

Boy on a Wire

Jon Doust

PUBLICATION DATE: APRIL 2009

ISBN: 9 781921 361456

English Learning Outcomes

- Understanding Language
- Attitudes and Beliefs
- Conventions
- Processes and Strategies
- Listening
- Speaking
- Viewing
- Reading
- Writing

Synopsis

Jack Muir leaves his south-west country town to continue the family tradition of going away to a private boys' boarding school in Perth. There his sense of natural justice is tried time and again, in an environment of bullying and belittling — from masters, prefects and all those higher up in the private school pecking order. This is a story of survival, coming of age, and of staying true to one's beliefs. The story is told in the first person with a punchy, witty vernacular and shrewd observation. The point of view allows the reader insight into Jack's perspective and encourages empathy through identification. The focus is on social relationships and on Jack's struggle to make sense of an often nonsensical and cruel boarding school culture. Jack uses humour as a weapon against his enemies and as a means of connecting with his friends. This is also the story of Jack's relationship with his father, and with his brother Thomas, who might seem to be a model schoolboy, but who has his own vulnerabilities and must develop his own strategies for coping.

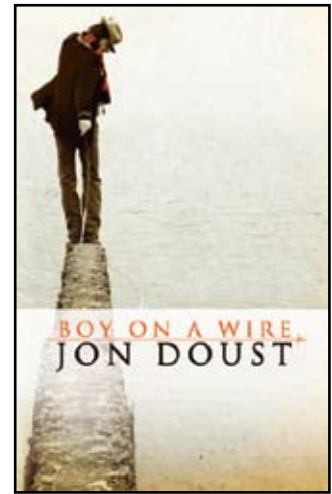
Suggestions for Studying the Text

A BEFORE READING

Take time to examine and talk about:

The book cover:

- What is the young man looking at?
- How are the colours used?
- What does "searingly honest" mean?



The title:

Think about who else balances on a wire: birds, circus artists, high wire performers.

- What are the physical properties of wire?
- What is the possible metaphorical relevance of wire? Remember, a title often gives a clue about important themes in a text.

Later, read p 39 for consideration of themes: Stringer the housemaster delivers a punishment.

The blurb:

The extract from the novel – *If you're weak, unspeakable things happen to you. The bastards won't get me.*

- What does this suggest? What is the anger and conflict about?
- Who wants to survive?
- Will he?
- Why do you think so?

The synopsis:

- Which words strike you? *Funny and raw?* Life must be *wrestled*?
- Make notes about what this suggests to you about the narrative, before sharing your ideas. What do you think might be meant by a 'dislocated memoir'?
- How might your perspective of their book alter if you read it as fiction or non-fiction?

Chapter headings (listed on the contents page):

There are 40 shortish chapters. Scan them for initial impressions.

- What does the language suggest to you?
- Make some comments about the style. Are any words colloquial?
- Do the chapter titles tell you much? Why? How?

Using these clues (see above), make your predictions about the narrative you are about to read.

- What have you found out about where and when the story is set?
- What can you guess about the characters from their names — in the chapter headings and the blurb — and what have you found out about the main character, Jack, from the blurb on the back?
- The structure of the book — it is divided into 40 short chapters. What can you guess these chapters might deal with?
- What kind of complications do you guess there might be?
- How will they be resolved?
- Remember, a good reader asks themselves questions, and makes predictions based on **clues from the text, their own knowledge of the world and their own previous experience of stories.**

- Your predictions should have some connection with what you have discovered from the questions above ...
- Write down your ideas.

Research ideas: understanding context

- Collect information (individually or in groups) on issues relating to bullying. Visit www.bullyingnoway.com.au. Check out your own school's policy on bullying, including physical, verbal, and cyber bullying.
- Find out how private school boarding houses were run in the mid-20th century. You may be able to locate someone who was a boarder. Ask them what it was like. What did they eat? How much homework did they have? Did they get lonely? And, if they are female, what similarities and differences do they describe from Jack's experiences? See if you can read a school report from the 1960s. Compare it with one of yours.
- Make brief notes about the Swabians in Hungary – who were they? See the history of Hungary in the 20th century, especially 1939–1956. *Google* or another search engine is probably your best bet, unless you know some Hungarian people to talk to.
- Fatherhood: Talk to an older father. Ideally you could talk with someone who was a father before the 1960s, but anyone who became a father before 1980 would be interesting to talk with in terms of this book. Find out what he thinks about how boys should be brought up. What is important? What makes a boy grow up to be a man? What would your subject do differently if he became a father now?
- What were some of the social and political issues of the 1960s in Australia e.g. the Vietnam War? (Who was the enemy? Why were Australian soldiers fighting?)

You may choose to revisit some of this research when you have finished reading the book so keep all your notes and source details.

- Present your research findings to the whole class/your small group. You can share your information in a short talk, in conversation, in the form of written notes, or show people what you have found on a website.
- The idea is to extend your understanding of the context in which the book is set, the time period and the issues current at the time. How do they compare to issues of the present?

