

I am admitting my bias. I think Steven Herrick is a magician. He is conjurer of the highest quality. The way a single page can provoke. The way a single word can bring back a time, a place, or a person. In the *Cold Skin* Herrick's characters are not pillars of morality. Some are wretched, miserable. A teacher, the local newspaper editor, a local boy back as the Sergeant, returned POW's, miners, the mayor, teenagers compelled to act form our cast. The setting is a coal town, a town of rich and poor, of war hero's and cowards, in many ways a simple town. However, it is the heartfelt, rustic manner of Herrick's prose that generates a world so close to contemporary Australia, yet so far removed. With the backdrop of the peace that followed World War II and returning soldiers comes a story of love, tragedy, empathy and life in a small town. The tragedy that brings the town together is dramatic, yet is used to great effect by Herrick. He wants us to feel how each person reacts to extremes. As a parent quips: 'All those years the Japanese couldn't kill, then this'.

Herrick's way with words sets him apart from any of his contemporary writers. He should be a national treasure, up there with Andrew Johns or Chris Judd or Ricky Ponting. Herrick's ability to capture Australia is not unique, but he shows us how we are, not how we want to be viewed. The utmost pleasure came from reading this novel, yet it was the pain that surrounds each of the characters that I found most profound.

I will be ordering a class set as soon as possible.

Some suggested activities:

- Research tasks: Australian POW's
- Performance poetry
- Appropriation into play/film scripts
- Composing tasks related to the local newspaper
- Creating characters and atmosphere using techniques Herrick employs
- Such themes/ideas: power, love and empathy, belonging.

**Troy Martin, Callaghan College, NSW**

In his new verse novel *Cold Skin*, Steven Herrick addresses the emotions and various issues that confront nine characters from the country town of Burruga, where nothing usually happens except for the odd fight at the local pub.

Beautifully crafted and set during the tough times following WWII, this novel presents a story of life and death, told in eight chapters. Using multiple narrators and an informal, colloquial register, Herrick provides the reader with a bird's eye view into the thoughts and feelings of each character as they come to terms with growing up, fitting in and dealing with death.

This book is a teacher's dream. A unit of work could be crafted relating to its structure and language use alone. Examine the title. Does 'cold skin' refer to the dead girl or is there an association to how one feels when they realise how the girl died, or who instigated her death? Maybe it is how Eddie feels when he discovers his teacher is paying for sex in the city! Vivid imagery manipulates the mind's pictures while declarative sentences reflect the feelings of the speaker and add emotion and energy to the text. Dialogue is used cleverly to add depth to the representation of ideas.

Consider this novel for a character study – First person narration allows for compelling reading which enables the reader to identify and develop empathy for each character whose story could easily stand alone. Students could choose a character's entry and use as a springboard for their own creative writing or construct a timeline of events in that character's life.

*Cold Skin* would be great as a thematic study. 'City versus country', 'the abuse of power', 'father/son relationships', 'forgiveness', 'bribery', 'sexual abuse' and 'murder', to name a few. Because of the nature of the sexual references in this book, I would recommend it for study with years, 10, 11 & 12 only.. The text would make a good related text for the new Area of Study: *Belonging* which comes into effect in 2008.

**Suzanne Daw, Gosford High School, NSW**

This book is thoroughly enjoyable and especially useful in exploring various perspectives of the same event. This perspective study gives students an opportunity to see how the character is maintained through their reactions to the events portrayed.

Students would enjoy finding out who murdered Colleen O'Connor. This event encourages students to read further as they develop their understanding of the various things that were taking place, when Colleen was murdered. The events that take place allows students to think about the concept of justice and whether or not the perpetrator was not a victim himself. Was justice achieved for the innocent girl that was murdered? This could be a very good discussion panel on the outcome and whether or not there are times people can justifiably take the law into their own hands. Students

could act out the part of Albert Holding in a court to see if his position could be explained. This would be a very good way of getting students to understanding the main themes in this text. The different themes that have been explored are very serious. The students begin to grapple with the ideas of loneliness and the long term effects of war. Herrick develops the idea that men who were unable to “fight” for their country in a public way can suffer feelings of guilt and worthlessness and the effect this could have on the soldier and his family’s life. Herrick explores the concept of the security of rural life as opposed to the decadence of city life. This is seen through Eddie’s experience of following Mr Butcher and his “need” to visit prostitutes in the city.

This text is wonderful in overcoming student’s prejudice towards poetry. While Herrick is using poetic techniques and verse to communicate his ideas, students are able to overcome the idea that poetry needs an interpretation to accompany the text. Once the storyline has been understood students are then able to look specifically at the techniques that have been used and see the effect of them. There are numerous activities that can be used to inculcate them into the student’s minds.

**Vanessa Wickens, NSW**

Steven Herrick has again uses his signature free verse multi-voiced narration to tell the story of life in the small town of Burruga, soon after World War II. The Holdings are poor, living on the edge of town. For them, life is hard but Albert refuses to work down the mine so the cycle of poverty continues. Eddie finds school hard and no longer wants to be there but cannot break away from his father’s control, nor from his high-achieving older brother’s scorn. Through the eyes of nine members of this narrowly focussed society we learn of the minutiae of life: Friday night drinking, the town’s scorn on a non-combatant returned soldier, the role of the newspaper’s editor, the mayor’s supposed superiority, the balancing act of the local policeman and the weak, bullying teacher. Life appears mundane until Colleen’s body is found beside the river and every man and boy in the town is under suspicion. Herrick slowly unfolds the details till the reader knows the killer and copes with the punishment meted out.

