

**Teachers Notes**  
by **Dr Susan La Marca**

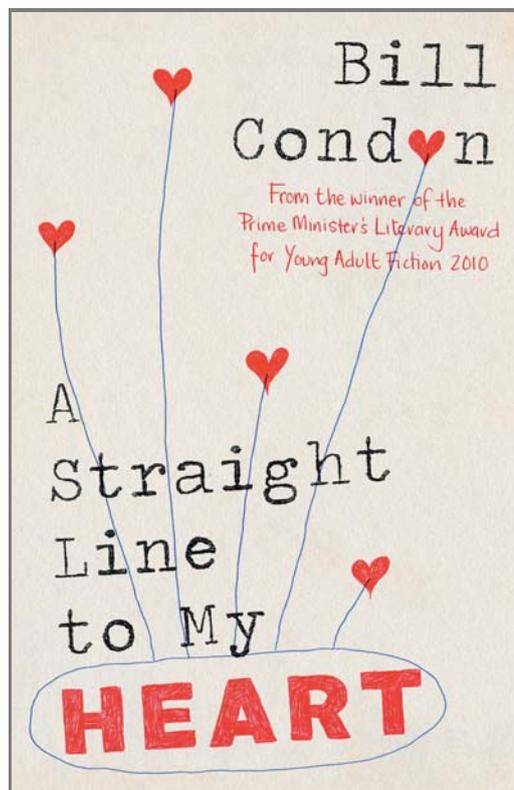
**A Straight Line to My Heart**  
by  
**Bill Condon**

ISBN 9781742377308

Recommended for ages 14-17 yrs

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## INTRODUCTION

Bill Condon is much lauded and beloved by teachers and students for books such as *Confessions of a Liar*, *Thief and Failed Sex God*, *No Worries*, *Dogs* and *Give me Truth*. In 2010, he was the inaugural winner of the Prime Minister's Award for Young Adult Fiction for *Confessions of a Liar*, *Thief and Failed Sex God*.

*A Straight Line to My Heart* is written with a storyteller's skill but is also a fast, easy read exploring core young adult themes of coming of age and finding your heart.

This book is about family, love, friendship and loss. It is a sharp and astute reflection on Australian country life and perfectly captures the dreams, hopes and insecurities of teens just ending their school life and about to step into the adult world. Condon has crafted characters that are laugh-out-loud funny, yet sensitive and wise. They and their families are highly flawed but oh-so real, and we share the author's affection for them.

## PLOT

Tiff has survived school and is looking forward to work experience as a reporter on the local newspaper. Her life revolves around her tight-knit family, Bull and Reggie, and her best friend, Kayla. Despite their relatively young age, both girls have had to cope with great loss and much responsibility, and both are on the edge of exciting change as their lives head in exhilarating, yet frightening, directions—if they can just make the right decisions. Tiff's mother died just after she was born but, nonetheless, she feels a strong connection to her. This, and her keen wit, keeps her one step ahead of most things.

Tiff's story is set in Gungee, a small country town where the world revolves around Saturday football games, pub meals and the meat raffle. In this quiet and close world, Tiff dreams of possibilities and finds support in her books and writing.

Reggie is Tiff's step-grandfather/father and he knows he is sick. She's worried for him and anxious about doing well in her summer work experience at the local newspaper, her dream job. The Shark, senior reporter, seems to have other ideas. And Kayla, Tiff's only friend, is moving away. The world seems upside down, and into all of this walks Davey. First love is always intense.

## INSPIRATION FOR THE NOVEL

The author has said: *The idea for this book came when I noticed a teenage girl in my local library. She was alone, and I started thinking about how girls might find refuge in a library; how books might become their friends. I began with that premise but the story quickly evolved into something else when Davey walked into the library and made a quick and lasting impression on Tiff.*

*Many of the experiences Tiff has when she works on a newspaper spring from my ten years as a journalist. I was actually late on my first day because I followed a fire engine (as Tiff does), thinking I might get a great story. Unfortunately, it was too fast for me and I lost sight of it. When I stopped the car and asked an old lady if she'd seen a fire engine, she asked me what it looked like. That anecdote didn't make it into this book, but many other weird and wonderful things did.*

*A Straight Line to My Heart is a feel-good story about two country girls and their families, their friendships and their hopes for the future. It's also about change and all that brings, both good and bad. There is plenty of humour and some sadness – which is just how I see life.*

## TITLE

The title is taken directly from Tiff musing about the strong connection she feels to a mother she has never known:

*There must be some invisible mother-daughter wiring that runs from her image in a straight line to my heart. (p.40)*

Is it unusual to feel such a connection? Might others in the same situation feel disconnected from a mother they never knew?

