

Teachers Notes (Secondary)

by Dr Wendy Michaels

By the River

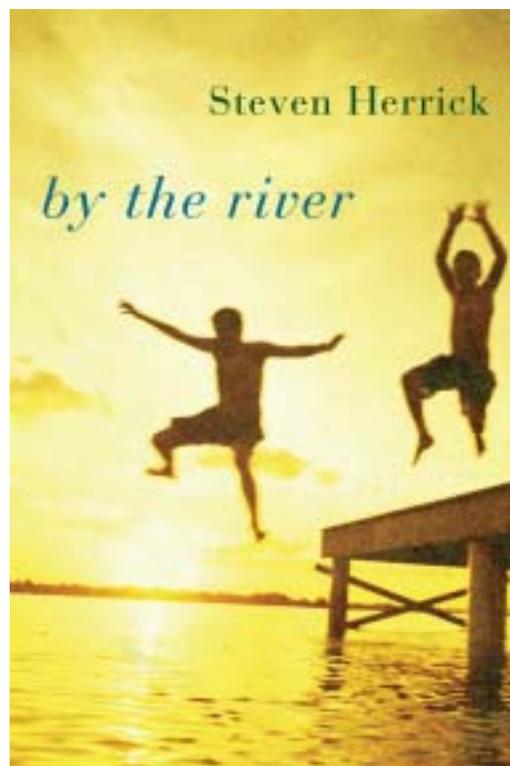
Steven Herrick

ISBN 9781741143577

Recommended for age 12 and over

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INTRODUCTION

PLOT SUMMARY

Harry's dad named him after Harry Houdini, the escape artist, and he can talk his way out of trouble when he needs to, especially when old Miss Carter is wielding the ruler in class. Harry lives with his dad and his brother Keith in the Hodby house, stained brown with oil. Their mother died when Harry was seven, but Dad and the boys take care of themselves. Life for Harry is about swimming in Pearce Swamp, riding bilycarts and lighting firecrackers, but his friend Linda dreams of bigger things, like being Queen of the Surf on a beach far away from their town by the river.

Then, in 1962, when Harry is fourteen, the big river bursts its banks and sweeps everything downstream, including Linda, who is drowned. Harry tends a white cross left by the swamp in memory of Linda. In a town where men are tough and women gossip, Harry privately honours what is good and true. One day he finds a ring by the cross, and he realises that someone else cares for Linda too. Not that you let your feelings show in the battleground that is the schoolyard. Boys like Johnny Barlow use their fists to sort things out. By the time the river floods again, Harry can no longer bear the limitations of his small town, and the new girl, Claire, helps him imagine a bigger world. Harry recalls his father's directions out of town, and he knows that before too long he must go.

THE AUTHOR AND HIS WORK

Steven Herrick writes poetry for young people and adults and performs poetry in pubs and schools. His poetry collections include *Water Bombs*, *Love Poems and Leg Spinner*, *The Sound of Chopping* and *My Love, My Life, My Lasagne*.

Before introducing students to Herrick's verse novel, you could read aloud some poems from his earlier collections of poetry, or provide students with copies of selected poems and encourage them to explore ways of presenting the poems as performance poetry. Allow time for discussion of the voices – sounds, rhythms etc – in the poems and how these features shape mood and meaning.

YOUNG ADULT VERSE NOVELS IN AUSTRALIA

Herrick pioneered the verse novel form for young adults in Australia. Herrick's first verse novel was *Love, ghosts & nose hair* (1996). Other renowned Australian writers, such as Margaret Wild and Catherine Bateson have also turned their hand to verse novels for young adults and younger readers. The YA verse novel has become a significant storytelling genre – even though it causes some librarians a degree of angst in determining where such books should be shelved in libraries.

Herrick's verse novels include *Love, ghosts & nose hair* (1996), *A place like this* (1998), *The spangled drongo* (1999), *The simple gift* (2000), *Tom Jones saves the world* (2002) and *Do-wrong Ron* (2003). His works have been shortlisted for Children's Book Council Awards on a number of occasions and the young adult verse novel, *The simple gift*, has been listed in NSW on the HSC English text list – one of very few works by Australian poets to be listed in 2004-2005. Herrick continues to write his stories in verse – "because I can't write prose", he says – with the publication of one of his most sophisticated novels so far, *By the river*.

