

Teachers Notes
by Dr Wendy Michaels

Lonesome Howl
Steven Herrick

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Recommended for ages 12-14+

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Introduction 2
 The author and his work 2
 Young adult verse novels in Australia 2
 The YA verse novel genre 2
Classroom activities..... 3
 Before reading the book 3
 While reading the book 4
About the writer10



INTRODUCTION

THE AUTHOR AND HIS WORK

Steven Herrick was born in Brisbane, the youngest of seven children. At school, his favourite subject was soccer, and he dreamed of football glory while he worked at various jobs, including fruit picking. Now, he's a full time writer and performs in many schools each year. He loves talking to students and their teachers about stories, poetry, soccer and even golf.

Steven Herrick is a poet whose body of work includes poetry collections for young people and adults such as *Water Bombs*, *Love Poems and Leg Spinner*, *The Sound of Chopping* and *My Love, My Life, My Lasagne*. He has also performed his poetry in pubs and public venues in Australia and overseas.

Steven Herrick is renowned for his verse novels for young readers and young adult readers including *A place like this* (1998), *The spangled drongo* (1999), *The simple gift* (2000), *Tom Jones saves the world* (2002), *Do-wrong Ron* (2003) and *By the river* (2004). Several of his verse novels have won awards throughout Australia and have been released in the US and other countries. His works have been short-listed for Children's Book Council Awards on a number of occasions, and have won various awards including the NSW Premier's Literary Awards. The young adult verse novel, *The simple gift*, has been listed in NSW on the HSC English text list – one of very few works by Australian poets to be listed in 2004-2005

YOUNG ADULT VERSE NOVELS IN AUSTRALIA

Steven Herrick's first verse novel was *Love, ghosts & nose hair* (1996). The publication of this book marks something of a watershed in narratives for young people as it re-introduced narratives told through verse. While narrative verse is as old as storytelling itself, Herrick's work has taken narrative verse in new directions. Herrick says that he writes in verse "because I can't write prose".

Other renowned Australian writers, such as Margaret Wild, Libby Hathorn and Catherine Bateson have also turned their hand to verse novels for young adults and younger readers and this has allowed them to tell some different kinds of stories in a compact format. The developing genre of the YA verse novel has become a significant story-telling genre in Australia – even though it causes some librarians some degree of angst in determining where such books should be shelved in libraries – with the poetry or with the novels.

THE YA VERSE NOVEL GENRE

The young adult (YA) verse novel genre is now well established in Australia and the USA. The novels commonly allow the poet to tell a story from more than one perspective. In Herrick's first collection

of poems *Water Bombs* (1992), we find the essential features of the verse novel in the series of vignettes from the perspectives of the two main characters Joe and Debbie – adolescents who grow up in the same neighbourhood, go the same school, become friends, fall out, get back together “in Year 11” and eventually marry and have a son – “Joe Junior”. There is a loose narrative thread that binds these vignettes of juxtaposed poems in the individual voices of the characters into a connected story. Herrick’s subsequent verse novels build on these essential features and extend and expand them to explore more complex issues and relationships.

The hybrid form of the verse novel draws upon not only narrative poetry, but also lyric and dramatic poetry forms. The individual poems spoken in the voice of different characters are similar to the soliloquy in a play in which a character directly addresses the audience. The juxtaposition of these monologues allows the reader to hear the different characters’ perspectives on the events. In some ways the contemporary Australian verse novel has much in common with ancient Greek drama.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES:

BEFORE READING THE BOOK

Ask students whether they are familiar with other works by Steven Herrick or other Australian verse novels. Encourage them to discuss their responses to other verse novels that they have read.

Students could research the range of verse novels written by Steven Herrick and other Australian writers and compare these with American verse novels by writers such as Sonya Sones or Karen Hesse.

Before beginning the verse novel, *Lonesome Howl*, have students read the “Dedication” that prefaces the book. Encourage students to talk about why authors dedicate their work to particular people and why Herrick might have used this dedication for this particular work. Encourage students to speculate as to how it might relate to the themes of the novel.

Have students consider the title and cover of the book. Encourage them to discuss what the image suggests about the setting and themes of the novel. Focus particularly on the image of the wolf superimposed on the image of the forest. What does the image suggest about the wolf? Encourage them to talk about the kinds of wild animals that inhabit the Australian landscape. Have them consider the connotations of the adjective, “lonesome”. What ideas are suggested by this word? Have students speculate as to what ideas the novel might explore.