Why do you think Tiff is able to maintain this strong link between herself and her mother?

The concept 'a straight line to my heart' is a beautiful one. It manages to convey a strength of feeling, whilst also conjuring up a powerful, visual image of a physical connection between the two characters.

Brainstorm other similarly evocative phrases that describe a strong feeling. Aim to create a strong visual element.

For example:

- a chain around my mind
- my heart on a string

One draft title for the book was *Let it Be*. Discuss the merits of this title. Do you agree that the final title, *A Straight Line to My Heart*, is better?

## LANGUAGE

Condon has created a deceptively simple story. His exceptional use of descriptive phrases, and his pared back style, make the story a pleasure to read. Tiff's smart asides are whip-fast and entertaining, offering us a very individual Australian style of self-mockery that is difficult to achieve. Condon's character descriptions are clever and respectful, using words to weave pictures that are both evocative and powerful in their simplicity. Consider how Condon uses language in the following pieces:

- *She's an old, close-to-the-ground jelly-belly woman with bald patches showing through her wispy grey hair. (p.8)*
- *His [Reggie's] face has as many lines as the state rail system, and though he still has some hair, most of it is poking out of his ears and nose. (p.13)*
- The verandah is called the 'Oval Office' as it is where they meet and it is across the road from the oval. (p.19)
- *...small boys in red-and-black footy jerseys pop up on the grass like mushrooms after a rainy day. (p.49)*
- *...a cup of tea so strong you could lay bricks on it. (p.50)*
- *tangled-up fishing-line thoughts. (p.111)*
- *Bull has a head on him like a block of concrete – nothin' gets in or out. (p.170)*
- *Kayla and boys go together like chocolate and pimples. (p.10)*

*A Straight Line to My Heart* is a life-affirming story, despite the death and separation that are central to the plot. Near the beginning of the story, Tiff describes the sunflowers in Mrs Muir's garden as 'a symbol of sheer happiness' (p.7)

**Writing activity:** Brainstorm similarly symbolic objects. (This could be created online in a forum that allows each class member to add their comments and suggestions.)

Students create and share amongst the class a list of objects that have symbolic meaning for them.

Are some symbols personal whilst others are universal?

Encourage students to use their symbolic object effectively in a short story or a poem.

Condon manages to evoke feeling with imagery and language carefully crafted into simple sentences. For instance:

*She wraps her arms around me and holds me like I'm hers. (p.19)*

*Bull stares into the hazy distance as though the right words are out there somewhere and all he has to do is claim them as his own. (p.20)*

*Sometimes it gets so quiet in Gungee you can hear conversations from a hundred years ago breathing on a gust of wind. (p.20)*

Condon does not use long, adjective-rich sentences to convey an image; the power of his work is in its simplicity.

**Discuss** language and its use in fiction writing. Explore and compare Condon's style to the work of other writers.

Is there a 'right way' of writing fiction?

**Analysis:** On page 200, Tiff finds out that Reggie has died. Consider the paragraph describing how she reacts on hearing the news. How has Condon used word selection, sentence structure and point of view to convey extreme emotion?

## CHARACTERS

Condon demonstrates empathy and respect for the characters he creates in *A Straight Line to My Heart*. With very few words he manages to capture the essence of what are straightforward, yet complex, people.

### TIFF

We learn most of what we know about Tiff through her interactions with the world around her.

- *All I've got is a smart mouth. (p. 78)*
- Shark likes her *because you say what's on your mind – even when it's complete crap. (p.194)*

**Write** a brief character description of Tiff. What is she like? What are her strengths and weaknesses? Is she someone you would like to get to know?

The period described in the book is a major time of change and upheaval for Tiff. Where do you think she will be in ten years time?

### DAVEY PETERS

Davey is relatively elusive during the book. We know him through Tiff, who has barely begun to know him herself.

- his handshake is 'almost gentle' (p.5)
- he's *a bumble-headed sleep walker* (p.5)
- Big Foot
- interaction with Tiff at footy (pp.61-63)

He is unusual because he is 'cheerful and friendly' and 'it's comforting to know that there are guys like him out there – weird, gangling, goofball guys. But nice ones.' (p.66)

Do you see a future for their relationship, or is this just a passing romance or an important, but fleeting, first love?

