

BANTAM

Terry Whitebeach and Michael Brown

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Synopsis

Mick and his mate Toad return to Bantam, the depressed, chilly, unemployment ridden country town they call home, after a less than successful time in the city. Mick has no girlfriend and no job — and no prospect of getting either, he reckons. He's not cool, old ladies love him, and so do chooks. He doesn't have Toad's way with the girls.

Mick and his mates lurch from one hilarious disaster to the next as they look for ways to survive till the next dole day, and have a good time while they're doing it. Then Mick falls in love, and for a while, life is looking up.

But in a town like Bantam, where disaster is a weekly occurrence, it's too good to last. The Takeaway blows up, someone torches the Aboriginal Centre, and worst of all Spider, Mick's new girlfriend's ex-boyfriend, returns to Bantam.

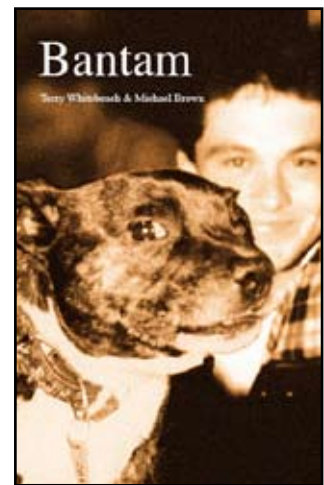
Months of drought, escalating violence and the suicide of several of Bantam's young boys in the same week sends the town into shock, and makes people start to look at how they are functioning as a community. The book ends on a redeeming note, with Mick and his girlfriend re-united, but it raises a number of serious issues about community and the value people place on human life.

Author's Inspiration

Terry was inspired to write *Bantam* when her youngest son moved to a small town some distance from her. Each week he would enthral her by phone or letter with his zany stories of what life was like in a small town. The stories would always be much funnier, or more terrible than anything you could dream up for a novel. So she began to take notes.

Writing the book and ringing for a new episode or anecdote became a way for Terry to keep in touch with her son, who was going through a difficult time in his life, without mothering him in the way she had done when he was a small boy.

Also, she wanted to write a book that truly mirrored the lives of young people, who are increasingly being demonised and disenfranchised by government policies.



Author Information

Terry Whitebeach is a Tasmanian writer, presently living in Central Australia. *Bantam* is her second novel for young adults. The first was *Watersky* (1997), also published by Fremantle Press.

Michael Brown is Terry's son and he has spent a lot of his life in small county towns. His letters and phone calls home were the inspiration for this book.

Educational Adaptability

In both style and content *Bantam* is written for students who find reading a chore or who find the subject matter of most 'literary' fiction not to their taste.

The book could be used most successfully in senior high school classes, and with students whose lives are not necessarily comfortably middle-class, but who need to find mirrored in literature their own experience and some discussion of values and issues that are important to them.

The book deals with many issues that affect young adolescent boys in a very real and believable way and could serve as a starting point for discussion about a number of topics, including the significance of humour as a survival tool.

Topics and issues for classroom discussion

Insider / Outsider:

- Prejudice against Aborigines, foreigners, homosexuals or anybody perceived to be different from the norm.
- How do you become an outsider?
- Why are some people excluded, others accepted?
- What happens to outsiders?
- What do you have to do to be an insider?

Depression / Suicide:

- Young men in rural areas of Australia are amongst the highest risk groups for suicide in the world.
- Why is this?
- What leads a person to consider such a course of action?
- What role do friends/family play in this problem?

Community:

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of living in a small, isolated community?
- What are the effects of unemployment, alcohol abuse, domestic and community violence and loneliness on young people and how could things be improved?

Values:

- Mateship – just how important is it?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of mateship?

Politics:

The macro and the micro:

- How do politics and government policies directly affect the lives of individuals in small country towns like Bantam?
- Mick and his sister have different attitudes to politics. Which attitude is the more effective and which is the best way to change government decisions or policies?
- What sort of things could governments do to make the lives of people in towns like Bantam better?