

Teacher  
Notes

Janeen  
Brian

# YONG

the  
Journey  
of an  
unworthy  
SON

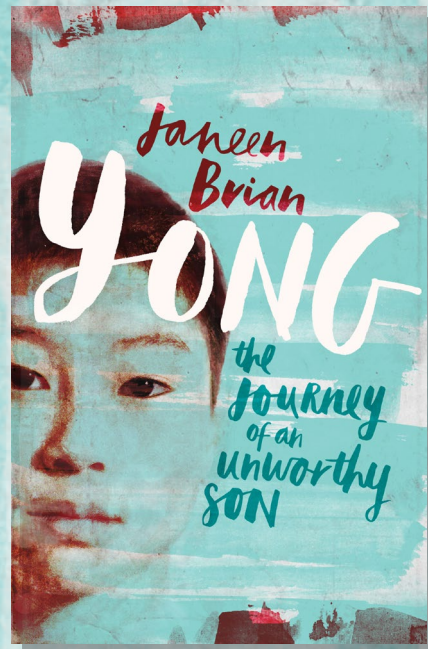
Teacher Notes by Ben Gilholme

WALKER  BOOKS

“Yong.”

my father said one night as I sat on the earthen floor, stroking my pet cricket and determined to save it from being eaten.

“You will come with me to Australia.”



ISBN: 9781925126297

Age: 9-12

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**S**ET IN 1857 AND INSPIRED BY TRUE EVENTS, this is the story of thirteen-year-old Yong, his father and a small group of men from their village who journey from China to the goldfields in Ballarat.

As with modern day “boat people”, these Chinese are desperate, exploited and vilified, and their journey treacherous. Their tax money is stolen and they are put ashore in South Australia, rather than the promised Victoria, and are forced to walk hundreds of kilometres to Ballarat. However, despite his family’s desperate need for money, Yong does not want to be on this journey. To those around him, he appears to be an honourable son, but in his heart and soul, he is resentful and longs to defy his father and return home to care for his beloved grandmother. *Yong* is a story of family and honour and what drives people to leave their homeland in search of something better.



## JANEEN BRIAN

*Author*

**A**t age sixteen Janeen Brian trained as a primary teacher and at eighteen stood in front of her first class of year five students. Her teaching career saw her work in junior primary, primary, drama and as a teacher-librarian. While raising a family, she began a four-year career with a professional children's theatre company, both acting and writing. She has also been involved in over 100 television and radio commercials as well as dozens of voiceovers for radio and video. She began dabbling in writing in her thirties. Since then she has written over 100 books both in trade and education, and in genres ranging from picture books to poetry, short fiction, nonfiction and novels. Janeen is an award-winning author and poet and many of her books have been translated and published overseas.

For more information about the author, please visit her website: [janeenbrian.com](http://janeenbrian.com)

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## BEN GILHOLME

*Teacher Notes Author*

**B**en Gilholme is an experienced high school English teacher with First Class Honours in Semiotics and a Bachelor of Teaching. His formal qualifications are complemented by practical experience in the publishing industry as a freelance editor, manuscript assessor and children's specialist bookseller. He has also reviewed for *Magpies* Magazine and presented at the ETA national conference.

Q&A with

# Janeen Brian

*Yong* is a moving tale of a young boy's physical journey in a foreign land and his emotional journey based on his relationship with his father, all set against the backdrop of South Australia in the 1850s. What drew you to *Yong*'s story?

With my earlier historical novel, *That Boy, Jack*, (Walker Books Australia) it was the discovery of an old photograph that led me to write the book. The grainy, black-and white photo showed a group of pickey-boys at their work during the early Cornish copper-mining days in Yorke Peninsula, South Australia. However, the trigger for *Yong*'s story came about in a different way. I'd long been fascinated by the incredible overland journey taken by the Chinese, from the port of Robe in South Australia to the goldfields of Victoria. I'd often perused the artifacts and historical information available at Robe.

For several years, the thousands of Chinese who landed at that south-eastern port, then had to embark on an arduous trek of approximately 450 kilometres, through unfamiliar land until they arrived at either Ballarat or Bendigo. The idea of having a story about a boy on that journey seemed remote until I began to research further and discovered that indeed, several boys did travel with their father or other male relatives to Australia. What would that journey have been like for a young boy? That then, became my starting point.