## **BULL**

Bull is a major part of Tiff's life. The relationship they have is unique and strong.

- Relationship to Tiff described (p.13)
- He used to be a boxer (p.14)
- Snarls at the dog not to get up, but when she does he pats her: *She's got him figured out* (p.20)
- *together and happy* (p.124)

## **REGGIE**

Reggie is ill when the book opens and suffers a heart attack during the story. At the opening, he claims he has two instructions for his funeral (p.18) and, towards the end of the book, we receive a description of his funeral and the following celebration of his life (pp.201-216).

What do these events tell us about the man?

Brainstorm a list of words to describe Reggie. Refer to the text for evidence to support your views. Some relevant sections are:

- Described (p.13)
- Reggie – *I've got instructions...* (for the funeral) *'only two things* (pp.17-18)
- Wolfie (dog) is like Reggie (p.29)
- *It's a game we play. He acts tough and I act soft.* (p.25)
- Reggie and the Gunners (pp.52-53)
- *...in his toothpick legs; tackling a giant beer like an ambitious sparrow...* (p.79)
- Loves John Wayne movies (p.162)
- Celebration of his life (pp.201-206)

Re-read Reggie's phone call to Tiff when she is at work (pp.181-184).

What does this call tell us about Reggie? About Tiff?

Why does Reggie ring her?

Reggie's philosophy of life is encapsulated in the Beatles' song *Let it Be* (p.30)

Is this truly representative of his world view?

Can you think of a song that encapsulates your own world view? Discuss.

## ZOE

Significant sections for understanding Zoe include:

- Descriptions of Zoe (pp.22, 112)
- Zoe's 'Reggie-pecks-to-the-cheek' are 'like shooting a tranquiliser dart into a bear' (p.21)
- Lunch with Tiff at which Zoe offers her support (pp.151-157)

## KAYLA

Kayla is particularly worried about her life turning out like her Mum's (p.76). The period of *A Straight Line to My Heart* is as much a time of change and reflection for Kayla as it is for the main character Tiff.

- Beginning of her friendship with Tiff (pp.33-34)
- *You take away her pretty and my plain and what you get underneath is about the same: a couple of lost girls looking to be found.* (p.34)

## OTHER CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS OF NOTE:

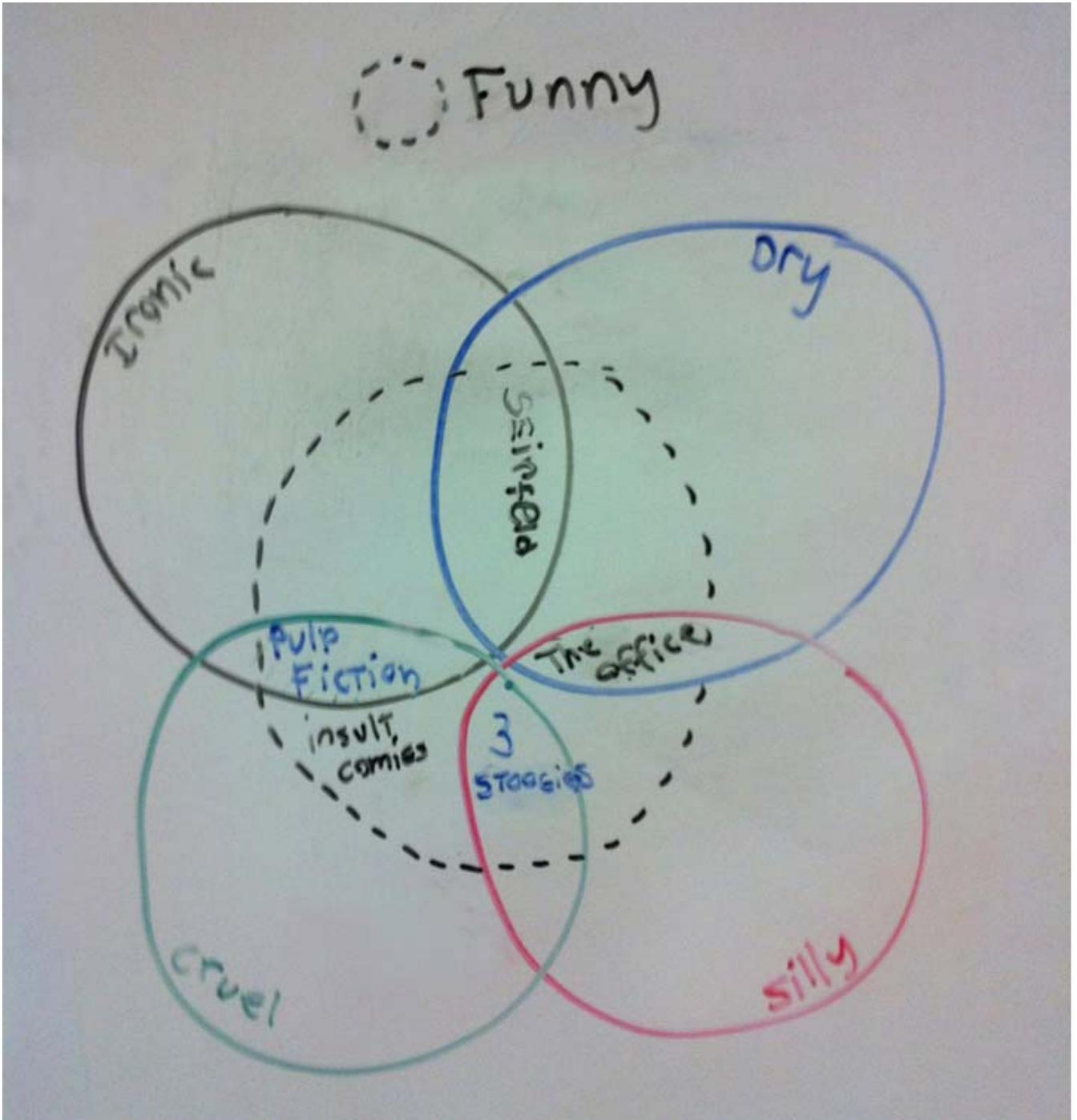
- Kayla's mum (pp.37-38)
- Colin (p.38)
- Shark (pp.90-92)
- Clarence (turning 100 years) (pp.119-121)

