

TEACHING NOTES

Return Ticket by Warren Flynn

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Synopsis

As their train hurtles through a tunnel in the Victorian goldfields, Shannon, Zak and Sam are transported back one hundred years from their school history excursion to 1899. They discover that the next train back won't be for another two weeks and stumble upon a farmhouse where they meet Beth, the daughter of the house, whose life of caring for the family without the conveniences of modern existence is in sharp contrast to theirs. They pose as travellers from far north Queensland and Shannon stays at the farm, exchanging her jeans for a waist-hugging long dress, while the two boys go off separately to find work.

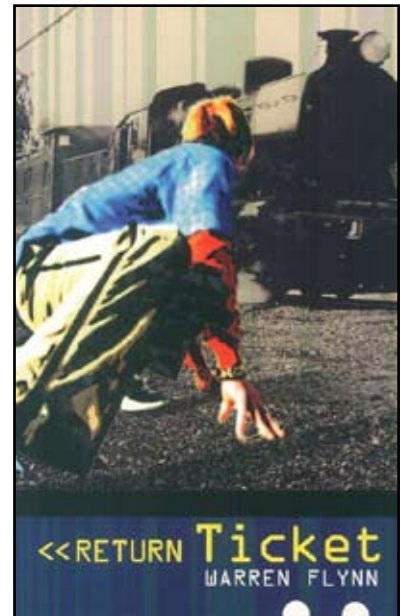
They soon discover there is a delay on the tracks and a further month before they can attempt to return. Part worried and homesick and part excited, they know they shouldn't do anything that might affect the future, but Sam is drawn into the Chinese community in Bendigo and finds himself fighting against racist attacks, while Zak tries his luck at gold-mining and saves a life before getting involved with the local Aboriginal people.

On a trip to Bendigo with Beth, Shannon discovers a surprising ancestor, and at a Federation rally, she and Sam antagonise a couple of hoods. Later, Shannon has to deal with their dangerous threats, whilst Sam and Beth's relationship is rapidly developing into a serious romance. The reader realises that all three of the time travellers have grown up very quickly, largely due to a society which treats them as adult working members.

Finally the day comes to make the attempt at the time tunnel. Things do not go according to plan. There are kidnappings and shootings, and in one version, all three of them make it to the train, Zak with the aid of a hang-glider, while in another, only two make it — and is that an eagle circling in the distance? Even when the train emerges from the tunnel ... things are definitely not what they expected.

About the Author

When he's not writing, Warren Flynn enjoys mountain bike riding, sailing and splashing about in the ocean. Perhaps best known for his fun adventures of *Gaz* and the gripping suspense thriller, *Escaping Paradise*, each of Flynn's novels have been short-listed in the West Australian Young Readers' Book Award. *Different Voices* was also short-listed for the Western Australian Premier's Prize. Flynn loves to travel and is fascinated by the many languages and cultures of Australia. He has provided professional development for educators in



Vietnam, China and various parts of Australia. A former Asialink literature resident in Seoul, South Korea, he currently teaches at The University of Western Australia, Albany.

Study notes

HISTORY

- Much of the book is set one hundred years ago. Discuss the differences in lifestyle between then and now. Was life better in the nineteenth century?
- Does knowing about our past help us to understand the present?
- Do you think understanding the past will help us make wise decisions about our future?
- Research the clothes of the period. Draw (or download) some illustrations and give a short prepared talk about how suited the clothes were for the climatic conditions, occupations and lifestyles of earlier Australians. Then examine some modern fashions and 'test' them against the same criteria.
- Make a model of the Cobb & Co coach, the train, or Beth's farm house or one of the other buildings mentioned in the book. Display your models in the library.

GENDER ROLES

- Shannon finds it hard to adjust to the gendered role of her life in the nineteenth century. Research some of the things which she felt restricted her and write about the extent to which your life choices are free of gendered expectations.
- Do Sam and Zak suffer from the same sort of gender restrictions as Shannon? Was life easier for men in the nineteenth century? How have things changed for men and women?
- Debate this question: does greater choice lead to greater contentment?

