

Teachers Notes

by Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright

I Am Thomas

Libby Gleeson and Armin Greder

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Recommended for ages 10-16.

Older students and adults will also appreciate this book.

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I AM THOMAS

Libby Gleeson & Armin Greder



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INTRODUCTION

... do as we say, think like us, be like us... Thomas is isolated in a crowd. His story is punctuated by this repeated mantra – by the words adults such as parents, teachers, politicians, recruitment officers and churchgoers have said to him throughout his journey from childhood to adulthood. Words like these are often used to inculcate ideas, attitudes, values and beliefs, but also in a very sinister way to repress children, teenagers and adults, and to inveigle them into actions they might not have ever imagined.

In this book, Libby Gleeson expresses the powerful sense of social justice reflected in her previous works, and similarly, artist Armin Greder in this and his previous two self-authored books, has evinced a passionate regard for individual self-determination and choice, and an objection to simply adhering to the status quo. When the two have combined their talents, they've created a synergy which is much more than their individual parts.

Libby Gleeson's spare and yet expressively written text is explored in Greder's stunningly arresting visual text in which they celebrate non-conformity, encourage their readers to question peer group pressure, and challenge the forces which would have us behave as unquestioning members of a community.

'I am Thomas' is an extremely potent expression of one boy's refusal to become a silent member of a crowd.

THEMES

This book could be studied in a range of ways in a classroom. It is a philosophical treatise which could be used to explore the themes of:

- Identity and Individuality
- Conformity
- Peer Pressure
- Community
- Adolescence [See **SOSE** Below]

You might also use quotes from the book to explore these themes and their often ambivalent implications. For example:

'You must do as you're told.'

'Let the army make you a man.'

'Your country needs your vote.'

CURRICULUM TOPICS

It could also be used to explore certain curriculum topics:

LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

- This written and visual text is a contemporary parable, in which the text is an amalgam of traditional motifs and of social issues which have enormous resonance. Have your students discuss the import of the words quoted above. Then have them write a story which explores the ramifications of these words. They may draw inspiration from incidents in their own childhood or adolescence in which they've been told to adopt a view which is foreign to them.
- Thomas is the central character in this text, and all those who attempt to influence him are nameless. 'I am not the child my brother is. I am not the student they all are. I do not walk

the streets as they do.' Discuss the way the characters in this, and in both *The City* and *The Island* are objectified as 'they', 'we' etc. Why are they nameless?

- Make a list of words (using a thesaurus) which relate to the themes of this text, and then ask your students to write a brief paragraph/essay outlining the relationship of the words from the list to the meaning of this text.
- See the **Bibliography of Related Texts**, below. Classes could compare this book to *The City* and *The Island* by Armin Greder, to Libby Gleeson's novel *Refuge*, or to *The Great Bear* or *An Ordinary Day* which they created together, and to other picture books for older readers, by creators such as Shaun Tan, Matt Ottley, Maurice Sendak or Anthony Browne.