Have students research some of Herrick's earlier verse novels – or those by other Australian writers (e.g. *Jinx* by Margaret Wild). Where are these located in libraries or bookshops? What kinds of stories do these verse novels tell?

THE YOUNG ADULT VERSE NOVEL GENRE

While the YA verse novel is an emerging genre (both in Australia and in the USA) we can trace some immediate Australian precursors in the early work of poets such as Steven Herrick. His collection of poems, *Water Bombs* (1992) features a series of vignettes about the characters of Joe and Debbie who grow up in the same neighbourhood, go the same school, become friends, fall out, get back together "in Year 11" and eventually marry and have a son – "Joe Junior". The key feature of this collection is the loose narrative thread, the juxtaposition of

characters' voices in individual poems and the inclusion of illustrations that extend the scope of the verses. Herrick says that he had read Dorothy Porter's adult verse novel, *The Monkey's Mask*, and then "found a group of poems that [he had] written years earlier about a teenage boy" and he realized that he had begun to write a verse novel. Those poems "became the first few for *Love, ghosts and nose hair*".

The verse novel, despite its apparent simplicity, is quite a complex form. It draws on traditional narrative verse forms such as the bush ballad, but is more sophisticated both in its form and structure and in the ideas and issues that are able to be explored.

The verse novel is really a hybrid form, drawing not only on narrative poetry, but also on lyric and dramatic poetry forms, as well as showing the influence of other media in the shaping of the stories. The individual poems that make up each verse novel may be told in different voices – as soliloquies, dramatic monologues, or interior monologues – that allow the reader to experience different perspectives on events or situations. Herrick has used this technique effectively in most of his previous stories, where he has also experimented with various ways of introducing dialogue within the poetry.

Verse novels also draw on features of the oral tradition of storytelling as performance. Within individual poems Herrick creates the performative situation of the narrator directly addressing the audience – we are experiencing the events in the moment as we do in a performed play. Moreover, Herrick includes features of more contemporary storytelling media – particularly the short scenic structure of film and television (and non-naturalistic theatre). Individual poems are often structured in the same self-contained way that individual scenes are in film and television – often with the same kind of tightly structured lines at the end to indicate end of scene – not unlike the way in which Shakespeare uses rhyming couplets to indicate end of scene in his plays. In some of Herrick's earlier stories, visual elements – either realistic or symbolic images – have also been used to heighten the reader's experience of the layers of meaning in the story.

Have students discuss why they think the verse novel form might be attractive to young people today.

For further exploration of this genre see teachers notes on Margaret Wild's *Jinx* – Allen & Unwin website.

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES

BY THE RIVER – A BILDUNGSROMAN

By the river represents something of a departure from Herrick's earlier work. It is a *bildungsroman* – a coming of age novel in which Harry, the protagonist, goes on a journey through childhood to adolescence, experiencing the various pleasures and vicissitudes of life in a country town.

- Have students research information about the *bildungsroman* genre and identify other stories in novels or films that they have encountered in this genre. Encourage them to explore their responses to those that they have read or viewed. Encourage students to discuss why readers might find stories about the journey from innocence to maturity so compelling. Is this a universal human experience?

FRAME STORY STRUCTURES

This story is introduced by a prologue in which Harry establishes how his journey has affected his present view of the world. This prologue positions the reader by providing a frame from which to view the main narrative.

Frame story structures have been used throughout the history of storytelling. Chaucer, for instance, uses the framing of the pilgrims travelling to Canterbury to structure his *Canterbury Tales*, while the Scheherazade story frames the tales of the Arabian Nights. Shakespeare also used the framing device in *The Taming of the Shrew* and

related devices such as prologue and epilogue in *Henry V* and *Romeo and Juliet* and play-within-the-play in works such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hamlet*. In *The Taming of the Shrew* Shakespeare uses a partial frame in the form of two scenes (Inductions) to set up one of the main themes of the play – deceptive appearances.

- Have students research the use of frame stories in works such as the Arabian Nights and Chaucer's tales. Encourage them to consider why a writer would employ this technique. How do the inductions in *The Taming of the Shrew*, for instance, affect the way in which we see the rest of the play? Have students consider how the device positions us as readers.
- Have students examine the opening poem in *By the river*, "The colour of my town". Have them list the characters and actions identified and the emotions associated with each. Remind them that the prologue poem is effectively the stimulus for Harry's journey into his memory. Encourage them to discuss why Harry might make such a journey into his past.