RACISM

- Sam gets into a fight defending the rights of a Chinese person. Have our attitudes to different races and cultures changed much in one hundred years? What events may have caused us to be more tolerant of each other's cultures? What is the media's role in this?
- Discuss some of the ways that people of different ethnicities have influenced your local community, or the broader community.
- Zak makes contact with members of a local Aboriginal tribe. What are the attitudes of the white settlers to Indigenous people? What makes them feel that way? What things have helped white Australians to understand Indigenous peoples and cultures better?
- Ask someone in your school or in your community to come in and teach your class about the local Indigenous language(s). Learn a little about how the language is structured, names of some local fauna and flora, and a greeting or two.

CHOICE

- The book has two different endings. Why do you think the author chose to end the book that way?
- Do you think the two endings that the author has written are appropriate, or could you write another ending that would better suit the book or your own ideas of the future?
- Draw a picture of your community fifty years into the future, and explain to your group why you made various choices about what to include/exclude.

SOCIETY AND ENVIRONMENT

Some politicians like to throw around the term “un-Australian”. What do you think this term might mean? If it’s the antonym for “Australian”, then it should be possible to come up with a profile of a “typical Australian”. Or is it?

In small groups, make a list of six things which you think are essential for a person to be “Australian”. Test the ideas which each group has, by considering how they might suit a diverse range of Australians, e.g.: an old-aged pensioner living in Darwin; a teenage Afghani former refugee; a fourth generation Australian with Chinese ancestry living in Bendigo; a primary school student in Fitzroy Crossing.

OR

Test these myths:

1. AFL is Australia’s most popular leisure activity.
2. Australians are healthy and love the outdoors.
3. Australians speak English.
4. The FX Holden was the first “real Australian” car.
5. Australia is an egalitarian society.

ENGLISH

Check out Beth’s diary entries and compare them with Shannon’s (pp. 77-78, 115-118).

What are some differences in how the two writers have expressed themselves?

- Choose any other two characters from *Return Ticket* and write two diary entries for each person. Try to use the language you think the person would have used.
- Draw up a feature film storyboard *or* create a comic strip for one chapter or scene from *Return Ticket*, e.g. the fight between Sam and Packer, pp. 127-133.

SCIENCE

Zak has to use his own ingenuity to work out how to make a hang-glider with materials that were available in 1899. Think of another object from today that you could build, using materials that were available in 1899. Using a series of well-labelled diagrams, show how you would go about building it. (Maybe you could even make a model version?)

Answers to some of the myths:

1. In 2002, 3.6 million [25%] Australians visited an art gallery, whereas only 17% attended an AFL game. Sure, others watched televised games, but nevertheless, interest in art is definitely as big as the interest in footy. And more kids play soccer than footy!

2. 74% of Australians over 18 years of age travel to work or uni by car. 1.2% use a bicycle for the same trip. 3. Mostly that’s true, but there are 353,000 Australians whose first language is Italian; 264,000 who speak Greek; 174,000 Vietnamese speakers, and so on. Some people say that outside of Athens, Melbourne has the largest Greek-speaking population of any city in the world! Did you also know that many remote area Indigenous Australians can speak 3 or 4 languages fluently, but English isn’t one of them. Does that make them “less Australian”?

INTERVIEW with author *Warren Flynn*

Leone: *This is quite a different book to your others, Warren. What made you interested in writing about the past?*

Warren: I'm not sure really. I remember thinking one day that most of us Australians know so little about our own country. Like I'm still surprised at how many people are shocked when I tell them Perth's nearest big city is Denpasar. West Australians live closer to Jakarta than they do to Sydney. Some of our so-called leaders would like us to believe Washington DC is closer! I guess I went from thinking about who we are by exploring the landscapes and street scenes of our modern world in *Escaping Paradise*, to this book thinking about who we used to be - where we've come from.

Leone: *Did you have to study much history to write this book?*

Warren: Well, I didn't think of it as study. But yeah, I spent heaps of time in libraries reading biographies and history books and looking at hundreds of photographs. It was great fun! I just became so absorbed by some of those old stories and some of the faces. Like the photos of some of the Dja Dja Warrung people in their cultural centre in Bendigo. And reading some of the great Wadjella (whitefella) stories too.

Leone: *Was it harder writing this book than say... the *Gaz* books or *Escaping Paradise*?*

Warren: It was different. Before I wrote *Escaping Paradise*, I took a degree in Indonesian, so I was sort of researching the book a long time before I thought of writing it. But *Return Ticket* certainly took longer to write than *Gaz* - because even after the pre-reading I did, I'd write a simple sentence like, 'Shannon picked up her pencil...' and think ... Um, I wonder if they had invented pencils by then? So then I'd race back into the encyclopaedias to check that - yes, pencils had been invented! My respect for some of Australia's great historical novels ... ones like Ruth Park's *Playing Beatie Bow*, increased with each page I wrote.