VISUAL LITERACY

- Discuss the layout and design of the book, and of the individual double page spreads within it. Encourage students to read for the 'sub-text' and observe how the detail in each picture often adds to or illuminates meaning, complementing and enriching the text.
- The crowd scenes in the book are executed in charcoal colours of grey and black, but Thomas himself is drawn in muted pastel hues, as are the toys and objects which matter to him. Discuss the artist's use of colour in depicting Thomas. What does this suggest thematically?
- Each of the objects Thomas collects can be seen to have symbolic resonance. They denote, for example: curiosity, adventure, intellectual insight and difference. What do these objects tell us about Thomas?
- Discuss the use of perspective, the spatial relationships between people, and body language of figures in these images (for example the foregrounding of the leering, threatening figures, and the difference suggested when Thomas is foregrounded in the pictures, since he is surrounded by white space).
- Greder depicts the groups which call Thomas to join them, in a graphic and often horrifyingly threatening way. He draws on his European background in the hauntingly macabre images of these people, who evoke memories of the creatures who created Hitler's Holocaust, or the instigators of pogroms in Eastern Europe, who starkly demonstrated what human nature is capable of. In creating these images, though, he suggests that any people, anywhere, are capable of such coercion. Australians *per se* are not visible in these images, since Greder's work tends towards the universal in its imagery, but the idea of them is all the more potent for that absence, reminding us of how closely related we all are, in our frailties and failings. Discuss with students what these images suggest about people.
- Discuss the use of a 'pointing figure' in each scene (family, school, funfair, army, government, religion) which is threatening and intimidating, and adds menace to the impact of the words. Some of these images can also be seen to relate to famous images of intimidating figures eg. Lord Kitchener's poster entreating young men to fight in WWI. 'Your Country Needs You!' http://www.sterlingtimes.org/memorable_images53.htm Examine other such forms of propaganda (See **Internet Resources** below) and how such imagery is used persuasively.
- Discuss the use of a comic format or strip in some individual double page spreads, and how it contrasts to the double page spreads depicting all the various groups trying to lure Thomas into conformity. In the latter pictures, the much larger image bleeds across the central gutter of the book. How does format contrive to enhance meaning in this story?
- Choose one of the **Themes** below and create a cartoon which illustrates the point. [See 'Government Rhetoric Cartoon 1' http://www.cartoonstock.com/directory/g/government_rhetoric.asp? as an example.]
- The final three spreads are wordless, first showing Thomas playing with a toy bus, then looking enquiringly into the future, and then in a wordless crowd scene in which Thomas is

about to board a bus. Several other figures in this scene are depicted in colour, whilst several others are in stark black or grey charcoal, and are depicted walking away from the bus. What meaning did you take from this sequence of images and open ending?

CREATIVE ARTS

This book could stimulate a range of creative arts activities such as improvisation, music, dance, craft and sculpture.

- Improvise the crowd scene where the army is recruiting.
- Choose a piece of music which Thomas might have on his iPod which reflects his inner turmoil and frustration. Create a dance to explore his feelings via this music.
- Create an object which you think would appeal to Thomas, using collage, paper mâché or some other craft materials.
- Create a sculpture of Thomas which is expressive of his feelings.

SOSE

In a SOSE unit *I am Thomas* could be used to discuss a range of issues such as:

Identity and Individuality

- 'Thomas' is an everyman figure. On one level, this is a story about one boy growing into a man. On another it's about every man or woman's journey to adulthood, and the individual choices we make as we grow. Do we accept the roles mapped out for us by our families, and the institutions to which they entrust our education and spiritual welfare? Do we adhere to our parents' principles, politics and religion or do we strike out on our own paths? Do we listen to peer groups as children and adopt the same games, clothes, pastimes? Do we become, as adolescents, a member of a 'group' and follow 'trends', or do we choose to be individual and different? Do we, as adults, choose traditional study paths and careers? Do we opt for a traditional family life? Discuss with your students the issue of individual choices, and how they determine the person we become.
- The idea of the 'journey' or 'rite of passage' is conveyed in Armin Greder's illustrations in the opening pages as the toys illustrate and trace the boy's progress from the childish things which he is told he must 'put away' in order to be considered an 'adult' or a man. Discuss with students the things which they enjoyed as children; do they still value or treasure them? Do we have to change as we get older? Can a man or woman still enjoy childish things, or is this a sign of immaturity, in your opinion? What does it mean to be 'mature' in any case? Discuss.
- Thomas 'hides' behind his iPod ... as many teenagers do. Often considered a sign of conformity, such mobile music devices and phones, ironically may also be a form of self-defence when teenagers really don't want to be bothered by adult or peer group conversation and/or expectations. Discuss.
- Compare this book to other picture books which depict characters who challenge the status quo, for example *The Art Lesson* by Tomie de Paola; *Make It I'm the Mother* by Janet and Andrew McLean; or *The Lost Thing* by Shaun Tan.
- Parents often try to make their children conform, as a way of ensuring that they themselves will be seen in a good light by their peers. They send them to 'good schools' as a social gesture and encourage them to pursue careers which will be well regarded in society. In your opinion, how much of modern parenting is devoted to encouraging conformity rather than individuality? Discuss.

