for the CBCA Book of the Year Awards on eight occasions. He is widely recognised as a pioneer of the 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 pedalling slowly and thinking about his next book. www.stevenherrick.com.au