I am a great fan of Herrick, but in this novel I feel that his character and scene settings were too drawn-out (the murder doesn’t occur till almost halfway through the book) and could have been better integrated into the narrative. However, it will resound with a large readership and should make a great class set for upper secondary school. Sexual references limit its use with younger students. The strength of the characterisation and story line will offset any problems arising from the time period of its setting. Would it have worked in a 21<sup>st</sup> century setting? Class discussion and research could revolve around: town/city/country divide, POWs and trials of life after war, social justice issues, sexuality/love and prostitution, father/son as well as intra-town relationships; comparison (themes, characterisation, symbolism, imagery, setting, etc) of this novel with other Herrick titles or with other authors who use the verse novel style.

**Maureen Mann, TAS**

The secrets of Burruga unfold through this country town’s rumour mill in this latest offering from Steven Herrick, master of the verse novel. Set in the days following Albert Holding’s return from war (probably World War 2), the cleverly titled *Cold Skin* explores “cold” and “skin” on several levels – the *cold*, wounded heart of Albert, labelled a coward by the townsfolk for not going overseas to fight, never the same since his return from military service in the Northern Territory, in his desperation to settle back, his soulful cry for help, lonely, refusing to work in the mine again; the naked Eddie Holding and Sally Holmes, young lovers exploring their blossoming sexuality, *skin to skin*; the hidden *cold* side of Mr. Butcher, the teacher who doesn’t belong, filled with contempt for the town and the school, seeking his pleasure with the youthful *skin* of prostitutes each weekend when he escapes to the city; the other coward in the town, the *cold* and calculating, thick-skinned Mayor, Mr Paley, who avoided war service, always out to manipulate for his own “will and purpose”; the literal *cold skin* of young murder victim, Colleen O’Conner; the *cold*-blooded shame of her murderer, a local no doubt, with all the men of the town under suspicion. Perhaps Paley is the murderer? Or Albert Holding? Or Mr. Butcher?

Indeed many themes are skilfully and subtly interwoven with an almost lyrical, gentle quality into this easy-to-read mystery, which takes the reader to the heart of the “big issues”, universal, non time-specific issues of identity, father-son relationships, innocence and first love, hypocrisy, cowardice, guilt, revenge and forgiveness. Wanting to discover the identity of the murderer will keep readers aged 13+ turning the pages of this beautifully crafted story, and, as such, *Cold Skin* warrants inclusion in the secondary school library alongside Herrick’s other popular award-winning titles, and for consideration as a shared English class reader at Year 9-10 level, as a thought provoking

discussion starter exploring the effects of war service upon our soldiers, the nature of power and justice, vengeance, healing and recovery.

**Alison Cassell, QLD**

*Cold Skin* is one of those books that lives with you afterwards. For me it is the uncannily vivid portrayal of small town society and the immediate, vibrant reality of the characters which reverberate. Having spent almost my whole life in small towns, to me, Herrick's insight is painful and almost uncanny- how does he know so much?

The death of young Colleen is only one of the dark secrets which are to be unraveled in Herrick's spare, direct, vivid prose. The novel is laid out as a narrative free verse poem, with few words on each page. The natural rhythms of language are upheld, punctuation is sparse and powerful, and various voices are employed. This gives insight for the reader into the psychology and character of each individual. Each chapter is entitled with the name of the character whose thoughts we are to hear, much like monologue and soliloquy in a play. Schoolgirl Colleen gets her own voice; she is also to be seen through the eyes of the men who see her in their own way, and according to their own character; her father; her teacher; the policeman: *'I know Colleen/Smart and pretty/ and not the type to get into mischief'*; the mayor; the boys of the town.

In setting his novel in the small town of Burruga on the Jamison River, to which Albert Holding returns after World War 2, Herrick has chosen to profile a returned soldier who feels ashamed of not taking part in the fighting; he was stationed in Alice Springs as an army driver, on psychiatric grounds: *'It's not only the body that has to be fit, Holding'*. Eddie's dad is also unable to go underground to work in the coal mine, and overall feels that he is a coward. This is why he takes the extraordinary step of forcing the murderer to 'out' himself in a public, visually powerful way: *'No one in this town will think of me as gutless./Not this time.'*

Although each character is presented to the reader in first person, directly through inner thought, as well as through actions observed by others, and by analysis through the thoughts of others, to me, Eddie Holding was the protagonist. Perhaps this is because he does have more chapters than other characters; but ultimately I suspect it is because he is a genuine free spirit, one who may make mistakes, but who always has the best of intentions. Because Eddie's story has a powerful and good outcome, this tale, a 'murder mystery' which could have been overwhelmingly dark and distressing, is, in the end, life affirming. The novel starts and ends with Eddie's voice:

This is the place where Colleen sat  
the day I dive-bombed the beach.  
That's how I'm going to remember her,  
laughing and waving  
at big old Eddie  
acting the fool.

**Helen Wilde, SA**

I found this book to be strangely confronting. As a lover of poetry, I am encouraged to read Steven's book and hope that it does encourage other young writers to explore different styles of writing and expression. I did find it difficult to understand at first though.

Eddie is the hero of this book, amongst others, but it took me a while to establish who the characters were. For me, it was a bit like a mystery murder (which it was), except that the mystery was trying to work out who the characters were. Was this the author's intention?

I would recommend it only for senior high school students as it has sexual references in it, including a visit to a prostitute and then the murder and suicide too. Definitely not for younger readers. I found the sexual references a bit confronting. I don't think some parents would be happy to think this type of reference was available in the library, except to older students perhaps.

There was a good sense of suspense in the book, with the mystery only being solved at the last minute. Set in a small town, with a small town mentality, Steven has done a good job of viewing things through the locals' eyes.

Not one of my favourites, despite my expectations. Sorry.

**Linda Marx, Mountain District Christian School, VIC**