Although it is fiction, *Yong* tells a story that many Chinese immigrants could have experienced when travelling from China to the goldfields. What was your experience of mixing historical fact with narrative fiction?

It can be both exciting and revealing to mix historical fact with narrative fiction. Or it can prove a real test of endurance and creative manipulation to keep the story alive, and not allow the facts to distort the narrative. After all it is a story, not a work of nonfiction. For example, my husband and I had travelled by campervan, exploring the different routes often taken by the Chinese, or, been guided along by bullockies and others who sought payment for the job. I used many aspects of that trip in the story. At one point, when *Yong* is utterly exhausted and on the point of collapse, he caught sight of steep mountains in the distance, knowing that if he were made to climb those slopes it might prove the last steps he ever took. So I needed the shadow of those mountains in the story to generate tension and concern for *Yong*'s welfare. But it meant that *Yong*'s journey might've veered away from the regular Chinese routes later recorded in the history books. However, nothing about journeys of that nature would ever have been straightforward and all sorts of trickery went on. "Guides" often led the hapless Chinese in whatever direction suited them, for their own avaricious or dishonorable purposes.

Research can also bog a story if it's not woven subtly throughout the narrative; in the setting, the dialogue, the type of clothing, food, transport and so on of the times. Given in big doses, research can run the risk of boring the reader and turning him/her off the story. While the author might've found a piece of research fascinating, if it doesn't fit the story or adds nothing to the narrative it has to be discarded. And that sometimes needs another, objective pair of eyes!

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“ ...reading stories goes a long way to help younger people understand issues of racism, refugees and the darker moments in our history. ”

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I loved using real objects that I discovered in my research to develop the story. I'd seen a beautiful piece of Chinese woven cloth in a glass case in the old Customs House Museum in Robe. During the writing of the story, that sash became more and more important. It was the fabric that Yong's mother had stitched and that Yong had brought over with him to Australia. It also became the symbol of Yong's love for his mother and his distress at being so far away from his family. So, factual objects, photos, paintings, diaries and other authentic pieces of writing can enlighten and be a huge help in the development of the plot of the story.

**How much research went into the creation of this book?**

I have many folders full of information but that is only a small part of the research. It involved hours, weeks and months trawling through books, the internet, travelling through the countryside, photographing and recording different types of environments the Chinese would've passed through, taking note of the landscape, birds, trees and vegetation; skimming old historical newspapers, visiting libraries and historical centres, viewing photographs from databases such as Trove and other libraries and even speaking to our tour guide when my husband and I travelled to China in 2014. I struggle at times with so much research, but I have to fill myself up in order that I can then "forget it" and hopefully for it to emerge in a natural way through the story.

**Do you believe it is important for young readers to be exposed to issues of racism, refugees and the darker moments of our history?**

It is difficult to be taunted and vilified for being seen as different, because we are all different in one way or another. We relate and empathise better when an issue becomes personal; when we see and appreciate the problems of others from a human level. On a broad scale, these issues can be overwhelming and so reading stories goes a long way to help younger people understand issues of racism, refugees and the darker moments in our history.

**What do you hope young readers will take away from the book?**

I hope that my readers take away the understanding that life is full of change; and those changes can be difficult and tragic, but there is always hope. Also, that people have different ways of showing love but if there is one person who believes in you and you can trust, then you can make your way forward. Yong showed courage and strength, but he didn't go looking for it; it came about because he had to face huge and distressing changes in his life. He discovered strength he didn't know he had. It came from a place within and because of his love for his family. Yong might not have known the word "resilience" but that is what he showed.

History is not a boring topic. It was created by people who lived before us. Because of the discovery of gold in Australia, we now have stories of people who came from far distant countries, like China, travelling in ways and in conditions we can scarcely imagine today, to make better their own lives. I hope too, that young readers will empathise with those who've made journeys different to their own.

# AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM OVERVIEW

## YEAR/AGE

Primary years 4 – 6

Ages 9 – 12

## KEY LEARNING AREAS

English, History

## EXAMPLE OF

Historical fiction,  
Australian/Chinese history

## THEMES & IDEAS

Immigration,  
Asia and Australia's  
engagement with Asia,  
goldfields, honour, family,  
coming-of-age

YEAR 4	YEAR 5	YEAR 6
<b>HEALTH AND PHYSICAL ED.</b>	<b>HEALTH AND PHYSICAL ED.</b>	<b>HEALTH AND PHYSICAL ED.</b>
ACPPS034	ACPPS052	ACPPS052
ACPPS035	ACPPS056	ACPPS056
ACPPS037	ACPPS060	ACPPS060
ACPPS042		
<b>ENGLISH</b>	<b>ENGLISH</b>	<b>ENGLISH</b>
ACELA1498	ACELT1608	ACELT1613
ACELT1602	ACELT1610	ACELT1603
ACELT1609	ACELT1612	ACELT1618
ACELT1605	ACELY1701	ACELY1711
ACELT1607	ACELY1702	ACELT1712
ACELY1690	ACELY1703	ACELY1713
ACELY1691		
ACELY1692		
<b>HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES</b>	<b>HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES</b>	<b>HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES</b>
ACHASSI053	ACHASSI095	ACHASSI095
ACHASSI074	ACHASSI123	ACHASSI123
ACHASSI054	ACHASSI096	ACHASSI096
ACHASSI075	ACHASSI124	ACHASSI124
ACHASSI055	ACHASSI097	ACHASSI097
ACHASSI076	ACHASSI125	ACHASSI125
ACHASSI061	ACHASSI105	ACHASSI105
ACHASSI082	ACHASSI133	ACHASSI133

\* Key content descriptions have been identified from the Australian Curriculum ([australiancurriculum.edu.au](http://australiancurriculum.edu.au)). However, this is not an exhaustive list of Australian Curriculum content able to be addressed through studying this text. Information is current as at June 2016.

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# YONG

Journeys provide all kinds of opportunities for individuals. In moving from one place to another, they are forced to adapt to new situations. Often, the journey will entail obstacles that the individual must overcome if they want to arrive at their destination. As a result, all physical journeys force individuals to embark on emotional journeys as they learn from the new experiences and adapt to meet new challenges. At the end of the journey, they are often stronger and wiser. This is particularly true for Yong who undertakes a journey from a child dependent on his father to being seen as an adult in the eyes of the villagers.

At one point in their journey, the villagers come to a junction in the track and must make a decision based on very little information. *“When I open my eyes again, I notice something that fills me with dread. We’ve stopped at a junction in the track. Beyond, the track splits in two. Which one will you take, Father?”* (p 100)

Yong also comes to a number of metaphorical junctions in his emotional journey. These are places where he is forced to make a difficult decision, sometimes with very little information.

## ACTIVITY

As you read, keep track of these “junctions” on your map by adding it as a question. You could also make a list for each one of all the information Yong does or doesn’t have. For each decision, answer the following questions:

- What are Yong’s reasons for his decision?
- Does Yong make the right decision? Why?

A rite of passage is an event in life that signals a transition from childhood to adulthood. We learn about two of Yong’s own rites of passage in particular. The first is after his father dies, he acknowledges that *“If I were back in China, the men wouldn’t involve me like this in the organisation of a burial.”* (pp 180-181).

The second is perhaps even more significant because it symbolises his becoming a leader as well as a man. When he is first told to walk in his father’s place at the front of the other villagers, he thinks *“I may be the Headman’s son. But now there is no Headman. And I am simply a boy. I have no right to be here.”* (p 184).

## ACTIVITY

The villagers insist, emphasising the fact that they see him as a man, and he takes his father’s place. Why do you think the villagers give him this honour?

After his father’s death, Yong is forced to make some difficult decisions that involve the promise to he’d made to his father to *“...never use them [English words] within earshot of the men”* (p 21).

This eventually leads to the confrontation with Mr George where Mr Chung loses his pigtail and Yong hits Mr George over the head with a log in order to protect the other villagers. At this point in the novel, Yong has earned the respect of the villagers. They ask him *“We would like to know what you think, Yong,”* (p 238) and *“Will you speak to Mr George on our behalf?”* (p 240).