Herrick uses tightly patterned language to construct images of the town. The poem is basically a "list poem" in which Herrick extends this simple form to capture the complexities of the people who inhabited the town in Harry's youth.

- Have students identify the various kinds of repetitions that create the "list" – eg the colours, the sounds and rhythms, etc. Encourage them to discuss how these repetitions work to create a picture of Harry's past that is multi-layered, yet cohesive. Remind students that Herrick is using these to create the sense of Harry's memories. Encourage them to talk about the impression of memories that this achieves. You could introduce T.S Eliot's poem, *Rhapsody on a Windy Night*, which also depicts memories and have students compare these two representations of the nature of memory.
- Have students use the line, "The colour of ..." to construct their own list poem to describe their neighbourhood, house or some place of personal significance (using present tense) or a place that they remember from an earlier time in their life (using past tense). Allow time for sharing and discussion of students' own writing and comparison with that of Herrick's poem.

THE EPISODIC STRUCTURE OF THE STORY

Verse novels tend to tell their stories in short fragments, not unlike film and television. Herrick captures in words (and in images in some of his earlier work) the essence of each moment in the story. Sometimes the verses slow down the action while at other times they move the action forward. This verse novel is structured in seven sections – almost like acts in a drama or episodes in a television program.

Encourage students to discuss why a writer uses section divisions (chapters, acts, episodes etc) in a fictional work. You might point out that chapter titles often indicate the "spine" of the story. You might also remind students that in western storytelling traditions stories essentially represent a protagonist's journey to some new kinds of understandings.

- Have students examine the titles of the seven acts of the story:

One – Harry
Two – A patch of daisies
Three – Love
Four – My father's hands
Five – Storm season
Six – Someone, sometime
Seven – Not alone

Consider with your students what ideas are suggested by these titles. How might they construct the “spine” of the story? Encourage students to speculate as to what remembered events, incidents or people could be associated with each section. Refer them to the references to characters and incidents in the prologue.

- Have students work with a small group to use the information that they have from the prologue to flesh out the ‘spine’ of this story and map some of the stages in Harry’s journey. Allow time for discussion of various speculative versions of the story.
- Divide the class into seven groups and allocate each group one of the sections. Have them read that section, noting carefully the characters and events that Herrick depicts. Have each group prepare a brief synopsis of the events of their section to present to the class. Encourage them to read out some sections of the verse to illustrate their synopsis. Allow time for discussion of the synopses and the story that evolves. Then encourage all students to read the whole story before they continue to explore the issues and ideas in the verse novel.

REPRESENTATIONS OF PLACE

THE AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPE

The story of *By the river* is set in an Australian country town about forty years ago. Many aspects of the landscape and the natural world feature strongly in the various stages of the story – as they have featured in the writings, paintings and music of many Australian artists.

Have students work in groups to research the ways that the Australian landscape has been represented in different art forms. You could encourage them to explore the works of poets such as Dorothea Mackellar, Judith Wright, Douglas Stewart, A.D. Hope etc, painters such as Tom Roberts, Frederick McCubbin, Arthur Streeton etc, and musicians such as Ross Edwards, Peter Sculthorpe and Richard Miele. Have students discuss the images of the landscape evoked in such works. How have these artists depicted the Australian landscape and the relationship that humans (particularly Europeans) have established with that landscape?

Herrick’s depiction of the landscape can be seen to have some connections with the Romantic tradition. The natural world is both a thing of beauty but also a thing of immense power – floods, fire etc. It retains something of the restorative power that Romantic writers such as Wordsworth and Coleridge found in their ramblings into nature and which some Australian poets have also found in their forays into the Australian bush.

- Have students work in groups. Allocate each group a section of the verse novel and encourage students to identify some of the landscape features in the poems. Herrick names many of these places – eg Durra Creek, Pearce Swamp, Hobsons Bend, Cowpers Paddock and so on. Students should look for references to the land, the river, birds and other creatures and discuss the ways in which Herrick represents the Australian landscape within the story. Encourage them to identify specific images and ideas associated with aspects of the landscape and the natural world. Allow time for discussion of the findings.
- Have students imagine that they have been contracted to write a short entry for a new publication that deals with ways in which aspects of the Australian landscape have been represented by Australian poets. The entry should be 750-800 words and should focus on one or two aspects of Herrick’s landscape imagery.