## HUMOUR

Tiff is the master of the smart comeback, even if most of them only happen in her own head. For example:

- *Then you just haven't been to enough asylums.* (p.176)
- *I just want to keep the toilet seat down.* (p.23)
- *Really. The whole state?* (p.39)
- *'What is your type?' 'Normal'* (p.63)
- *Only ten pages?* (p.168)

Consider the diagrammatical representation of humour on the next page and the following glossary of types of humour.



Created by Charles Theurer.

Accessed at: <http://ge.geglobalresearch.com/blog/humor-in-venn-diagram-form/> .July 2011

## Glossary of types of humour

<b>Types of humour</b>	<b>Definitions</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<b>Idiom</b>	<i>a form of expression peculiar to a language, especially one that has significance other than its literal one</i>	<i>He was as mad as a cut snake means that he was angry.</i>
<b>Irony</b>	<i>a figure of speech or literary device in which the literal meaning is the opposite of that intended</i>	<i>Exclaiming, 'What a beautiful day for a picnic!' in the middle of a thunderstorm.</i>
<b>Joke</b>	<i>something said or done to excite laughter or amusement; a playful mischievous trick or remark</i>	<i>What does a storm cloud wear under its coat? Thunderwear!</i>
<b>Parody</b>	<i>humorous or satirical imitation of a serious piece of literature or writing; to imitate in such a way as to ridicule</i>	<i>Examples: Scieszka, Jon, <i>The true story of the three little pigs</i>  Munsch, Robert, <i>The paper bag princess</i></i>
<b>Pun</b>	<i>the humorous use of a word in such a manner as to bring out different meanings or applications, or of words alike in sound but different in meaning; a play on words</i>	<i>Police were called to a daycare centre where a three-year-old was resisting a rest.</i>
<b>Riddle</b>	<i>a puzzling question, problem, or matter</i>	<i>David was out for a walk when it started to rain. He did not have an umbrella and he wasn't wearing a hat. His clothes were soaked, yet not a single hair on his head got wet. How could this happen?</i>
<b>Spoonerism</b>	<i>a slip of the tongue whereby initial or other sounds of words are transposed</i>	<i>My dunny fog is maned Nitsy is a spoonerism for My funny dog is named Mitsy.</i>

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What kind of humour is to be found in *A Straight Line to My Heart*? Are there different kinds in the book?