Conformity

- Thomas might be described as a non-conformist, a free thinker, or even as an iconoclast. Use a thesaurus to find words which relate to his character. Discuss the meanings of such words and whether some give an extreme or misleading impression.
- The text and the images in the book depict a variety of situations where human beings often demonstrate conformity. Some situations are seemingly banal e.g. queuing for a bus; but others are potentially dangerous, harmful or likely to cause permanent damage, e.g. forming a mob. Is rebellion a good thing? Is conformity a bad one? Encourage students to consider these questions with regard to their own lives, to those of others, and to issues they have read about in the news media or in history books.
- Greder's previous two books, *The Island* and *The City*, like this one, relate to the growth of conservatism, ultra-nationalism and xenophobia in so-called western or affluent societies. Why do relatively privileged people seek to repel those who are different, or to silence them? Discuss.
- Discuss other texts which deal with conformity, e.g. Jean-Jacques Sempé's *Martin Pebble* (1969).
- 'You are heading for failure. You will amount to nothing.' Such threats are what one might call 'emotional blackmail'. Are such threats ever useful? Do they have the desired effect, to make a young child worry about the future, or are they just as likely to alienate and even anger the recipient? Discuss.
- The reaction in the world today to so-called 'terrorism' could be evidence of how reactionary western societies are becoming. For example, the US government's reaction to the 2010 Wikileaks issue is typical of how quickly we find political commentary buried under strident accusations, without a presumption of innocence being exercised. Discuss.
- Non-conformity can consist of active and passive responses to societal pressures. For example, anti-war demonstrators generally take an active role in marching and protesting, but some take a less active role by becoming 'conscientious objectors'. Protestors against GM crops and foods can also conduct demonstrations or they can simply choose not to purchase products which contain GM ingredients. Discuss the ways in which one can become a non-conformist in certain situations.
- Conformity can also be a very hidden or unacknowledged act. For example, simply by condoning government treatment of refugees or of forms of censorship, we are 'conforming' although we might not be perceived to be doing anything tangible. How much of our conformity consists of inaction or laziness?
- Religion is another controversial area where certain groups seek to have others conform to their beliefs. In an ecumenical society, all creeds should be tolerated, and given equality, but Christian symbolism is often, for example, given precedence in public institutions in Australia. Discuss the role which religion plays in Australian society. Is ours a biased society?
- When criticised for bias, public commentators and politicians sometimes claim they are being 'censored' in the name of 'political correctness' and appeal to 'freedom of speech' to justify the expression of their 'opinion'. Think about power in society: How does censorship operate? Is everyone's opinion of equal weight in public discussions?
- Government rhetoric is often criticised for encouraging conformity. 'Help us make your country great. Exercise your democratic right. Vote for us.' Examine forms of government advertising and catchphrases such as 'working families' and 'closing the gap'. One of the most hotly contested statements in recent times were the words spoken by then Prime Minister John Howard on 6 December, 2001, in relation to border protection: 'We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come.' Campaign slogans are also very revealing, for example, 'Go for Growth' was John Howard's 2007 Liberal Party

political campaign slogan and 'Moving Forward' was Julia Gillard's in the 2010 Labor Party campaign. Are such forms of rhetoric designed to engage citizens in forms of conformity?

- Military recruitment is another persuasively conservative strategy [See also **Visual Literacy** above] by which people are inveigled into joining the armed forces by appeals to their citizenship. Discuss recruitment and the values it is founded upon.
- Find several literary quotes about conformity and discuss them with your students, for example:

Read, every day, something no one else is reading. Think, every day, something no one else is thinking. Do, every day, something no one else would be silly enough to do. It is bad for the mind to continually be part of unanimity. – Christopher Morley

Labels are for filing. Labels are for clothing. Labels are not for people. – Martina Navratilova

Be who you are and say what you feel, because those who mind don't matter and those who matter don't mind. – Dr. Seuss (Theodore Geisel)

Do not follow where the path may lead. Go, instead, where there is no path and leave a trail. – Ralph Waldo Emerson

Peer Pressure

- Discuss the persuasive influence of one's peers. What strategies are used by peers to influence each other? Some strategies may be negative (e.g. bullying) and others may be positive (e.g. acting as good role models). Discuss the negative and positive aspects of peer pressure.
- Fashion is one of the most obvious examples of peer pressure in today's society. Celebrities, media and other influences conspire to make teenagers feel that they must wear certain brands, be seen in certain places, eat certain foods, drink certain beverages, and behave in certain ways. Discuss.

