



Teachers' Notes Ishmael and the Hoops of Steel

MICHAEL GERARD BAUER

Teachers' Notes written by Anita Jonsberg

OMNIBUS BOOKS

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INTRODUCTION

As the book opens, Ishmael is about to embark on his Senior years at St Daniel's College. With his romance with his dream girl, Kelly Faulkner, still fresh in his memory, he looks forward to the school formal, parties and generally being in Kelly's company. His dreams are soon crushed when he receives an email from Kelly explaining how she and her family are to stay in New Zealand. The only positive aspect is that he has the unwavering support of his friends at St Daniel's: Razz, Scobie, Billy and Prindabel. Together, the boys navigate the vagaries of their Senior years – more debating, career choices, exams, sport and serious school work. Year Eleven goes by for Ishmael as a kind of non-participating observer of everyone's else's social life (except the memorable occasion – memorable for all the wrong reasons - when he has to stand in at the Lourdes College semi-Formal for his friend Razz). At the end of Year Eleven Ishmael finds himself at his own Formal with an arranged date, Raychell Taylor, who pays more attention to her other friends and her mobile phone than to him. But the news from Razz via Kelly's friend Sally is that Kelly is to return the next year as a boarder at Lourdes. When Year Twelve comes around, Scobie as School Captain proposes that, to repay the outstanding commitment of their Year 9 English teacher, they mount a whole-house effort to win the College Cup for its House Patron, Miss Tarango. Operation Tarango proves to be a challenge that reaps rewards beyond the boys' greatest expectations. With Kelly as a friend, if not anything more for the year, Ishmael throws in his lot with his friends, who are aiming for the debating grand final, the school Talent Quest and Battle of the Bands, and all the inter-house sporting comps. As the year reaches its exhausting conclusion, they all discover new, challenging and sometimes surprising things about themselves. And Kelly Faulkner resumes her place as Ishmael's dream girl.

THE AUTHOR

Michael Gerard Bauer was born in Brisbane. He taught at schools in the Brisbane-Ipswich region before resigning from full-time teaching to pursue his dream of being a published writer. *The Running Man* was winner of the CBCA Book of the Year (Older Readers) award, and shortlisted in both the NSW Premier's Literary Awards and the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards in 2005. It was also the winner of the *Courier Mail* Readers' Choice Award and it was shortlisted for the *Courier Mail* Book of the Year for Younger Readers Award. In 2006 *The Running Man* was

shortlisted for the SA Festival Awards for Literature. In 2008 it won the prestigious German literature prize, the Katholischer Kinder- und Jugendbuchpreis and was shortlisted for the Deutscher Jugendliteraturpreis readers' section award. Michael's second book, *Don't Call Me Ishmael!* was shortlisted for the CBCA Book of the Year Awards and the NSW Premier's Literary Awards in 2007, selected for 'The White Ravens 2007' exhibition at the Bologna Book Fair, and won its category in the Children's Peace Literature Award in 2007 and the SA Festival Awards for Literature in 2008. *Dinosaur Knights* (2009) is an exciting time-slip fantasy for younger readers and Bauer's most recent publication, *Just a Dog* (2010) is currently shortlisted by the Children's Book Council in its 'Book of the Year for Younger Readers' section.

BEFORE READING THE TEXT

NB: please check all websites and pages for suitability on the day of proposed use.

Don't Call Me Ishmael! and *Ishmael and the Return of the Dugongs* are prequels to this novel. If you haven't already read these, you may like to familiarise yourself with what happens, though context and background is given in this novel

The novel focuses on the challenges of growing up and facing changes in ideas about who we are and who we may become. It also explores the idea of honour and how sometimes the right choice isn't necessarily the easiest.

The following websites are useful in exploring identity and how it is formed:

<http://articles.familylobby.com/355-teenagers-and-the-struggle-for-identity.htm>

(straight-forward article by Seth Mullins)

<http://au.reachout.com/search?search=identity&start=0> (reachout.com is an excellent site to introduce teens to – it deals responsibly with all aspects of growing up and features blogs written by teens for teens)

<http://www.headspace.org.au/> (Another responsible site which teens can navigate to explore all aspects of growing up)

READING THE TEXT

(Please select discussions and activities according to your cohort and timeline and check all websites on the day of use for currency and suitability.)