Even though he feels a little “silly”, he gives his opinion and they decide it is the best option.

## ACTIVITY

Discuss the ways that you know you have been accepted as a mature member in your family or community. What are some of the formal and informal rites of passage that you have undertaken or are soon to undertake?

## VOCABULARY

### ACTIVITY

This activity is designed to be used with the vocabulary worksheet (from [classroom.walkerbooks.com.au/yong](http://classroom.walkerbooks.com.au/yong)). Find and copy the definition of each of the words in the worksheet. Make sure you include which part of speech the word is (noun, verb, adjective). Transform the word into the other parts of speech (N.B. some words can’t be transformed into all of the parts of speech). Use an online translator to translate the words into Chinese characters. Create a word wall of synonyms and the Chinese equivalents.

## POINT OF VIEW

From the very first line of the novel, *“I never wanted to come.”* (p 7) we know that *Yong* is a story about one character’s experience, told directly in first person. As the story follows Yong’s journey from his arrival in South Australia to his final destination just outside



Ballarat, we are invited to share in his emotional journey. Even though his background may be foreign to us because of his cultural and historical heritage, we recognise that he is not all that different to us. The insights into the experience of a young immigrant help us to sympathise with him and learn how to see the world from another person's perspective. Just as Yong strives to “*see...through foreigners' eyes.*” (p 33) when the villagers first land on the beach at Robe, we are encouraged to do likewise, to consider how our way of life might seem to an outsider. However, if the story was told from the perspective of one of the other characters or even in the third person, the story would be very different.

## ACTIVITY

Discuss other possible perspectives and what they would mean for the way the story is told, and the events those different perspectives would include. Brainstorm possible plots or rewrite one of the scenes from the perspective of another character such as Mr Chung, Mr Feng, Mr Li or even Mr George.

## A WORTHY SON

Much of Yong's experience is universal, which means that everyone can recognise the same feelings in their own life. This is especially the case with the difficulties Yong faces in his relationship with his father, which is reflected in the subtitle of the novel “the journey of an unworthy son”.

## ACTIVITY

- What is the purpose of a subtitle?
- How does this subtitle help you make predictions about the story and understand what happens in the narrative?
- What do you think makes someone a “worthy” son or daughter?
- What does Yong think makes someone “worthy”? Compare Yong's beliefs with your own.

Yong's journey is a physical journey from China to Ballarat, as well as an emotional journey of growth and change in his relationships with others and his attitude to himself. Part of growing up is learning to be independent of our parents – learning to make our own decisions and accept the consequences. Sometimes this means that we will disagree with our parents. While Yong and his father both struggle with this

transition, it is Yong who undergoes the most significant transformation as an individual. In a first person narrative like *Yong*, writers use the protagonist's thoughts to demonstrate the way they change. As Yong starts to challenge his father he becomes more independent and eventually gains confidence. His thoughts reflect his developing maturity.

## ACTIVITY

As a class, break into groups and assign each group one or two chapters. Each group should then find examples of Yong's thoughts and actions. Each group receives an A3 sheet of paper (more if assigned multiple chapters). Write the chapter number along the top and draw a circle in the middle about 5-10 cm in diameter. In the space around the circle copy the examples. Then write one sentence describing Yong's emotions in the centre of the circle. Display all of the sheets in order and discuss the way Yong's transformation is reflected in his thoughts and emotions.

## REFUGEES

There are many types of refugees – those who flee from war and violence, as well as those who are threatened by famines, droughts and natural disasters. They all have one thing in common – they are all in search of a better future. The men from Yong's village are no different. They leave China because of the famine in the hope that they can “*find gold... and on our return, we will be able to buy food. And maybe build roads and a proper school for the village.*” (p 31). When people are vulnerable it means they can't take care of themselves. They need the help of others. Some people take advantage of this vulnerability for their own purposes. It is often at these times, however, that people discover their strength.

## ACTIVITY

In what ways are Yong and the villagers vulnerable? At what points in the story is Yong most vulnerable? What strengths does Yong discover at these points?

## ACTIVITY

Research the main periods of migration to Australia and create a timeline that includes information about the number of people who arrived, how they travelled, what nationality they were, why they left their homes and how they were treated when they got to Australia.