Tell students they are going to read a story told primarily in the voices of the two main protagonists – Lucy and Jake. Tell them that these two adolescent characters live in very different family

situations in two neighbouring country properties at Wollie Creek near Sheldon Mountain – a place that Lucy refers to as “the arse-end of the earth”. The story is essentially a Romeo and Juliet appropriation. Ask students about their experience of this story in other appropriations in other forms. You might need to talk about the practice of appropriation and adaptation and the way that writers use existing story structures to explore issues and values in new contexts. Encourage them to talk about the issues that the iconic story of Romeo and Juliet raises about love, parents, family feuds and so on. Remind them to keep these ideas in their minds as they read and respond to this verse novel.

The story involves not only the events that bring the two adolescents together but also the past histories of the two families who have struggled to maintain these small farms. Have students recall other stories they have read or viewed that are set in country Australia and the kind of lifestyle associated with living on the land.

Tell students that this novel is written in verse and divided into ten parts and they are going to read each part and undertake activities in response to each part.

WHILE READING THE BOOK

“One: Lucy”

Have students read part one which introduces Lucy and her family situation and talk about the kind of family situation that Herrick depicts for Lucy. Point out that we only see this situation through Lucy’s eyes and this invites us to empathise and sympathise with her experiences and feelings about her family.

Encourage them to explore the kind of relationship that Lucy had with her grandmother. Herrick presents the grandmother as a kind of wise old woman who has planted seeds of resilience in Lucy. Ask students to consider what Winnie might have meant by her comment that “some people die/long before they’re in the ground”.

Encourage students to discuss:

- why they think the mother is so passive in this situation – why she says: “I don’t want to fight”;
- why the father is so hostile;
- why the mother counsels Lucy to “keep out of his way”.

Have students take on the role of either the father or mother and create a monologue in either prose or verse that explores his/her feelings in this situation. Remind students that we have really

only been privy to Lucy's feelings so they will have to imagine how the father or mother feels about the situation. Allow time for sharing of the monologues and discussion of these two characters.

"Two: Jake"

In this section we meet Jake and his family. Encourage students to discuss the ways in which Jake's family differs from Lucy's family.

Focus on the two poems "The wolf story" (p. 26) and "The wolf at Wolli Creek" (pp. 27-28). Have students discuss the effects of the wolf's presence on the father and the effects of the father's story of the wolf on Jake. Have students debate the questions:

- "Is this wolf real?"
- "If the wolf is not real, what is the best explanation for the father's experience?"

Invite students to share any "stories" that are part of the mythology of their own families. Encourage them to consider the part that such stories play in connecting members of the family across generations. Does it matter if the stories are not totally "true"?

Have students use the "The wolf at Wolli Creek" as a model to write a poem about one of the "stories" or "myths" from their own family memories. Or have them construct a fictional story along the same lines. Allow time for students to rework their stories and then hold a Poetry Reading.

"Three: Holidays"

In "Holidays" we see the end of school and the beginning of the holidays with the two characters interacting in their family situations. The contrast between the two fathers is highlighted in their approaches to killing animals. Point out to students that Peter has absorbed his father's attitudes and this further accentuates the differences between the two men.

Have students compare the depiction of the two fathers in the Jake poems: "Chasing ghosts" (pp. 51-52), "Spotlighting" (pp. 53-54), and "Midnight" (pp. 55-57), and the Lucy poems: "Dinner" (pp. 48-49) and "Christmas" (pp. 58-59).

Ask students to consider how they would deal with a situation such as Lucy's family situation. Perhaps they could compare Lucy's family situation with various depictions of Juliet Capulet's family situation.

"Four: Lonesome howl"

In this section of the story the motif of the wolf is highlighted. You might need to explain that the literary idea of a motif (like its musical or artistic usage) involves a recurring theme that is developed throughout a narrative. Ask students if they can think of other examples of motifs that

writers, musicians or artists have used in their works and how this highlights key ideas of the work. Ask students to keep in mind the way in which the references to the wolf build up the development of this idea.

Before students read this section encourage them to speculate as to what might happen in the next stage of the story. Encourage them to think about what might bring these two characters together. Have students read this section of the story. Point out that there are two poems in this section that feature Peter's voice (pp. 70 and 79). These poems do not have titles as those of Lucy and Jake do. Students might consider why the poet has made this choice and what the effect of this is when they read Peter's poems.