Communities

- This book depicts a variety of 'communities' in which Thomas is expected to play a certain role or part. The word 'community' is generally regarded as a positive social concept, suggesting neighbourliness and cooperation. However, there is a less attractive side to a community, where certain behaviours are considered to be mandatory and where any attempt to choose an alternative is regarded as an infringement of laws or rules. Make a list of all the communities which are mentioned in this text. Then make a list of the rules or obligations attached to such groups and of the pros and cons of such rules. For example, a school expects that a student wear a particular uniform, study certain subjects, participate in sports, and adopt other conventions. If you are attending a school, do you have to follow all the rules or should you be able to argue against some of them?
- What does it mean to be part of a community? Do we have to adhere to all its principles, or can we strike out in a different direction? Discuss a variety of different communities, e.g. Religious group, Institution, Club, Town, Country. For example, if you are a member of a political party, do you have to agree with all its policies, or can you 'cross the floor' on those you wish to challenge?
- Rules, regulations and laws are actually very arbitrary, and often rules which we accept without question are not universally observed. For example, voting is compulsory in Australia but not in the US although both are 'democratic' countries. Encourage students to think of and discuss rules and their possible alternatives. There are many commentators who feel that Australia is becoming an overly regulated society; that in response to certain incidents the government has acted in a somewhat reactionary manner to ban or to prohibit certain forms of behaviour. The introduction of gun laws after the Port Arthur massacre is a major

example, and although many laud it, there are people (graziers for example) who find the laws restrictive. Driving regulations are multiplying, so that, for example, we can face fines if we don't wear seatbelts, speed, drive under the influence, operate a mobile phone while driving etc. Legislation in response to anti-social behavior is multiplying too, for example the incidence of 'glassing' in hotels has led to a move to use only perspex rather than glass, which creates issues for proprietors of such establishments. Social justice issues are challenged, too, for example by the government's 'intervention' in Aboriginal communities. Discuss these and other issues.

Adolescence

- Teenagers are traditionally regarded as non-conformists or rebels, and the novels which are typically identified with them are works of rite of passage or about identity crises. Ironically, though, teenagers are also most vulnerable to being led into conformist behaviour, whether it be to join a particular social group, to adopt a particular belief or creed, or even to join a violent or reactionary group. Discuss.
- Is being a teenager a time of rebellion or conformity, in your experience?
- One of the ironies of 'growing up' is that in the times when we need most to be allowed the freedom to forge an identity we are often in the grip of institutional forces which deny us that choice. Discuss with older students how they feel about growing up.

AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR INSPIRATION

When asked about the inspiration for this book, the author and illustrator replied:

Libby Gleeson:

In 2002 I woke with a line in my mind: *Thomas had music in his head.*

I didn't know where that line would take me but I felt I had a character who was different from his family and his peers and that I wanted to write about him. I knew Armin Greder would respond to this idea and so shared it with him. That began a long process of exploring what it means to be a kid who is different and who does not want to conform to the desires of his family, his school and his community. Nine years later we have the result.

Armin Greder:

The trials and tribulations of Thomas who doesn't fit in used to be very much my own: the teachers in the images are the charcoal cousins of those who did their level best to get me to hate school and them. Working on this story presented a late opportunity to get even with them.

My allergy to the military, the clergy and politicians developed later in life. Here I could indulge in the pleasure of expressing what I think of them.

The story offered interesting possibilities to play with visual language beyond what the images themselves are saying: non-conformism – one way to classify the story – implies its opposite, conformity. So I split the imagery into two groups – the coloured, free flowing drawings representing Thomas, and the opposing black and white ones hemmed in by frames, representing the world around him.

CONCLUSION

In their latest collaboration, Libby Gleeson and Armin Greder have created a contemporary masterpiece in a haunting and highly pertinent fable about the individual's role in society.