Semester One, Year Eleven

1. Calling Ishmael – 4. The Fab Five

For discussion:

1. Look at '1. Calling Ishmael'. How does the author immediately engage the reader in Ishmael's world?
2. What insights does the reader gain because of the use of a first-person narrator?
3. How does Bauer differentiate the boys' speech so it is easy for the reader to understand who is speaking without being told?

Activities:

1. Explore the character of Orazio Zorzotto, 'Razz'. Make notes on the techniques used to communicate his character quickly and clearly.
2. In '3. The Short, the Tall, and The Cuddly', Ishmael comments on how his Senior uniform makes him feel. Discuss with a small group how important clothes are in communicating an individual's personality and status.
3. Describe the relationship between the 'Fab Five' and Miss Tarango. Look closely at Ishmael's descriptions of her and the others' reactions to her.

5. Uncle What's-his-face and Auntie Thingo's Daughter – 9. A Turbo-charged Cobra

For discussion:

1. Mr Guthrie is presented as a stereotypical 'tree-hugger' by Ishmael. How accurate do you think his assessment is? Give reasons for your view.
2. How important are names? Why is Cindy Sexton described as a 'porn star' and Prindabel think she 'sounds like a stripper'? You can find out about your own name in 'Activities' below.
3. As a class and before you have read '9. A Turbo-charged Cobra', list all the clues that suggest Ishmael's potential relationship is not a good idea.

Activities:

1. Visit <http://www.behindthename.com/> where you can put in your own name and find out its meaning, translations in different languages and even randomly generate a new one.

2. Look at '9. A Turbo-charged Cobra' and rewrite this section from Cindy's point of view. You will need to think about how she feels about being 'hooked up' with Ishmael and what her impressions are of him.

10. Deceased Piece of Solid Bodily Waste – 15. Talking About Talk Talk

For discussion:

1. Ms Heckenvaal feels it is important for the boys to learn about the History of Feminism. Discuss why you agree or disagree with her. You may want to learn more about feminism here:

<http://www.newint.org/features/1992/01/05/simple/> (illustrated timeline)

2. How does Razz's script for an advertisement on sun safety support Ms Heckenvaal's point of view?

Activities:

1. Look at '10. Deceased Piece of Solid Bodily Waste'. In your own words, describe exactly why his discussion of Cindy with Razz makes Ishmael feel so uncomfortable.
2. Do you find Ishmael's actions in turning off the recording ('12. Bill and Razz's Excellent Sun Safe Adventure') surprising? Explain why or why not. Would you have done the same thing?
3. In '14. A Killer, Petrol-driven Motorised Hamburger', Ishmael's doubts about himself surface in the shape of a distorted Ronald McDonald. Write about a time you had a nightmare and what you think might have caused it.
4. Hold a class debate, using the topic: 'There is something wrong with Ishmael Leseur.'

16. A Prairie Dog on a Caffeine High – 17. A Gross Invasion of Piracy

For discussion:

1. Ishmael's reaction when Sally confronts Razz about the video tells us a lot about him. What does it show about his friendship with Razz?
2. It is possible for characters to be present in a story despite their absence. Think about this paradox with reference to Kelly Faulkner.

Activities:

1. Review the events of Semester One at St Daniel's and make suggestions about what might happen in Semester Two.
2. In groups, create a timeline of events for display in your classroom – you can add to it at the end of each semester.

Semester Two, Year Eleven

18. The Alcoholic Dane – 22. Watch Your Back, Billy Shakespeare

For discussion:

1. How does this quote link with what we know of the novel so far?
2. Examine the boys' reaction to Billy's revelation in this section. How does Bauer create tension here, particularly with regard to Razz's response? How is this tension defused?