Have students re-read these poems and talk about their impressions of Lucy's brother. Working in pairs, students can stake on the role of Lucy and Peter. Have students improvise a scene in which the two "characters" talk about their father and his attempt to shoot the wild dog. Allow time for discussion of their improvisations.

Have students re-read the Lucy poem "bad luck" (pp. 71-72). Ask students to imagine that they are Lucy's mother. Have them write a poem in her voice explaining why she keeps on "mopping the floor". Allow time for sharing their poems and discussing their views of Lucy's mother.

Have students re-read the poem "Where the wolf lives?" (pp. 82-84). Why do they think this title has a question mark? Encourage them to speculate as to what will happen next in the story. Why do they think this?

"Five: The deep silence"

Jake and Lucy set off on the quest for the wolf. You could point out that the quest story is an ancient story form. Students could research early Greek myths such as Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece, or the Holy Grail version of the quest story, or other versions throughout the history of story-telling or English literature. Some students might wish to explore iconic questers such as Bilbo Baggins in *The Hobbit* or Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars*. Perhaps you could introduce some of the quest schema that Christopher Vogler developed from Joseph Campbell's notion of the hero's journey [Vogler, C. *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, Michael Wiese Productions, 1998]. Students could then identify those elements that match Steven Herrick's portrayal of his hero's and heroine's quest.

Have students talk about the different motivations that send Lucy and Jake on this quest. Encourage them to speculate as to what will happen to the characters. You might remind them that quest stories traditionally involve the quester(s) is some kind of transformation as a result of the

challenges of the journey. What kind of transformation could these two characters undergo as a result of their journey?

Ask students to consider why they think Lucy doesn't want to turn back as the weather closes in on them. Is this a sensible decision? What might happen as a result of this decision?

"Six: The mist" and "Seven: The cave"

In these two sections Jake has the fall that immobilizes him and cements his relationship with Lucy. Lucy refers to her favourite fantasy novel, *The Lady of the Lake*. This is a reference to the traditional Arthurian legend of the Lady of the Lake, the foster-mother of Sir Lancelot who raised him beneath the murky waters of her lake. It was the Lady of the Lake who presented King Arthur with his powerful magic sword, Excalibur. Have students research this legend. Why do they think this might be Lucy's favourite story? What aspects of the story might she identify with? Encourage them to discuss how the ideas of the legend relate to the events of *Lonesome Howl*.

Have students re-read the poem "Stupid" (p. 120). Encourage them to discuss Lucy's remorse at this stage. Who do they think she is referring to in the lines: "The only animal I knew/was the one I wanted to escape from."?

Have students re-read "A few hundred metres" (p. 124) and work in pairs, imagining they are Jake's parents. Have them improvise a scene in the kitchen as the darkness sets in and Jake does not return. Allow time for discussion of their improvisations.

Have students imagine they are Jake's father and write a poem that begins with the lines that explore his thoughts and feelings as he begins to realize that Jake is missing:

I sit in the kitchen of our farmhouse
Drumming my fingers on the table.

Allow time for students to share their poems and discuss their perceptions of the father. Encourage them to think about how Lucy's father might be reacting to her absence.

The cave is significant in terms of the plot – it provides shelter for the two lost characters. But it also has a deeper significance for both of them. It is a place of a kind of spiritual rebirth as the characters delve into their memories and tell each other about their innermost feelings – a situation that leads to the kiss. Have students re-read the two recollections of the plague (pp. 135-138) and make drawings of the two recollections of this event and the different responses of the two fathers.

Have students examine Peter's response to Lucy's disappearance. Have them write a monologue to show what Lucy's father might be thinking as he stands "staring at the hills". Allow time for sharing

and discussion of their impressions of her father. Compare this monologue with the earlier one in the voice of Jake's father.

"Eight: This is what happens"

In this section of the story the relationship between the two characters moves beyond the kiss that ended the last section. As they both deal with the reality of their situation Lucy recalls her grandmother's wisdom. Have students read this section and focus on the poem "one smart old lady" (pp. 158-159). This provides some of the backstory that helps us to understand the attitudes of Lucy's father. Ask students to consider whether this information changes their impression of the father.

Have students re-read the next two poems (pp. 160-162) in which Lucy undergoes a kind of catharsis and Jake comforts her. Encourage students to discuss their responses to Lucy's confession and Jake's response. Ask them to imagine how they might have responded in this situation. Have them write their response beginning with the line: "If I were Lucy I would". Allow time for discussion of their responses.