Re-read the pages about Kayla's aversion therapy (pp. 42-44). It contains some excellent humorous observations that many of us can identify with. Tiff's response to nappy changing for example:

*"Yuck!" I hold my hands in front of me and shake them wildly – hoping my fingers might fly off. I have no use for them anymore. (p.43)*

What form of humour is this?

The character of Clarence, who is interviewed for the local paper as he is turning 100, epitomises country town quirkiness. He's not turning 100 at all and takes great delight in sharing this secret with Tiff (pp.119-121).

Is this form of humour, or this type of character, quintessentially Australian?

Consider other examples of Australian humour that evoke a particular facet of our culture. Some excellent comparisons could be made between the descriptions of place and the characterisation in *A Straight Line to My Heart*, and those in other texts and cinema. The movie *The Castle* is a good example. Using YA book titles for extension comparative work could also be beneficial – for example, *Town* by James Roy or *His Name in Fire* by Catherine Bateson.

## THEMES

### FAMILY

Family is central to this text. The concept underlies every other theme. But, with great gusto, *A Straight Line to My Heart* challenges the traditional notions of family structures. Both Tiff and Kayla live in unconventional families. Bull, Reggie and Zoe, Tiff's family, are not related to her by blood and Kayla has a number of brothers and sisters from a range of fathers. The message of this text though is clear – these families might not always get it right but they are effective and strong.

On page 13 Tiff outlines her family structure. Is the arrangement she outlines a family?

What constitutes a family? (Consider the examples from the text and what you see around you in society.)

Kayla's family structure is equally different and has been dysfunctional in earlier years when her mother was not coping. Despite this, family ties, and the need to nurture and celebrate them, triumph over any other needs for Kayla. She has a strong need to support her mother in enabling the family to all be together again (p.137). Kayla says to Tiff *...we're a family. You understand don't you?* (p.139)

**Brainstorm** the characteristics that each of these family units demonstrate. Return to the text for evidence to support your list.

Tiff's relationship with her mother is complex. Despite never knowing her, the link she feels to her mother is unbreakable.

*About two months after this photo was taken, I was born and Mum died – clean swap. Caring about someone I never knew doesn't make sense, but that's how it is. This photo means a lot. There must be some invisible mother-daughter wiring that runs from her image in a straight line to my heart. (p.40)*

Tiff even pushes others aside because of this feeling of connectedness. When Zoe tries to comfort her she tells Zoe she already has a mother (p.110).

*My mum is always with me, but I hadn't realised how deeply I felt about her until the words actually came out.* (p.113)

Tiff wants to acknowledge her mother and plans to travel to her grave. This is obviously very important to her. She says she wants to:

*Put flowers on Mum's grave. I owe her that.* (p.41)

Why is this act so important to Tiff?

## RELATIONSHIPS

### Romantic

At the opening of the story, Tiff seems resigned to having no romantic interest in her life

*If you can't get a boy, get a book.* (p.1)

And the storyline of *Wuthering Heights* is dismissed as 'romantic drivel' (p.2). Despite these pessimistic views, Tiff is open to possibilities; she is just having trouble seeing where they might come from:

*But still, I wouldn't mind feeling that way about someone, especially if they felt the same way about me.* (p.2)

Davey offers something different:

*Here's a boy my own age; he shakes my hand, he talks to me – not just to ask me directions to the toilet – and he reads books.* (p.6)

Davey's note to Tiff towards the end of the book is suitably romantic but also allows for humour. She needs to *nod if you're even slightly interested* (p.167)

Tiff says to Davey about his concerns, *I'm not into class, I'm into people* (p.175)

What does she mean?

When they finally get together, the description from Condon is poetic:

*I fit neatly up against him.*

*Our arms hold us together.*

*He has the softest lips.* (p.176)

Tiff is smitten, she watches as he leaves:

*...just wanting to be close to him for a few seconds more.* (p.176)

Later, it becomes apparent Davey is equally taken with Tiff. As he takes to a bicycle in order to see Tiff when she needs him most, Kayla comments:

*...what kind of idiot would be out riding a bike at this time of night?* (p.216)

Throughout the book, there are other examples of romantic relationships:

- Inky, Kayla's mother, has had a few
- Colin and Inky

- Zoe and Bull

How do these compare to Tiff's relationship with Davey? Are they any less intense, or important?

## Friendship

Tiff describes the moment when she and Kayla became steadfast friends:

*That day I think we really saw each other for the first time. I mean, saw beyond the bag of bones on the outside. (p.34)*

What does she mean?

