Each of the following reviews is the work of the named teacher and the views expressed are the teacher's own. The reviews were provided to Allen & Unwin for promotional use. They must not be copied or used for any purpose without permission from Allen & Unwin. If you are a teacher or librarian and would like to review for Allen & Unwin, please sign up for our educational newsletters at www.allenandunwin.com

**The Dead I Know by Scot Gardner**

When you finish reading this fine book, reread it. Only then can you really appreciate the subtle brilliance of the writing. It is a complex book. It is about the human condition, the living and the dead. It is about relationships, functional and dysfunctional. It is about vulnerability and resilience.

From the start I was intrigued by Aaron who, on page one, arrives for his new job at a funeral parlour. I immediately liked the funeral director and his wife who “wore a peach apron over a floral nightmare of a dress” – the author paints wonderful word pictures.

When his new boss suggests he may know his parents, Aaron’s answer “hung in the air like a balled fist”. What is Aaron hiding? The pace of disclosure ensured he had my sympathy. I like him, I care about him, I have to keep reading.

There is just enough tension and violence, none of it gratuitous. It will definitely appeal to readers who like their suspense with a touch of macabre and there is a clever touch of humour to lighten the load. The short chapters will appeal to reluctant readers. Each section seems like its own short story so it is easy to read.

It would be the perfect book to read aloud to a class to have the class make predictions. Why does he have such nightmares, why does he walk in his sleep and what is he trying to conceal, from himself as well as others?

The embossed caravan on the front cover and the flipside view on the back cover, cleverly encapsulates this story.

It is a well designed story. Maybe this is a book that can be judged by its (exceptionally well designed) cover.

**Lois Best, Worawa College, Healesville, Victoria**

Aaron, as recommended by his school counsellor, is given a three month trial as an undertaker with JKB Funerals. Initially, he seems ill prepared for such a position as he turns up to work on his first day sporting long hair and shows little interest in talking to others. As Aaron’s training progresses, the intricacies of work as an undertaker and preparing the dead for burial become apparent. Throughout the story, Aaron’s unusual home life is also revealed — he lives in a caravan with his Mam. This seems a far from ideal environment as he has concerns for his safety (and with good reason) from the inhabitants of van 57. In addition, Aaron is Mam’s sole carer as her memory is failing and she is unable to look after herself. This thrusts responsibility onto Aaron that is beyond his years. Aaron also has terrible dreams which cause him to sleepwalk which result in him experiencing the violent wrath of the inhabitant’s of van 57.

However, despite some hurdles along the way, Aaron shows that he is able to manage the challenges faced by him both at work and in his home life. In fact, his work and his growing relationship with his boss, John Barton and his family seem to bring some peace to his life. The ending provides the shocking revelation of who Mam is, why Aaron lives with her and the cause of his terrible dreams. This is a haunting story that provides macabre details of life as an undertaker. This, in addition to the story of Aaron’s personal life makes this a gripping read and one hard to put down.

**Catherine Duffett, Claremont College, Hobart, Tasmania**

I usually skip over dream sequences in novels but in the case of *The Dead I Know* by Scot Gardner the nightmares experienced by Aaron are integral to this darkly compelling story. Aaron begins work at a funeral parlour and the author describes what goes on there in great detail. This is real life, or death, as the case may be. Not a ‘Death at a Funeral’ sort of romp, but a respectful look at the role of people who deal with the realities of death on a daily basis. Aaron is a troubled teenager with a tragic past that is played out in his nightmares; the full story is revealed at the end of the novel. In the meantime, he is dealing with living in a caravan park, his somnambulistic tendencies and a demented relative. I wanted to know more about Aaron as soon as I read that he reached late adolescence and had never shaken hands with anyone. He is an enigmatic, strong, likeable character and certainly has a lot of issues to
deal with – as many teenagers do. His personality and social skills develop over the course of the novel. I enjoyed reading this book. It is an affirmation of life. I’m not sure I could have read it as a teenager as the experiences of death at that age were still too raw. Personally, I would hesitate to use this in the classroom unless I knew the students very well. Some of that hesitation is based on my own experiences and I’m sure there are many skilled teachers who know exactly how to draw out the themes of the book without traumatising anyone. Having experienced many deaths at this stage of my life, I found the saddest part was when the cat died. Bravo to Scot Gardner, who has written about difficult topics in a skilful way, using perceptive and natural language.