THE COUNTRY TOWN

Central to the story is an Australian country town situated by the river. While there have been enormous changes to many Australian country towns in recent times, Herrick's story evokes a country town around forty years ago – a period that pre-dates the current decline of many towns. There is a sense of nostalgia in Harry's memories of the town of his childhood – although this is not unduly sentimentalized. Harry remembers the bad as well as the good.

Introduce students to Kenneth Slessor's poem, "Country Towns" and have them discuss the poet's attitude to country towns in this poem.

Divide students into seven groups and allocate each group a section of the novel. Have students read through the poems to identify features of the town and the ways in which Herrick represents them. Students should note that some features are named – eg Cowpers Paddock, Keeling Street – while others are not – eg train station. Have students examine what image of the town Herrick evokes through these references. Allow time for sharing and discussion of these ideas and comparison with Slessor's evocation of country towns.

- Have students imagine that they are journalists who have been given an assignment on youth in Australian country towns. They should imagine that they have interviewed Harry about the country town that he grew up in and should write a short article (800 words) about that town. Allow time for discussion and sharing of written work.

REPRESENTATIONS OF FATHERS AND FAMILIES

Herrick's verse novels often focus on the domestic within the broader Australian landscape: fathers, families and homes are motifs in many of his earlier works. They are central to the issues in *By the river*. Herrick frequently "kills off" the central mother in the story and explores the ways in which the father copes with parenting as a sole provider and nurturer. Often, in the process, he presents two contrasting representations: one admirable, one not so.

- Have students work in groups. Have some groups research the families– eg Harry's family, Johnny Barlow's family, Linda's family, Peter Evans' family, Eve Spencer's family etc., and other groups research those characters that appear to have no family – eg Mrs Appleyard, Mr Kerry, Birdy Newman. Ask students to locate all references to the characters, noting how the notion of the family is represented. You may need to point out that some characters without family are still looked after in a similar way to how families care for their members. Allow time for discussion of the patterns of ideas about fathers and families in the novel. Students might like to consider how Herrick's representation of nurturing fathers relates to popular conceptions of fathers in other contexts – eg media and film.
- Have students work in small groups or pairs. Allocate groups some of the key poems that illustrate Harry's memories of his father – eg "The dragon slayer", "Good luck", "Too much money", "My dad's good hand", "The price of sympathy" etc. Have each group prepare a performance of the poem that will illustrate the perspective it highlights on this paternal relationship. Students could be encouraged to think about use of props or symbolic costume items to enhance their performances. Allow time for rehearsal and performance – as well as discussion of the performances.

REPRESENTATIONS OF LOVE

Herrick's work commonly celebrates that most universal of human emotions – love – in all its manifestations. In this verse novel, Herrick highlights love between various characters, in addition to the love within the family circle. Love in some forms is represented as bringing people together – eg Johnny and Harry are eventually united in friendship

through their love of Linda – and in other forms (lust) it is represented as the means of driving people away – eg Eve Spencer, whose illegitimate pregnancy is the reason she must leave town.

- Have students work in seven groups. Allocate each group a section of the verse novel. Have each group examine the relationships of love and friendship that are depicted. Allow time for feedback from each group. Encourage discussion of those relationships that change from one section to another. How do such changes shape our understanding of human relationships?

COPING WITH LOSS AND LEAVING

There is a complex pattern of interwoven ideas in this sophisticated text. One concern is coping with loss and leaving. This issue is central to Harry's coming to terms with his childhood and his town. Have students examine the losses that various characters experience – eg Harry's loss of his mother and Linda, Eve Spencer's leaving town, Harry's father's lost finger, Barlow's "lost child" in the bush, Mr Kerry's house lost in the fire, the death of Peter Evans' mother and so on.

Encourage students to consider how the characters cope with the loss at the time and in the period after the loss. You may need to remind students that these events are being recounted within the partial frame story as a set of memories. Have students consider how these memories might help Harry to come to terms with his own lost past.