On pages 35 to 36, Kayla and Tiff converse in a way that marks them as real friends:

*'Our conversation travels down many windy paths...'* (p.35)

What aspects of this conversation indicate that the girls are close?

Later in the story, when Kayla breaks the news that she will move to Perth with her family, the girls' friendship is tested. They both acknowledge that: 'We'll always be friends.' (p.131)

Do you think they will?

**Discuss:** What is necessary for a lasting friendship?

## With Family

The relationship between Bull and Reggie is strong but stereotypical; they do not overtly demonstrate their affection. Tiff comments:

*They hardly look at each other. They're so awkward about getting close, and yet somehow they make it. (p.102)*

The football games and supporting the Gunners is something that allows them to interact in a way that they are comfortable with: *Forget that step-dad stuff. It's father and son on days like this. (p.52)*

Bull and Reggie are not the only ones protecting their feelings from the outside world and each other. Tiff admits she does not often let Bull and Reggie get close. She says:

*...mostly they get the outside layers. (p.155)*

What does she mean?

Despite this, Tiff has a comfortable, supportive relationship with both men. She describes her relationship with Bull as *like eating chocolate. (p.125)*

Mrs Muir, the lady whose sunflower Tiff destroyed, is the most physically demonstrative of Tiff's entire circle in Gungee. After Tiff gives her the raffle tickets by way of apology, she *...wraps her arms around me and holds me like I'm hers. (p.9)*

Why is she the most comfortable with physical affection? Refer back to the text to the little we can discern about Mrs Muir.

## COUNTRY TOWNS

The country town of Gungee is cleverly realised by Condon. Gungee is a small town with little on offer for the entertainment of teenagers. It is clear that characters like Tiff will leave for bigger things when they can but, despite this, there is an affection and appreciation for the simple friendships and sense of community and belonging that can come with small town life. Condon, through his depiction of Gungee, demonstrates a respect for a way of life that can offer a great deal.

The town is described in various ways:

- *Sometimes it gets so quiet in Gungee you can hear conversations from a hundred years ago breathing on a gust of wind.* (p.20)
- *Gungee is a very ancient word that means: this place is a hole.* (p.48)
- Hot local entertainment is watching the lobsters at Chans (p.49)
- Football match, page 52 onwards
- Eight-dollar dinner special at the Royal and the meat raffle (p.72)

Tiff is very clear that she will be leaving Gungee as soon as she can. (p.16) But perhaps she is more a part of the town than she realises: *Trudging up the road I become a part of the landscape...* (p.32)

What will she lose upon leaving? What will she gain?

## A TRANSITION SUMMER

*A Straight Line to My Heart* is about the end of one part of Tiff and Kayla's lives and the start of something new.

- *School is over; not just for the year, but forever. We've done Year 12. We're free. That's what we've always wanted, but now that it is here it's too big and dark and scary to handle. Summer is nearly at an end and that means life decisions; like heading in different directions, saying, 'I'll see you later', when we don't know how long later might be.* (p.36)
- *For now both of us step carefully around the subject of the future. It's one of those too-hard things you leave until you can't put it off any longer. It's much easier to be little kids again, playing show-and-tell.'* (p.37)
- *Things will change. Life is going to work out fine.* (p.76)
- *In among the dead there must be girls who were once like me and Kayla. They probably lived this very scene before us; asked the same questions about friendship, about life, wondered if it was all worthwhile. I think it is. Hope it is.* (p.78)

Change for Kayla and Tiff is inevitable, but what of the other characters in the story? Is change inevitable for them too?

Is there another period in life that offers such a big transition or period of change?

Does life ever really stand still?

## FIRST WORK

Tiff's first days at the newspaper on work experience are described on pages 88 to 98. The Shark, the senior reporter at the newspaper, is particularly difficult. He, and the owner of the paper, call her 'girl', disparage her enthusiasm and her world, and get her to make tea. She is the *work experience girl – the lowest of the low* (p.91).

Tiff comes to the conclusion that The Shark is *not a guppy – he's a pig*. (p.94)

Why does The Shark feel it necessary to treat Tiffany like he does?

The Shark tells Tiff:

*Write this down: who, what, when, where, why, how. Got that?...Those are the details the reader needs to know....Keep it simple. Stick to the facts. (pp.96, 97)*

**Discuss:** Is this true?

Consider the news format you prefer – what do you want to know? Need to know? Does it depend on what sort of news it is?