**Kimbra Weeks, Secondary Teacher Librarian, Oman**

Scot Gardner never flinches from reality, which is precisely why I like his writing so much. *The Dead I Know* is a challenging and extremely graphic novel in places and is therefore best suited to mature readers as it deals honestly with death and the essential services surrounding it. It is also a finely crafted, subtle and rewarding novel that will stand a number of readings.

Aaron is on a trial work placement in a funeral parlour. In the first few pages we get a sense of his troubled background: there is a slight accent on the few occasions speaks and he has never shaken hands with anyone before John Barton, the funeral director. Aaron quickly fits in and proves to be a capable worker. His first young woman ‘client’ is an apparent suicide and the next is a particularly horrific motorbike accident. Gardner has done his research — so much so that we feel almost voyeuristic in that way when you want to hide behind your hand but can’t stop peeking, such is the fascination. Death hovers over every page, but it is the ‘small death’ that hits the characters and readers the hardest.

But beneath the macabre surface is plenty of humour to lighten the tone, especially in the growing banter between the usually taciturn Aaron and young Skye Barton. Chapters are short and definitely of the page-turning variety.

Characterisation is also strong in this dark novel. We care about the damaged Aaron; worry for him with his nightmares and sleepwalking; feel the injustice of his treatment by a bully in his unsavoury living conditions. His touching relationship with Mam, with whom he lives in a caravan park, reveals him to be a boy with a big heart.

Aaron's back-story is gradually and satisfactorily revealed. He has been carrying his grief since he was five. What better place than working with death to help him understand himself, and what better people than John and Delia Barton to guide him down the path to healing.

Readers seeking gritty realism or are admirers of Scot Gardner’s writing will not be disappointed by *The Dead I Know*.

**Judi Jagger, Western Australia**

In *The Dead I Know*, Aaron Rowe is given trial employment at JKB funerals. Relieved of the burden of attending school, Aaron is willing to learn, although he lacks the skills of social interaction. His boss, John Barton, is forthright but kind. The emotional impact of burying the dead forces Aaron to confront his own violent experiences as he struggles to cope with the heartbreak of young lives cut short. His past haunts him: in his nightmares; in his need to hang onto Mam even though she is clearly beyond his care; and in the sleepwalking he is unable to curb. Yet, despite the tragedy of his childhood revealed at the end of the book, Aaron is capable of humour and compassion.

Resilience is the key theme of this novel. Aaron survives his awful beginnings, the disadvantage of his current circumstances, and the grief that colours everything. He respects the adults in his life but is not cowed by them, nor is he intimidated by the exasperating Skye. As Mam’s condition deteriorates and the caravan park becomes more dangerous, Aaron discovers who to trust and from whom he can safely accept help.

‘Again, I felt something. A change in the weather, a shift in the season, something dawning or something setting. Some tide on the move or moon made full. Stirrings of ancient dust.’ In a style reminiscent of his previous novel, *Happy as Larry*, Scot Gardner maintains suspense throughout. The macabre setting and unsavoury detail about the realities of death provide a ‘yuck factor’ that will
likely appeal to young readers. The author’s treatment is often comical, always respectful. His imagery is fresh and powerful. ‘Our eyes met and he smiled with all the warmth of an autopsy scar.’ Teachers who decide to use *The Dead I Know* as a classroom text should be aware of its potential to stir up painful memories for students who have experienced the death of loved ones. For the same reason, it allows students to tackle an issue that society encourages them to ignore. The book sends a message of optimism; Aaron overcomes adversity via the kindness of those around him. He emerges from hardship able to empathise with others. Despite its controversial subject matter, or perhaps because of it, *The Dead I Know* makes extraordinary reading.

Sharon Hammad, Winmalee, NSW

This is a hauntingly well structured and well written book. It grabs your attention from the very first chapter where Aaron, the teenage protagonist, walks into a funeral home for a job interview and ends up getting the job despite his unshaven appearance. Aaron is reluctant to offer answers about himself to his new employer and John Barton’s exclamation about Aaron being an enigma is not far from the truth. The reader understands that Aaron’s circumstances are difficult, mysterious and enigmatic and wants to find out why. Aaron is a likeable teenager who is battling many fronts. He is struggling to come to terms with his past, has frequent nightmares that leave him drained and exhausted and often cause him to sleepwalk and endanger his life. He is also struggling with looking after his “Mam” who is the person we initially assume is his mother who is suffering from a mental illness and often calls him by a different name. The reader is fascinated by the love this young man shows for his “Mam” and the extent he goes to in order to look after her despite the poverty and the poor living conditions of the caravan park where they live. He also has to hide from a bully but confrontations do occur and we feel more and more engrossed in Aaron’s troubles.