Activities:

1. When Razz misquotes Mr Slattery's description of Hamlet, describing him as the 'Telescopic Dane' instead of 'Melancholy Dane', he is exhibiting malapropian speech – the misuse of words in a way that often creates humour. Find as many other examples of malapropisms as you can throughout the novel and list them. (You may need to refer to the text of *Hamlet* if you are unfamiliar with the play.)
2. In '19. The Accelerated Jedi Course', Billy reveals his homosexuality to his friends. Imagine this scenario from Billy's perspective. Draw thought-bubbles and write in the thoughts and feelings that might accompany his revelation.

23. Focusing is for Wimps! – 26. Fatal Flaw Thingies

For discussion:

1. How does Bauer foreshadow what happens between Sally and Ishmael at the semi-formal? (You may need to review '22. Watch Your Back, Billy Shakespeare'.)
2. What effect does Ishmael's intoxicated state have on the link between his thoughts and words?
3. Is there truth in the statement 'in vino veritas'?
4. What is a fatal (tragic) flaw or hamartia? How might this concept relate to Ishmael?

Activities:

1. In pairs, examine Bauer's description of Ishmael's intoxication. What techniques does he use to communicate Ishmael's state to the reader?
2. What effect does Ishmael's discussion of Claudius with Razz have on Ishmael? Why?
3. Give your own opinion of Ishmael's actions in '23. Focusing is for Wimps!'. Is he a 'total scumbag'?

27. The Return of the Brainiacs – 29. Don't Disturb the Piranha, Dude

For discussion:

1. Bill announces that he is not going to the St Daniel's semi-formal because he can't take a partner of his preferred gender. Is this fair? You may want to explore this account of a real case of exclusion that occurred in Victoria recently and is referred to in the novel:
<http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/lesbian-couple-formal-row-could-be-discrimination-20101110-17mni.html> (Age article – lots more available on the net)
2. How far do you agree with the boys' efforts to talk Bill out of the final part of his presentation? How effective is Razz's analogy concerning school as a stream?

Activity:

1. Look at Bill's speech for the *Hamlet* oral. Why does this part of the play resonate with him?

30. The Grimpest of His Grim Days – 32. Advanced Self-pity Wallowing 401

For discussion:

1. When Mr Barker appears at the classroom door, he does not raise his voice. Why is this approach often much scarier than shouting?
2. Just how wrong is Mr Barker in his assessment of Razz? ('31. Hmmmmm')

Activity:

1. Razz is determined to 'save' Bill. How does this section alter the reader's perception of Razz?

Semester One, Year Twelve

1. The Last of the Lasts – 2. You Had Me at 'Data'

Activities:

1. Year Twelve begins with the boys nostalgically noting the 'last of the firsts' when they leave school. What things will you miss when you leave school? ('Nothing' is a short answer, but probably not entirely true.)
2. How does Scobie transform negative energy into positive?

3 Standby Eyes – 5 Sledgehammer Meets Soft-boiled Egg

For discussion:

1. In what ways is Ishmael's meeting with Kelly Faulkner an anti-climax?
2. How important is this scene's juxtaposition with the preceding one?
3. What is the source of the boys' motivation for winning the College Cup?
4. Evaluate the boys' plan for success. Can they win?

Activities:

1. Explain why Razz is 'bewildered' by his nomination as sports captain. Does his nomination surprise the reader?
2. What qualities make James Scobie an idea house captain?

6. The Pi Man Delivers! – 11. That's What I'm Talking About

For discussion:

1. Pi can be described as a transcendental number. In what ways does Prindabel exhibit transcendence?
2. Discuss Bauer's use of similes when describing the volleyball team ('7. The Brown Undies Effect'). What makes these similes so effective?
3. What is a 'Mudman' in mythology? What kind of person is Theodore Bungalari?
4. This part of the novel is 'feel good' in the tradition of many sport-related films. What is happening that really uplifts the reader?
5. How does Ishmael's 'commentary' compound this effect?

12. Words in the Blood – 13. Operation Get Razz into Uni

For discussion:

1. Ishmael comments that it would take a 'truckload of strategically placed plastic explosives' to lower Razz's self-esteem. Is this true? Think about Razz's initial plans for his future and how they are changed by Miss Tarango's comments and those of the boys.
2. Is it true that words can change lives?

Activity:

1. By the end of this section, Ishmael is working on four 'operations'. Design a poster, detailing in words and pictures, the operations *you* are involved in at the moment. This can be a private exercise if you prefer not to share.