## MEMORY & ANCESTOR WORSHIP

The importance of respect for one's elders is particularly strong in Chinese culture, so strong that it is part of a spiritual belief system, common to many cultures, called ancestor worship. On a number of occasions, Yong prays to his ancestors for protection and guidance. In worshipping their ancestors, individuals are honouring their memory, their contribution to the community and recognising their influence in shaping their identity. It is also the responsibility of family to ensure that their deceased loved ones "...rest easily and not wander, distressed as a ghost, for the rest of time." (p 179).

The idea of the dead haunting the living because they are unhappy is also strong in western culture. Even if we don't believe in actual ghosts, we recognise the power of guilt and unpleasant memories coming back to haunt us. For Yong, this is particularly powerful because he was so young when both of his parents died, he doesn't feel that he had a chance to prove himself as a worthy son. Only in his final conversation with his dying father does Yong begin to understand what his father thinks about him when he says "*You are a good boy, Yong. A good son. Your mother loved you too.*" (p 175).

### ACTIVITY

Based on this conversation and what you have learned throughout the novel, do you think that Yong should be afraid of his father coming back to haunt him?

Yong makes the promise to his father "*I'll find your grave, and I'll take you back to China and place you next to my mother. I'll never let you become a ghost.*" (p 186).

### ACTIVITY

Why do you think it is so important to Yong?

## LOST LOVED ONES

Yong carries with him a silk sash "*embroidered with silver and blue chrysanthemums*" (p 63) to remind him of his mother who died in childbirth. Silk, a material often associated with China, is valued for being strong, lightweight, warm and soft. Chrysanthemums were first found in China and have become popular around the world. The sash, therefore, is a reminder to Yong of everything that he has left behind, his family as well as

his home. The qualities of silk and chrysanthemums are also symbolic of the gentle affection his mother showed him as a child, which is distinct from his father's "tough love". The significance of the sash to the narrative becomes clear when Yong discovers it is missing and later when he learns that his father has stolen it to wear around his own waist. He reflects that "*Maybe this is becoming a journey that widens the gap between father and son. Perhaps the sash could have been something to hold us together, but now it has separated us further.*" (p 112).

When Yong finally "*winds*" the sash around his waist, "*just as my father had done*", he has created a reminder for himself of both his parents.

### ACTIVITY

Do you think that in doing this he has forgiven his father? Do you think that the sash does finally become something that "holds" them together?

### ACTIVITY

Imagine that, like Yong, you had to leave your home and family for a destination that you know nothing about. What one item would you take to remind you of everything that you love and will miss?

## KITES

Like the silk sash, the kite is a symbol derived from Chinese culture and has important significance for the narrative. It is first introduced as a symbol of childhood play, innocence and as a reminder of his home, China, where kites were first made. "*A stiff breeze blows off the sea and a leaf flutters from a tree. It is whisked along, dancing and twisting before floating to the ground. All at once I'm back in China with Chen, flying kites.*" (p 56-57). Later he dreams of both flying and being a kite, which reflects the kite as a traditional symbol of freedom. In China, kites also have special spiritual significance; in religious traditions, people used kites to send greetings to deceased loved ones, and, by cutting a kite free, it was believed that it would take with it worries, unhappiness and even illness. At one point Yong asks "*What if I were a kite? Cut free. Able to fly.*" (p 188).

## ACTIVITY

Make a list of all of the instances in the book that refer to a kite and discuss the significance of the kite in that scene.

After Yong's father's funeral, Mr Chung gives him a kite with "*Four, firm, straight twigs for the frame, old tent scraps for its body. And scattered down its long string are torn pieces of material, tied like tiny kites.*" (p 245).

## ACTIVITY

Discuss the significance of this. What do you think Mr Chung hoped to achieve in giving Yong the kite?