The novel gives plenty of insights and offers the opportunity to the classroom teacher to discuss death and dying, poverty, bullying, mental illness and dementia in particular as well as road safety and safe driving considerations, gun laws, privacy issues. It also offers opportunities to discuss kindness to strangers and what it means to be a good human being while we are alive and walking this earth. And of course it is about love and its transformative powers.

A totally engrossing novel with a very satisfying ending.

Angela Vassiliou, South Australia

Scott Gardner is one of those writers you just know is going to write a superb novel that will appeal to adolescent readers. And this is another that does just that. One of the best things is the fact that the main character is usually an awkward male social isolate who finds that given the right circumstances they can find a fit within the society they feel at odds with. From the very beginning one feels empathy with Aaron, a young man who is given a temporary position with a funeral parlour on the recommendation of his school. With a haircut, new suit of clothes and a family prepared to give him a chance he finds that he can deal with the sorrow in both his past and present.

The novel deals with a huge number of social issues that seem to be increasingly part of our youth’s lives – in this story Aaron has to deal with a carer who is suffering bouts of dementia, a home that fails to offer him safety and security as well as an horrific incident in his childhood that sees him lose both parents. And despite what seems to be a litany of woes the novel is not depressing but rather uplifting as Aaron deals with each issue in turn with the assistance of his new employer and the kindness of strangers. An excellent book that should appeal to all those boys in the reluctant reader group.

Peta Harrison, Albany Senior High School, Western Australia

I loved this book. It deals with the usually taboo subject of death and our society’s rites around it, and the reader learns a great deal about the time between death and the funeral and burial or cremation, always maintaining the respect for the newly departed. Aaron’s positive story opens on his first day with JKB Funerals, and immediately we also meet his boss, John Barton. Aaron slowly reveals himself – a no-hoper at school who is surprised to be enjoying his new position and shocked by his reactions to grief. Barton accommodates his new employee’s foibles and taciturn reactions. Mrs Barton and their daughter Skye also help Aaron make the adjustment to this new life. We understand that Aaron is blocking out his past. He sleep-walks, often to distant places, and is found at different
times by a paramedic, policewomen and a passing jogger. Mam is not quite what she seems and Aaron
takes on a caring role for her too, coping with her increasing forgetfulness and idiosyncrasies. His
dreams are confronting, inexplicable and confusing, but always an essential part of his story. Life in
their caravan park is also challenging because of the behaviours of the threatening Westy and his
family’s drug and alcohol problems.
Throughout the story the reader empathises with Aaron and wants to know more about him, to help his
nightly struggles, improve life with Mam and thank the Bartons for all they do for Aaron. He is not at
all a typical teenager and that is one of the strengths of Gardner’s tale. As a teacher, I felt that I had
come across several “Aarons” in my career and I am sure that young adult readers will understand that
they have too. Skye Barton, who is an annoying young teen at the beginning of the book, develops a
good relationship with Aaron, giving him the nickname of Robot because of the way he speaks, but he
is able to relate to her, perhaps the first person (other than Mam) in his life whom he has wanted to
help and who he gets on with.
The Dead I Know would make a good class novel for upper secondary students. Though the language
and content is not particularly challenging, it is well written with some wonderful word pictures and
students need to be mature enough to understand the many layers presented, especially Aaron’s
eccentricities and the Bartons’ total acceptance of him. Students could study/discuss

• sleep-walking, its causes and effects
• the rites our society creates around death, from the point of view of funeral directors as well as
what we expect
• death rites from the past and other societies
• dementia
• hospitals and hospices; aged-care facilities
• the strength of the ending of the story – did Gardner make the best decision to finish the book as
he does?
• The Bartons acceptance of Aaron was complete. Why was this believable?
• The role of the dead people in the narrative