Thomas refuses to conform to the expectations and demands of family and community. His story is an intensely articulated statement about individual identity and social coercion. For Thomas is not so

much a loner, but rather, one who refuses to feel lonely, even when those around him are all moving in a different direction.

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF RELATED TEXTS

PICTURE BOOKS

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- De Paola, Tomie *The Art Lesson* Putnam Juvenile, 1997
- Greder, Armin *The Island* Allen and Unwin, 2007
- Greder, Armin *The City* Allen and Unwin, 2010
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- Gleeson, Libby and Armin Greder *An Ordinary Day* Scholastic, 2004
- McClean, Andrew and Janet *Make It I'm the Mother* Allen and Unwin, 2000
- Marsden, John and Matt Ottley *Home and Away* Hachette, 2008
- Marsden, John and Shaun Tan *The Rabbits* Lothian, 2003
- Ottley, Matt *Requiem for a Beast* Hachette, 2008
- Sendak, Maurice *Where the Wild Things Are* Harper & Row, 1963
- Sempé, Jean-Jacques *Martin* Pebble Phaidon, 1969
- Tan, Shaun *The Arrival* Hachette Livre, 2006
- Tan, Shaun *The Lost Thing* Lothian, 2000

ABOUT PICTURE BOOKS

- Doonan, Jane. *Looking At Pictures in Picture Books*. Stroud: Thimble Press, 1993.
- Anstey, Michèle, and Geoff Bull *Reading the Visual: Written and Illustrated Children's Literature*. Sydney: Harcourt, 2000.

INTERNET RESOURCES

- 'Government Rhetoric Cartoon 1'
[http://www.cartoonstock.com/directory/g/government_rhetoric.asp?](http://www.cartoonstock.com/directory/g/government_rhetoric.asp)
- 'List of Political Slogans' *Wikipedia* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_political_slogans
- Lord Kitchener 'Your Country Needs You!' http://www.sterlingtimes.org/memorable_images53.htm
- 'Propaganda Posters – Australia' *firstworldwar.com a multimedia history of world war one*
<http://www.firstworldwar.com/posters/australia.htm>

ABOUT THE WRITERS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Libby Gleeson was born in Young, NSW in 1950, and later lived in a number of NSW towns with her large family. She studied history at the University of Sydney where she became involved in social issues such as the anti-Vietnam war protests and the rise of the Women's Movement. After teaching for two years in Picton, just outside of Sydney, she set off in 1976 for five years of overseas travel, based first in Italy (where she taught English) and then in London where she began

writing her first novel, *Eleanor, Elizabeth*. She also met her husband there, and they returned to Australia in 1980, and now have three daughters. She has written thirty books, taught occasional courses in creative writing, visited lots of schools to talk about her work, and now writes picture books and novels for young and older readers, full time. She's worked with Armin Greder on a number of books, has written books about writing including *Making Picture Books* (Scholastic, 2003) and *Writing Like a Writer* (PETA, 2007), and has also written for television: *Bananas in Pyjamas* and *Magic Mountain*. Visit her website <http://www.libbygleeson.com.au>

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Armin Greder was born in Switzerland in 1942, and migrated to Brisbane in 1971. He has worked as a graphic designer, and was a lecturer in art and illustration at Griffith University for many years, before becoming a full-time artist, illustrator and writer. His earlier works included *Big Dog, Sleep Time, Uncle David* and *The Princess and the Perfect Dish* (with Libby Gleeson). In books such as the Bologna Ragazzi winner *The Great Bear* (also written with Libby Gleeson) and the CBCA Picture Book of the Year 2002 *An Ordinary Day* (also written with Gleeson) his art clearly reflects his European background. *The Island* (2007) was the first book to which he contributed both written and visual texts as he did again in *The City* (2010).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THESE NOTES

Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright has operated *justified text writing and publishing consultancy* services since 1997, has published widely on children's and YA literature, and has lectured in writing for children and young adults at Griffith University (Gold Coast campus). She is Program Manager of the biennial APA/ Literature Board Residential Editorial Program, and was the founding director of the Queensland Writers Centre (1991-7).