- Yong is concerned that he is forgetting his mother. (p 148)
- Yong discovers that his father has been wearing his mother's sash and realises that he has misjudged his father. (p 166-168)
- After Yong's father is buried, Yong realises he has to leave his father behind and continue his journey. (p 184)
- Yong is given the honour of taking his father's place as headman but doesn't feel worthy. (p 184)
- Yong overhears Mr George's plans but doesn't know if he should tell anybody because it would show that he knows how to speak English. (p 204)

## RACISM

Racism is one of the many challenges Yong and the villagers face. They are called "*ching chongs*" (p 48), "*yellow*" (p 134), and Mr George even claims "*I know why you want the dog. I know! So you can boil him up with your rice!*" (p 151). Unfortunately, it is an experience common to many Australian immigrants, even today. In trying to stop racism, we need to understand the real cause, which is often fear and jealousy; fear of something unusual and jealousy of anyone who appears to have unique or valuable qualities. The character Mr George becomes a symbol for racism. His hatred for the Chinese makes him angry, bitter and spiteful.

## ADVICE FOR YONG

Yong's journey is a lonely one. At one point he states, "*I am alone. I have no one to turn to.*" (p 189). This is partly because he has no one to talk to about his problems, especially when he struggles with the emotions he feels towards his father. In some ways, he feels caught in a limbo between child and adult. He has left his childhood behind, represented by the friend he misses, but is not yet accepted as an adult, which means that he has no one he feels comfortable to talk with.

## ACTIVITY

Imagine that you were friends with Yong. For each of the examples below, reread the page and then write a short letter to Yong, giving him some friendly advice:

- Yong is torn because even though he is a dutiful son he feels dishonest because he wants to defy his father. (p 13)
- Yong learns that his father has risked making them slaves in order to borrow money to make the trip possible. (p 44)
- Yong's father is angry because Yong didn't tell him that Mr Feng was using opium. (p 54)
- Yong is angry with his father because he believes that he has stolen and sold his mother's sash. (p 73)
- Yong grows increasingly bitter with his father for taking him to Australia and then stealing his mother's sash. (Chapters 7 and 8)
- Yong is chastised for disobeying his father by investigating his suspicions about Mr George. (p 130)
- Yong overhears that Mr George doesn't intend on taking the villagers all the way to the goldfields, but doesn't know if he should tell his father. (p 136)

## ACTIVITY

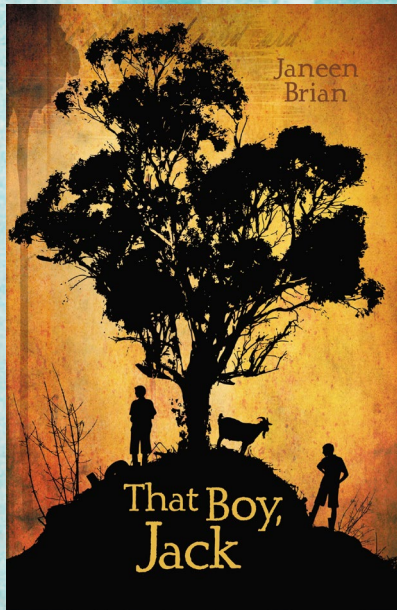
What qualities do the Chinese possess that people like Mr George might be jealous of? Why would people like Mr George be afraid of the Chinese? Based on your answers, what could people like Mr George learn from the Chinese characters in this story?

Given that many immigrants, especially refugees, experience racism, it might be helpful for all Australians to recognise what we can learn from immigrants and refugees.

## ACTIVITY

Based on your current knowledge of immigrants, start a list making note of what you could learn from immigrants and refugees. You could also do some extra research into the cultures or experiences of particular groups who have come to Australia recently.

## ALSO BY JANEEN BRIAN



ISBN: 9781922179005

**2014 Notable Book,  
CBCA Book of the Year Awards, Younger Readers**

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### **Praise for *That Boy, Jack***

“This is an excellent book about colonial life in early South Australia and readers will absorb much information while being engrossed in a good story.”

#### READING TIME

“This book is highly recommended for years 5 to 7 and will be a great text to use in the current history curriculum.”

#### READPLUS

“Jack is an interesting protagonist: a caring boy, on the verge of manhood, in an era when the notion of teenager did not exist. A novel about loss and the fear that can engulf you. A really good read and well-crafted novel.”

#### ALL THE BUZZ ABOUT BOOKS

“This evocative book is the reason we read. To be entertained, to be worried, to be affected. [*That Boy, Jack*] will easily become a classic. I cannot recommend it enough. It’s absolutely brilliant.”

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