Maureen Mann, Tasmania

Aaron Rowe is a troubled young man. Left school early, has no parents, living in a caravan park with
his “crazy” Mam, isn’t able to sleep and when he does he keeps having dreams that he can’t explain.
The story begins with Aaron first day of employment. His careers counsellor at school sets him up
with a trial work placement at the local funeral directors. Here Aaron is welcomed into the family of
head Undertaker, John Barton and finds some sort of peace among the dead. Aaron feels that he can
relate to the dead as he feels for them and understands them as he learns to prepare their mortal bodies
for burial. The one thing he can’t cope with is the faces of grief on the family and friends of the
deceased and he keeps asking himself why? Aaron is more comfortable with the dead rather than the
living.
But there is one thing that Aaron doesn’t have control or understanding over is his lack of sleep.
When he does, Aaron discovers that he has developed the strange habit of sleepwalking which leads
him into all kinds of trouble. Aaron doesn’t know why this keeps happening to him and is frustrated
about what he can’t remember in his dreams.
This book is one of those novels that draws you in from the very first page and makes you read until
the very end. I was totally engrossed with this book as you were made to care about Aaron and what
would happen to him. This book deals with a range of issues including grief, bullying, depression,
mental illness and family. These issues have the possibility to be discussed with students and
researched further and would make a good thought provoking novel study. This book would make a
great read for upper secondary students (Year 9/10 onwards) for both boys and girls, especially those
who like their fiction to be “real”.
Scot Gardner has written a great story on difficult and sometimes confronting issues that will resonate
with the reader long after they have finished the book.

Alison Hay, Yarra Hills Secondary College, Victoria
Scot Gardner is shaping up to be one of my favourite young adult authors. His latest novel, *The Dead I Know* does not disappoint. It is an outstanding read that touched me to the core. ‘I have never read a book more gripping nor more triumphantly alive’, says John Marsden, arguably Australia’s most successful and popular children’s author. This is high praise and aptly deserved.

Main character, Aaron Rowe finds himself in the employee of John Barton, the undertaker. As a result he uncovers hidden nightmares of his childhood and thus is able to learn to live again. Aaron’s character is authentic and well-drawn. He is a failure at school but incredibly adaptable and a quick learner. He lives with his ‘Mam’ (Grandmother) in a caravan by the foreshore. She is slipping further and further into dementia and Aaron is in denial about this but the truth is coming and in doing so changes the course of his life.

As he learns more skills as a trainee undertaker his personal life begins to unravel and he is forced to face the demons of his past. Scot Gardner’s detailed descriptions about the work of an undertaker and burial are confronting on one level but equally fascinating on another and he handles this delicate subject with great sensitivity.

This is a story of great compassion, of love and the search for self. I read it in one sitting and could not put it down, like John Marsden, it gripped me from start to finish. Themes are abundant, such as ageing and dementia, victims of crime, compounding grief, poverty, love and the need for ‘significant others’ in the lives of teenagers.

I would highly recommend this as a class set for study or as a part of a literature circles set. I for one will be purchasing copies for this purpose.

Aaron has now become one of my beloved characters. I have shed tears for him and marvelled at how he is able to sort out the mess of his life and find new meaning. Strangely by working with death is he able to live again.

*Sharon Marchingo, Cruso 7-10 Secondary College, Victoria*

Aaron is an enigma; a mystery boy right from the start. Aaron has a secret that is hidden even from him. Throughout this book the secret is gradually unravelled in the context of his rather unusual new job working for an undertaker. We are given little glimpses of things that make you question who he is and where he comes from.

He is a boy of few words and gives very little away about anything, particularly his home life. Throughout the novel Aaron undergoes a steep learning curve but it seems he is ideally suited to the job. His boss, Josh Barton, takes him under his wing and it is through his steady support that Aarons’ secrets finally come out into the open, where he is able to confront them and deal with them. However, it isn’t all plain sailing. Aaron has to deal with family issues, bullying, mental illness and *that* nightmare experience from the past that he keeps pushing away.

This book lends itself to discussing all of these issues as they arise in Aaron’s life. They are revealed little by little in an authentic way. Scot Gardner has managed to get inside Aaron’s head and tells the story from his point of view. We share his journey as he comes up against the issues mentioned and sometimes fails and sometimes succeeds in coping with them at the time.

Throughout there is an overriding sense of hope, despite moments of real gloom. Death and mental illness are not trendy things to talk about in our society, but in this book they are both unavoidable. This could open up discussion in a very positive way, as readers look at how they are presented in the novel.

Recommended for good readers from 14 and up. Suitable for discussion at Year 9-10 level.

*Thea Maguire, Mountain District Christian School, Victoria*