"Nine: Morning"

In this section although we do hear a little from Peter (p. 188) and from Jake (pp. 194-195), it is Lucy's voice that dominates the telling of the story partly because she is the one returning to the farm for help, but importantly because her transformation is completed in this section. Have students read through this section and note the understandings that Lucy develops. Have students take note of the ways in which Lucy refers to herself and her father in imagery associated with the wolf.

Re-read the section where Lucy encounters the wild animal (pp. 173-177). Encourage students to discuss the significance of this moment for Lucy. Ask them to imagine that a film version of this book is to be made and they have been given the task of developing a storyboard for this section. They should consider how to build up the climax moment frame by frame. What music would they include to help build the tension? Allow time for the development of the storyboards and discussion of their impressions of this climactic moment.

In the process of her journey Lucy draws strength from her memories of her grandmother. Have students re-read this section (pp. 178-179). Have them use the grandmother's saying: "Time only goes one way" as the basis of a piece of writing in any form. Allow time for development of the writing and for sharing and discussion of the completed pieces.

One of the most important realizations that Lucy comes to on the journey home relates to her father – “he’s got nothing to hold onto”. Have students reread this section (p. 183) and discuss Lucy’s viewpoint. Encourage them to think about whether they agree with what Lucy says about her father. Challenge them to consider how important it is to have something – anything – to “hold onto”. Ask them to think about situations where having something to hold onto might provide the impetus for survival.

Have students re-read the sections that deal with Lucy’s return (pp. 197-200). Not only has Lucy changed but so also has her mother. This is the first time we hear the mother’s voice, other than as warnings to Lucy not to upset her father, as she says “sorry” over and over. Have students retell this episode from the mother’s perspective, writing in the verse style that Herrick uses.

“Ten: Home”

This part of the story acts as a kind of coda. The issues and ideas are tied up in the narrative closure. Have students read this section of the story and encourage them to discuss their responses.

A common theme in Herrick’s work concerns our memories and the connections we make with our past. Encourage students to talk about the memories that they have of their grandparents. Ask them to talk about these memories and how the process of remembering affects them. Ask them to consider what might trigger a memory of the grandmother – eg. a piece of music, an item of clothing, an object or a smell. Point out that some objects are used in rituals associated with remembering. For instance, students might think about the ways in which candles are used in some religions – eg. lighting a candle to pray for someone, carols sung by candlelight and so on.

Have students re-read the Lucy poems: “Grandma’s candle” (p. 208) and “this house” (pp. 210-211). The trigger for Lucy’s memories is the “long white candle” and its “vanilla smoke”. Have students examine how Herrick establishes the memories and connections that Lucy makes with her grandmother, grandfather and Jake through the motif of the candle. You might also point out how this connection allows her to disconnect from her father (“Not me, Grandma.”) and to make a decision not to argue with Peter (“these walls,/they’ve heard enough arguing”). Have students use this poem as a model for writing their own poem using a motif to establish memories and connections with their past.

Have students read Herrick’s award-winning verse novel, *By the River* [Allen & Unwin, 2004]. This novel also deals with the idea of past memories. Have students compare and contrast the ways in which Herrick explores this idea in the two novels.

Have them work in pairs and imagine that one is the author and the other the editor of this book. The editor has some questions about the way in which this last section works. They engage in a discussion of the verse novel and whether all the ideas and issues are tightly tied up in this ending. They consider any other possible endings, or a different ordering of the poems in this section. Allow time for each pair to engage in in-depth discussion and time to share their responses with the rest of the class.

ABOUT THE WRITER

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Dr Wendy Michaels is a former lecturer in the School of Humanities at the University of Newcastle on the Ourimbah Campus. She taught courses in Children's Literature, Creative Writing, Gender Studies and Education. Her research interests are in emerging genres in young adult fiction, representations of gender in children's literature, interanimation of word and image in picture books and writing for performance. Dr Michaels was also an English teacher and English Inspector at the NSW Board of Studies. She has published a number of books for students and teachers and has written teachers notes for Allen & Unwin on *Jinx*, *A Step from Heaven*, *Parvana*, *And what about Anna*, *Njunjul the Sun*, *Pankration*, *Wolf on the Fold*, *Guitar Highway Rose*, *By the River*, *The Glory Garage* and *Australia Locked Up*. Her own published writing for children includes the genres of poetry, drama script, prose fiction and the picture book, *Secret Smiles*.