14. The Poor Suckers Are Us – 18. OMG! OMG! OMG!

For discussion:

1. How does Mr Hardcastle's approach to volleyball training differ from Mr Guthrie's? Which approach is most effective?
2. How does Bauer craft the description of the game to be utterly compelling?

Activity:

1. Using the volleyball game as an example, write about the last sporting event you took part in or watched.

Semester Two, Year Twelve

19. Male Chauffeuring Pigs – 21. A Razzman Masterclass

For discussion:

1. What is 'grace under pressure'? Look at current world/state leaders. Which of them exhibit 'grace under pressure'?
2. Contrast Ishmael's performance in this debate with the one in Year Nine. (From the first novel in the series: *Don't Call Me Ishmael.*)
3. During the debate, Ishmael practices positive self-talk. Try this: tape a large piece of paper to the back of each student in the class. Have class members circulate and write *positive* attributes on fellow students' papers. These can then be kept by students for the purposes of positive self-talk.

Activities:

1. Ishmael carries a peg person of Ringo Starr as a good-luck charm. What objects do you carry, or rituals do you carry out 'for luck'?
2. Before reading the whole of this section, hold a debate on the topic the boys receive for their final debate: 'Women are the Weaker Sex'.
3. What persuasive techniques does the team use to win the debate?

22. Dying in Key – 26. KABOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

For discussion:

1. The boys work well as a team. Collating ideas on the whiteboard, outline the strengths and weaknesses of each character. Discuss how the boys complement and compensate for the others' positive and negative attributes.

27. The Dugongs of Steel – 30. You Are to Me

For discussion:

1. The boys don't win the Battle of the Bands. Can losers be winners?
2. Readers discover that Bill's partner for the formal is Jimmy 'The Main Event' Mainwaring. The boys said 'really?' when they discovered this early in the novel. Why were they so surprised?

Activity:

1. With a partner, come up with a list of things you consider 'Reverse Cool'. Share them with the class.
2. Come up with alternative names for the band – the class can vote on the best suggestion.

31. Three Phone Calls and a Decision – 33. Lines 116–119

For discussion:

1. How does Ishmael's ring-tone link with the story? What does it suggest about how he sees himself?
2. Why are Razz's comments about Raychell and Kelly so unexpected? What do they show about him?
3. Bauer deliberately misleads readers about Ishmael's intentions at the beginning of '33. Lines 116–119'. How does the reader feel?

Activity:

1. Look again at lines 116–119 of act 2 scene 2 of *Hamlet* (conveniently situated at the beginning of 'Year Twelve, Semester One' (page 159). What makes this part of Polonius's speech (quoted from Ophelia's letter) so apt at this point in the novel?

34. A Show Tunes Superman

For discussion:

1. Who are the 'Show Tunes Supermen' (or women) at your school? What do they have that others don't?

Activity:

1. Find five creative and apt adjectives to describe Bill's 'coming out' at the Talent Quest.

35. Perfect, Just Perfect – 37. Just in Case You're Interested

Activity:

Describe your reaction to the end of *Ishmael and the Hoops of Steel*.

POSSIBLE MAJOR ASSIGNMENTS

Creative

1. Choose one scene from the novel and rewrite it with *you* as an additional character.
2. Write a script of the conversation between Mrs Zorzotto and Mr Barker after Razz's outburst during Bill's *Hamlet* oral.
3. Recreate the photographs from the St Daniel's Graduation Dinner and caption them creatively.
4. Compose and perform a song written for the Hoops of Steel.
5. Write a newspaper review of one of Ishmael's future novels.
6. Choose one scene from the novel and produce a series of sketches that illustrate the action.

Analytical

1. How important are Bauer's allusions to other texts in making his novel so successful?
2. The boys are bound by hoops of steel – what makes their friendship so strong?
3. 'Razzman is a superhero'. Discuss with evidence from the text.
4. Did Operation Tarango really fail? Discuss with reference to the text.
5. How important is Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to the novel?
6. *Ishmael and the Hoops of Steel* teaches a valuable lesson. Discuss with reference to the text.