B DURING READING

Know your characters:

- Make brief notes on each of the main characters. You should look for a description of personality, find an example of what they say, or recount some of their actions. Working with a partner enables you to make more notes. Write down the page numbers you have used to get information about the characters. E.g. Jack, his dad, his mother, his brother, Jonesy, Briggsy, Sack, Tomas Nemet, Mr Duff, Whitehall ...
- Make two lists: one of Jack's friends and one of his enemies.

Know your context

- The book is set in Perth, Rottnest and the south-west of Western Australia. Find out where these locations are. Mark them on a map in your notes.
- Find out some facts about education in the 1950s and 1960s. What are the terms in the novel that show you there are differences in the way the school was run to the way it would be run now? Were there any big differences? Record your findings.
- What references to the politics, recent history, popular culture, sport, literature, and lifestyle of the 1960s can you find in the novel? (Clue: proper names have capital letters.) Note the page numbers. List 10 references. Explain who or what five of them were.
- E.g. Ian Brayshaw was a cricketer who ...
The Nazi party was German political party from the 1920s to 1945, led by Adolf Hitler; the Nazi party had its own army, navy and air force as well as politicians.
Communists ran Soviet Russia and then other parts of Europe after the Second World War.

Consider the style of writing

Take a few pages to examine closely. Where is the punctuation? What does it achieve? Are the sentences formal? Find a few examples of short snappy sentences followed by longer ones. What effect is created? Is the story told in the past or the present tense? Locate some examples.

Viewpoint

How is the first person point of view useful when presenting a main character? What difference would it make if this novel were told in the third person?

Themes

- Discuss the image of the bird on a wire presented on page 39. Have you ever seen a bird on a wire? Where? Explain how you think this image is connected to the title. Is it a good image to find in a novel about identity? Why or why not?
- How can you communicate your sense of injustice to a world whose systems seem to be very tolerant of unfairness and cruelty? What alternatives are open to you?
- Fatherhood: Is Jack's dad a good father? Why? What is your opinion of the last few pages of the book when he:
 1. talks to Jack about what happened to him in the army (page 228)
 2. puts his arm around him (bottom of page 233)

Note: Some students will keep a journal and develop the art of reflection and exploration of ideas in writing. Others, especially some boys, will enjoy the book and have energetic discussions if they can engage in fewer writing activities, so a balance is necessary. Some boys will feel safer to explore ideas relating to identity and sexuality, abuse and suicide in a less public forum, so journaling may suit them better.

C AFTER READING

Remember, if you present an opinion, either in writing or in a discussion, you should go back to the book for evidence to support your ideas.

Debating topics

1. The family is the most important influence on a boy's life.
2. Bullying can be stamped out.
3. Modern schools are better than schools in the 1960s.

Writing topics

Write short answers to these questions. The narrative tracks the years in which Jack Muir grows from a young boy to a young man.

- Does he find growing up easy?
- What makes things easier for him?
- What kind of person might he grow up to be?
- Does he fit into his family?
- Why is it bad to be a crybaby?
- Why is Jack worried about putting his arm around Sack when he knows he is upset?
- What does he do instead?
- How does he feel when his father puts his arm around him at the end of the book?
- What do you think are the main issues Jack really struggles with?
(clue: they occur more than once, in more than one place in the book)

Talk these issues over with a partner or small group.

- Pick one of the issues as a focus, for example, his anger about Russians invading Hungary in 1956, treating Hungarians very badly. Explain Jack's attitudes. Why does he care? What world issue do **you** care about? How do they make you feel? What do you want to do? What do you think other people should do? Who should fix it? (Eg. climate change, war in Iraq, poverty, oppression of minorities/women.)
- Pick another idea that Jack wrestles with privately. **Write** five or more questions that you would like to ask Jack if you met him, to find out more about his reasons for his thoughts, feelings or actions.

Role play activity

Role play an interview with one of the characters such as Mr Muir, Jack, Jonesy or Briggsy. For example: Mr Muir, do you favour Thomas over Jack?

The interviewee should try to demonstrate his knowledge of the character in as much detail as possible.

Other activities

- Describe your own best friend or a favourite teacher.
- Many themes are explored. Some are: love and friendship, bullying and violence, politics/war, religion and God, families, hypocrisy, ignorance. Choose one or two themes and identify at least two key passages where these themes are raised. Explain Jack's point of view. Explain if you agree with his attitude or not and why.
- Write a story about bullying. (You will need characters, plot, & setting.)

Discussion topics:

Provide the students with the questions in advance, so that they can prepare, individually or in pairs, for a class discussion. They could be directed to research using the website bullyingnoway.com.au with related links

- Why do people bully others? Explain your reasons.
- How does Jack survive boarding school life? Give reasons. Use examples from the book.
- Do you know anyone like him? Describe what Jack and your friend have in common.
- Is humour important to you? Why? What kind of humour do you find funniest?
- Record the class opinions on a whiteboard or butcher's paper.