Leone: *So as a teenager yourself, did you enjoy many historical novels?*

Warren: As a teenager, I read almost nothing! The closest I came to historical books were war comics. Battle of Britain - that kind of stuff. Serious violence and not a girl in sight! (laughs) That's why I wanted to make this book good fun. A great adventure. Some of the historical stories written for kids lately seem so yawningly sedate. Even though this is set a hundred years ago, I wanted it to bounce along and surprise readers.

Leone: *It is great fun, yet you spent a lot of time getting the background right -*

Warren: Yeah. Shannon, Sam and Zak find themselves in some unusual situations, but the real past - I mean pre-Federation Victoria - was a fascinating period to be living in. Dangerous and dynamic. I guess I tried to do for younger readers what Peter Carey does for older dudes. Not that I'm claiming it's 100% factual - of course not. I did create a town, Loddon, but I didn't need to invent things that could happen. It was all there already. Like King Jimmy's first word - if you know a little about the Dja Dja Warrung, there was no doubt about what his first word had to be.

Leone: *Hmm... I'll have to check it. You mentioned dangers before. What kinds of dangers? Do you mean violence ... diseases?*

Warren: Sure, there were health problems, but no, I was thinking about other kinds of risks. Even crazy accidents - I mean if you just take a stroll through the cemeteries and read the headstones, you quickly get a feel of what it was like back then. So many people drowned, guys got run down by horses, women died in childbirth. And if you were Chinese or an Aborigine, you had to be watching your back all the time. It was tough for everybody, but life was seriously risky for them.

Leone: *That part of the story set in the mine - when Zak and David are in the water - it seemed to have been written from personal experience. Have you ever been in that kind of situation?*

Warren: Yeah, I nearly drowned once. But that was in some huge surf, not in a mine. (laughs) But I did go into a gold mine in Kalgoorlie once - and when the miner turned out his light, it was BLACK! Like, you think you know what absence of light is, but when you're a hundred metres below the surface and it's suddenly pitch black, you get a fresh insight on what it means to be 'in the dark!' It was very scary!

Leone: *You used the word 'dynamic' earlier, but Beth's life, the young woman of the 1890s, her life doesn't seem to change much. At least not until Sam and Shannon come along.*

Warren: I don't know if she would have seen it that way. And of course, people really didn't know what was around the corner. Changes might have happened more slowly than they do today, but they still happened. In Beth's lifetime, she would have seen cars replace horses, and the birth not only of powered flight, but the start of international air travel! Not to mention how, like all of us, her whole world whirls on a new axis when she falls in love! Love has always sent the stars spinning.

Leone: *Tell us about the ending. What made you decide to write two endings?*

Warren: Actually I wanted to write about half a dozen endings, but that might've made the whole thing a bit long! And maybe a bit confusing. I don't know what the future will bring. But having choices means we sometimes make the wrong move, take the wrong path. I remember back in the 1990s turning on the TV and it happened to be our then PM, Paul Keating, giving his Redfern Speech - you'll find it on the web - and I thought, 'This is great! This is wonderful! Australia has finally admitted its past. From now on, we'll just keep getting better.' But we didn't. People turned their backs on what Keating said, and many Australians returned to the old lies. When I was in Korea in 2001, the Tampa refugees were vehemently rejected and I felt sick in the guts. I'm pinning my hopes on today's young people, because I think they know more about our history and more about the region we live in than any generation of Australians in the last two hundred years.

Leone: *Is that the message of this book?*

Warren: I hope people will enjoy the story. If they think about our past and where we're headed, that's a bonus.

Leone: *So it's a fun read with something to say.*

Warren: And a hopeful read ... depending on which ending you prefer. I heard someone on AWAYE the other day, saying, 'If we forget our past or we don't know it, it's like we're somebody with no memory - we don't know who we are and we've got no sense of direction.' I think he's right. Knowing where we came from is a good way to take our bearings. A good start to following the best track into the future.

Leone: *Oh I nearly forgot - the Chinese on the back cover - what does it mean?*

Warren: It's a compliment, and a good excuse for readers to start up a conversation with someone who can read Mandarin!

Leone: *Great! Thanks Warren.*