

Another outstanding verse novel by Steven Herrick.

Set in the country in the 1950s and 60s, Harry, the narrator, is a sensitive boy. Harry's mother dies and leaves his father trying to work out what went wrong and how to keep living. But then Harry's friend Linda also dies and a part of Harry dies with her.

Years later, Harry discovers love but finds it difficult to deal with unrequited love. But as Harry grows, so does his understanding of life and love.

A wonderful example of Australian identity! A must have for any secondary library and worthy of consideration as a class set.

Classroom uses:

- Have students write in the verse style mode.
- Debate what "Australian Identity" is and how it is to be found in *By the river*.
- Investigate how Australian identity has changed since the 1950s. What influences such change?

**Judith Way, Mill Park Secondary College, VIC**

My initial reaction of disappointment as I realise the book was written in verse very quickly turned to delight as I read this wonderful book about the life of a boy growing up in a small country town in Queensland in the 1960s.

The story centres on Harry (named after Harry Houdini) Hodby and his relationships with those around him. Primarily it is about his close and inspiring relationship with his father and brother. It also explores his relationships (some better than others) with the town's folk. The sections dealing with his relationships with those women who have been taken away from him are sensitively examined and their presence is felt throughout the novel.

The verse is slow and lyrical. It supports the feeling of timelessness of the novel and the slow pace of the events throughout. It was a quick read for me, partly because the structure means there are fewer words in this story but also because I could not put it down. I read it in one sitting; I enjoyed it so much.

The story deals with themes of prejudice, love and acceptance. The townspeople gossip and judge those around them. The Hodby boys are looked down on because, from the outside, their house looks ramshackle (their father made them paint the outside with sump oil to save having to constantly paint the house) yet on the inside it is one of the cleanest houses in town. The son of the shopkeeper kills small animals and yet the town think he is a 'good' boy because of his family's wealth.

Harry's relationship with his parents is special. He respects and looks up to his father and although his mother died when he was 7, she is still a very real presence in the household. "My dad listens/ all night/ in his old lounge chair/ with a cup of tea./ He stares into space/ and remembers her voice,/ and the smell of her hair,/ and her long hands/ pressing the folds of her dress./ And if you ask him/ to move on,/ he'd look at you/ with those clear beautiful eyes/ and he'd smile/ and touch your arm/ and say, 'To where?'"

Students throughout the high school years could read this novel. I think I would most enjoy teaching the story to students in years 9 – 10 as a number of sophisticated interpretations could be made of this book. The different structure is a start. The prologue poem on the colours of Harry's town could be a stand-alone piece of work on poetry. Then ideas of love and loss come through; and what makes a family? A Y chart on what does a family look like, sound like and feel like is a simple entry point into the nature of families and where Harry's family fits in with the 'norm'. Issues such as the complex nature of friendship and community dynamics can also be studied. There are so many options with this book.

I really liked "By the River". It appears to be simple and short yet it is quite a complex story. It has left me with many images and ideas that I will remember for a long time.

**Michelle Morthorpe, Stromlo High School, ACT**

A sense of melancholy lingers throughout Steven Herrick's 'by the river', provoking audience empathy. The reflective tone floats us along the river which is a metaphoric journey of life experienced by a family of two sons and their father. The father is a foundry worker of twenty years by day and a companion to his sons after work eating watermelon, "spitting the pips to the chickens." Grief is an issue which the family struggles to overcome. The father lovingly holds onto the memories of his lost wife while Harry, at 14, is stunned to learn of the mysterious drowning of a girl around his age. Thirteen years after the tragedy, the memories continue. Herrick creates a beautifully crafted story of rural life in a small town taking us back to the 1950s/60s in rural Queensland. This was a time when boys fished in the river, climbed trees, made billy carts and explored their river environment. It was "A place where people leave the town in an ambulance, or worse."

To Harry and Keith, their father was a hero, but the family was not held in such high esteem by the community. "You'll see it/or smell it/they liked to spit" refers to the family's weathered timber cottage which was smeared with sump oil. Every Sunday, the family would visit Oakwood Cemetery and the boys would place daisies at their mother's grave. Without a mother the community feels that "a man cannot bring up children alone", but Herrick's narrative point of view suggests otherwise. "Go and get stuffed" voices Herrick through Harry. Aunt Alice lends a hand, instructing the boys to wash themselves, cutting their hair using a dessert bowl for shape and spoiling them with lamingtons once a week. The father nurses his boys' wounds, both physical and psychological and causes some of his own while defending them.