Is there a place for long, descriptive pieces? Consider the news that you or your parents read.

How do we get our news in this technology-enabled world?

Is print journalism dead anyway?

After many attempts at a particular rewrite, Andrew approves of her story. She only knows this because he did not throw it back (p.98)

Is this an effective way to work with employees?

There is an old saying 'A little praise goes a long way'. What does this mean?

Tiff doesn't want to go back (p.99) It appears that they are trying to make it tough—to test her (p.103)

After offering her an important assignment, Shark sends Tiff to get the mail (p.116).

**Discuss:** How would you react in this work environment? (Remember, you have thought for years that this would be your dream job.)

Tiff feels she can't face seeing people in trouble. The work at the newspaper is not the desk job she had expected. (pp.145-8, 190)

The Shark shows Tiff his scrapbooks, something he only does for those he likes. It is suggested that he appreciates her ability to say what's on her mind. (pp.192-194)

Joan counsels Tiff: 'Now that's just silly. I can't be like him either, but I still get the job done. Be you. I'm sure that will be perfectly fine.' (p.214)

What do you think of Joan's words of advice?

## DEATH

Tiff has already been impacted greatly during her life by the deaths of those close to her:

*It's all so sad. Catherine died two hours after the birth of her daughter. Just like my mum. (p.1)*

*Nell died when I was five...(p.16)*

This novel covers the death of the man who has been a father/grandfather figure in Tiff's life. It is not maudlin in its approach, though, but uplifting in the way friends first support him and then celebrate him.

- *Already diagnosed meself, anyway. I'm cactus. (p.16)*

- *I'm really fascinated to know what sort of things he's packed in preparation for dying – how would you know what the weather was going to be like?* (p.17)
- (Reggie) *I've got instructions...[for the funeral]...only two things* (p.17-18)

Tiff is also quite philosophical about what life is all about, considering that, at her age, she has faced more death than most. Her view remains optimistic:

*I lean back against the cold stone and gaze around me. In among the dead there must be girls who were once like me and Kayla. They probably lived this very scene before us; asked the same questions about friendship, about life, wondered if it was worthwhile. I think it is. Hope it is.* (p.78)

From page 201 onwards, we witness Reggie's funeral and the later celebration of his life, conducted in line with his requests.

Re-read this section. Consider how Reggie's death is acknowledged. We all differ culturally, religiously and spiritually in how we view and celebrate important life occasions. How do his choices fit with your views? Those of your family? **Discuss.**

- 'Sparklers – that's what he wanted.' (p. 216)

As a symbolic representation of Reggie's life, what does his request for sparklers represent?

When she does not win the raffle, Mrs Muir's says to Tiff:

*'That's quite all right, dear.'* She gives me a smile like a sunflower. *'I have a lovely time just being alive. A person can't be too greedy.'* (p.64)

This is an interesting world view. Do most of us fully appreciate what we have, or does our society encourage a constant striving for more?

How does your experience sit with Mrs Muir's world view, or that of Reggie, encapsulated in the song *Let it Be*?

At Reggie's funeral, Mrs Muir recites 'Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night' by Dylan Thomas:

Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,  
Because their words had forked no lightning they  
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright  
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,  
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,  
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight,  
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on that sad height,  
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.  
Do not go gentle into that good night.  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

**Discuss** the poem's relevance to the characters in *A Straight Line to My Heart* and the emotive language and symbolism used by Thomas to convey feeling.

This is a popular poem, what is its appeal?

## POWER OF READING/WORDS

Throughout *A Straight Line to My Heart*, the power of words is celebrated. As the story opens, Tiff acknowledges the importance of books and reading in her life: *There's nothing quite as good as folding up into a book and shutting the world outside.* (p.1)

Scattered throughout the story are references to a range of literary texts.

- *Wuthering Heights* (p.1)
- *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote (p.6)
- Banjo Paterson's poetry (pp.30, 204)
- *A Tale of Two Cities*, 'the perfect companion' (p.57)
- Sylvia Plath's poetry (p.133)
- *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (pp.6, 166)
- *Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night* by Dylan Thomas (p.204)

Each of these titles is important for the various characters that have read them, mentioned them to others, or celebrated them. Reggie's favourite poetry both calms him when life is difficult and is part of his funeral ceremony at the end of his life.

**Discuss** the relevance of literature to our lives. Are there words—in stories or poems—that strike a chord with each of us?