MEMORIES

Harry, in recounting his memories, takes the reader into the remembered past as if we were present in the moment. Herrick at times takes us further back into the past from the remembered moment, as if Harry is remembering something that triggers even earlier memories. At other times he recalls the past, signalling a foreshadowing of future events. For instance, in the poem "The cake", Harry recalls the moment when Linda brought cake after his mother's death and foreshadows Linda's death:

I ate two helpings
of Linda's cake,
six years and four days
before she died
in the flood.

This playing with time allows us to see the different ways in which memories are recalled – sometimes being given a dispassionate distance, at other times immersing us back in the moment. In "Stories" and "Linda", for example, Herrick allows us to see the way in which we even "hear" the voices of the people involved – a phenomena often experienced by those who have lost someone close to them. Herrick gives this particular prominence by keeping the single narrator, Harry, throughout the entire verse novel (unlike many of his other works) but he interpolates the voices of others as Harry remembers them, as if he can still hear them from this distance of time.

- Have students work with a partner. Ask each pair to select two or three poems that they find moving. Encourage them to examine each poem carefully, noting aspects such as verb tense and voices. Have them consider how Harry's memory is being reconstructed. Allow time for sharing and discussion of the poems. Then have each student select one poem that involves interactions between characters or the

description of another character's actions – they will need to choose a character that is still alive at the end of the novel. Ask each student to imagine they are the other character and, like Harry, they are now looking back. Have them write an account of the event from their perspective now. Encourage them to use a free verse form for their writing. Allow time for the development of the writing and for sharing and discussion of the finished pieces.

THE END OF THE JOURNEY

Ultimately this verse novel celebrates coming to terms with some of the great questions of human life – identity and belonging. Herrick represents this as a journey into the past and a re-evaluation of the people and events. He prefigures this in some of the final poems.

- Have students examine the poems, “It wasn’t God”, “Not alone”, and “Perfect silence”. How do these poems position the reader in relation to Harry’s journey back into his memories?
- Have students write about their memories and reflect on the significance of the events they recall for their present understandings of themselves and their life situation.
- In earlier drafts of the poem, Herrick included a final frame poem. Have students use their understanding of the verse novel to construct a final frame poem that captures the essence of the memories. Allow time for sharing and discussion.

THE CRAFT OF FREE VERSE

Herrick has become skilful in creating a moving story by manipulating free verse form. One of the features of free verse is the breaking of the line to highlight a key image or idea. Have students examine particular poems of their own choosing for the lineation and its effects on meaning. You might want to point out that in speaking poetry the convention is to “read to the end of the line” so that the word at the end is stressed.

- Have students experiment with reading aloud the poem that they have selected as their favourite from the novel. Allow time for sharing of these readings and discussion of the effects.
- Have students use any of the ideas they have encountered in the verse novel and write a sequence of poems exploring this idea. Encourage them to consider the voice they will use in each verse and how they will shape the poetry to communicate the feeling and ideas. Allow time for the development of these works and for sharing the reading of some of them with the class.

ABOUT THE WRITERS

STEVEN HERRICK

Steven Herrick was born in Brisbane, the youngest of seven children. At school his favourite subject was soccer, and he dreamed of football glory while he worked at various jobs, including fruit picking. Now Steven writes for children and teenagers and visits many schools each year. He loves talking to the students and their teachers about poetry, and soccer.

Steven lives in the Blue Mountains with his wife and two sons.

DR WENDY MICHAELS

Dr Wendy Michaels is a lecturer in the School of Humanities at the University of Newcastle on the Ourimbah Campus. She teaches courses in Children's Literature, Creative Writing, Gender Studies and Education. Her research interests are in emerging genres in young adult fiction, representations of gender in children's literature, interanimation of word and image in picture books and writing for performance.

Dr Michaels is a former English teacher and English Inspector at the NSW Board of Studies. She has published a number of books for students and teachers and has authored teachers notes for Allen & Unwin on *Jinx*, *A Step from Heaven*, *Parvana*, *And what about Anna*, *Njunjul the Sun*, *Pankration*, *Wolf on the Fold*, and *Guitar Highway Rose*. Her own published writing for children includes the genres of poetry, drama script, prose fiction and the picture book, *Secret Smiles*.

She is the convenor of the Ourimbah Campus Children's Literature Festival to be held on 11, 12 & 13 November 2004. *By the River* will be launched at the Festival Barbecue Yarn Up on Friday November 12 at 6.30 pm.