" his knuckles are bloodstained swollen" from" the drunk's words flung around the pub about us no-good boys."

Herrick's story, written in his unique free verse text style, is about youth finding their place in their family, community and the world. The reflective tone engages the readers, prompting them to reminisce on their past to discover their present place in society. The book would be greatly appreciated and enjoyed by Yrs 10,11,12 students, particularly boys who would identify with the feelings of the male narrator towards family, romance and moving into adulthood. Issues to explore also include grief, single parent families, rural life, harassment, assertiveness, forgiveness and tolerance. 'By the river' would be a fitting text to connect with Steven Herrick's 'The Simple Gift' providing similarities and contrasts with the male narrators' perspective of life.

**Josie Illman, Yorketown Area School, SA**

A delightful book, and a great one for boys! This is written in the first person by a young lad, using the kind of vernacular we would expect from such a source ('Keith and me work for weeks' p.45), in the form of free verse.

As the book proceeds, we learn about Harry and Keith Hodby and their widowed father whose stoic attempts at bringing up his two sons alone is the subject of some head shaking and tut-tutting amongst the locals of the typical riverside town, somewhere in rural Australia. We meet and appreciate through her nephews' eyes the attempts of Aunt Alice to bring some feminine touches to the household on her visits and her sudden portentous appearance in the home when their Dad is injured in a serious industrial accident.

We learn about their friends, their rivals, their neighbours, their teacher Miss Carter, the school secretary Miss Spencer with whom Harry falls in love at the age of 14, their fears and sorrows and their hopes and dreams. There is an unusual sensitivity and gentleness about this book. It is a beautiful story, poignant and replete with evocative imagery which, however, never deteriorates into cloying sentimentality.

Despite the economy of language required by the format, character development is in no way stunted. We see the growing respect and friendship between the Hodby boys and Johnny Barlow and we can empathise strongly with their grief at Linda Mahony's death. The mother's illness and death are alluded to and then details filled out as the story unfolds. The author brilliantly captures

the pathetic picture of the father: 'while Dad / eats another chip, / takes a swig of beer, / and tries his best/ to enjoy / his big night out.' (p.84).

Steven Herrick has done a great job with this book. I'd recommend it to high school aged boys or girls, particularly to those for whom reading, and poetry in particular, have thus far proven elusive interests.

**Julie Davies, Sutherland Shire Christian School, NSW**

Written as a series of linking poems, "By the River" is accessible to students who like a quick read. It introduces them to narrative poetry and quietly goes about dealing with some pretty tough issues – grief, families and love. The story focuses on one boy, Harry, who has only vague recollections of his mother's death, but these are made all the stronger by the meaningless and blameless death of his best friend, a girl. While this sounds like a sad premise, the readers are not presented with all the information as plainly as seen in many other teen texts, instead it is presented in touching vignettes that slowly come together to form the picture. It fits in with the tone and approach (and reading level) of "So Much to Tell You" and "Peeling the Onion" but it focuses on the male perspective, the way society expects grieving men to behave.

This is not just about the Hodby family's grief, however, for the novel allows for a study of the small town and the era, 1962, in which they live. The free-ranging and relaxed lifestyle of the children, the acceptance of child abuse and neglect, and the horror of an unwed mother, are all seen in passing through the accepting eyes of the thirteen year old protagonist.

This is a text that in the brevity of poetry conveys a remarkable depth and breadth of character development. A quietly moving story that creeps up on the reader and leaves them heart-warmed.

Study areas – probably around Year 10 level:

- Portrayal of men in the text (distant from their feelings but caring)
- Portrayal of women in the text (they all seem kind but tough)
- Children's lives in the 1960s compared to now
- Dealing with grief (how it can return when similar events occur)
- Adolescence (there's a fair focus on his awareness of sexuality)
- Social taboos and how they are changing (ie: the unwed mother is banished but the child beating father is an acceptable member of society)

**Janet Hesse, The Rockhampton Grammar School, QLD**