What else has this relevance in today's world – movies or songs, perhaps? Are these merely different forms of story?

The song *Let it Be* is also important to Reggie (p.30).

Consider the ability of music to move people, to influence them and play a role in their lives. Is story also part of the power of music?

Words are important to Tiff for many reasons. She finds pleasure in great literature but she also finds support for her life in her own writing. She claims she will write about today, 'so I can keep it' (p.125). Writing about her life is, for Tiff, a way of internalising memories and making them last.

Once, people kept diaries. Tiff does so on her computer. Consider the growth in social networking sites and blogs on the Internet. Most of these record and share people's lives. This is an enormous modern phenomenon that is a big part of many people's lives.

Why do we feel the need to record, to share, to watch others' lives from a distance?

Is this part of being a social animal? Part of being human?

Davey gives Tiff a copy of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. He says: *It's an old book but the words are still in good nick.* (p.167)

What does he mean?

Tiff is interested in classic literature. It sustains her in times of difficulty and is an important part of her life. When she begins work experience, The Shark tries to teach Tiff his view on how newspaper content should be written (p.97). These are two very different styles of writing. Do they serve two distinct purposes?

For instance, can literary fiction convey knowledge or truth, or can this only be conveyed through factual newspaper reporting?

Consider, in relation to the text:

- 'Fiction reveals truth that reality obscures' - Ralph Waldo Emerson
- 'Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities. Truth isn't.' - Mark Twain
- 'Fiction is the truth inside the lie.' - Stephen King
- 'For truth is always strange, stranger than fiction.' - Lord Byron

## **RELATED READING**

*His Name in Fire* by Catherine Bateson

*One Whole and Perfect Day* by Judith Clarke

*No Worries* by Bill Condon

*Chasing Charlie Duskin* by Cath Crowley

*After January* by Nick Earls

*Stony Heart Country* by David Metzner

*Falling Forward* by David Metzner

*Dairy Queen: A Novel* by Catherine Gilbert Murdock

*Town* by James Roy

*Eggs* by Jerry Spinelli

*Broken Glass* by Adrian Stirling

### **Other novels by Bill Condon**

*Confessions of a Liar, Thief and Failed Sex God* (Woolshed Press, 2009)

*Give Me Truth* (Woolshed Press, 2008)

*Daredevils* (UQP, 2007)

*No Worries* (UQP, 2005)

*Dogs* (Hodder Headline, 2001)

## **ABOUT THE WRITERS**

### **BILL CONDON**

Bill Condon was born in 1949 and lives with his wife Dianne (Di) Bates, in the seaside town of Woonona, on the south coast of New South Wales, Australia. He left school at the first chance he got and worked in an assortment of jobs that did not require much in the way of qualifications. A chance meeting with Larry Rivera, the editor of a local weekly newspaper, led Bill into a career as a journalist. Throughout those years Bill was also writing for children, following the example of his wife Di, who is a well-known children's author. Eventually, Bill left journalism to devote himself full-time to writing for children. When not writing, Bill plays tennis, snooker, and Scrabble, but hardly ever at the same time. His dream is to receive a wildcard invitation to play tennis at Wimbledon - if nothing else, his knees would provide great comic relief for the spectators.

Bill was the winner of the inaugural Prime Minister's Literary Award in 2010 for Young Adult Fiction for his book *Confessions of a Liar, Thief and Failed Sex God*.

#### **Bill's books have been recognised in these awards:**

*Confessions of a Liar, Thief and Failed Sex God* – Winner, Young Adult Fiction category, Prime Minister's Literary Awards 2010.

*No Worries* - Honour Book, Older Readers category, Children's Book Council Book of the Year Awards 2006

*Dogs* – Honour Book, Older Readers category, Children's Book Council Book of the Year Awards 2001

*Miss Wolf and the Porkers* – winner of the Younger Readers category in the 2001 Kids Own Australian Literature Awards (KOALA)

### **DR SUSAN LA MARCA**

**Susan La Marca** is Head of Library Services at Genazzano FCJ College. Her PhD, completed in 2003, explored how a teacher-librarian creates a reading environment.

Susan is the editor of *Synergy*, the on-line journal of the School Library Association of Victoria (SLAV); she is also an associate editor of the journal *Viewpoint: on books for young adults* and editor of a number of books on reading and school library design. She is the co-author, with Dr Pam Macintyre, of *Knowing readers: unlocking the pleasures of reading* (2006).