

***Jasper Jones* by Craig Silvey**

I enjoyed this book a lot, and I don't want to give too much away; it needs and deserves to be read by everyone. The over-riding theme is that *no-one* is who or what others expect them to be. The story is told from the viewpoint of 13 year old Charlie Bucktin, and tells of his struggles to understand the how and why of life, his relationships with Jasper, a Vietnamese boy named Jeffrey, his first love, Eliza, and his parents. Both Jasper and Jeffrey are pre-judged by the community, Jasper because his father is a no-good drunk and Jeffrey because of his nationality... the book is set in 1965, and young Australians are being conscripted to fight in the Vietnam War.

Jasper doesn't actually appear in the book very much at all, but his presence is constant, and you find yourself anticipating his next appearance. The story opens with Jasper coming to Charlie with a secret ... a big secret, too big for a teenager to cope with alone ... he has found a body. Charlie is proud that 'tough-boy' Jasper has chosen him from all the boys in town to share the secret, but struggles to deal with the emotions it raises, and finds it very hard to keep. He finds that Jasper is not the thieving, destructive bully that he is painted to be, but simply a teenager struggling to get by. I found it interesting that Jasper was able to justify what theft he did commit by saying he 'never stole anything he didn't need'. Because of his reputation, Jasper knows that nobody will believe he didn't commit murder, so he enlists Charlie to help him hide the body. Jasper is no less guilty of believing the public hype about a person, and he is sure he knows who the killer is ... another resident who has a reputation which is nothing like the real person. Eliza has her own secret. Charlie is aware that something is bothering her, but racing hormones leave him unable to speak to her for quite some time. It is not until she tells *her* secret that the death is understood. Between them, they are able to come to terms with the death, reconcile the truth of other people with their images, and start to form a relationship.

From the very first page, I was enthralled; Craig Silvey drew me in and held me to the end.

Christine Higgs, Queensland

This is a highly acclaimed novel which whisks readers back in time to the 60s and a small mining community with its facade of community values, relevant to this time. Author Craig Silvey explores the social interactions of the community and its apparent values, then uncovers the truth beneath the veneer of happiness, exploring deep seated bigotry against the backdrop of classic American literature. The novel starts and finishes with a flurry of detail about an event which encapsulates three young community members, then explores racism, love, friendship and trust in the middle. Teachers be warned, though: the use of swearing in this novel may make people feel uncomfortable and in some ways unnecessarily undermines a tale of awakening. Discussions within my faculty have deemed this novel unusable for class.

Having said this, for those of you who are able and comfortable enough to read this novel with your class, here are some ideas for using the novel in the classroom. First there are the 'big' concepts within the novel; racism and its relationship to blame, both for Jasper, the indigenous youth, who wanders the town, and Jeffrey Lu's immigrant family, as the Vietnam War begins and jobs are lost at the mine. 'Small Town' values, who is accepted and how others are persecuted. The concept of blame; is it only the perpetrators of the actual events who are to blame or are the onlookers also responsible? And finally, the irony of Jasper blaming another enigma within the community for the worst possible crime. Opportunities for class discussion, journal writing and small group activities abound from within these 'big' concepts. Silvey uses buckets of metaphor and simile throughout the novel, creating a nice opportunity for some skills based activities and revision. Search and find activities also provide an opportunity to create examples for other parts of the novel. Students may also wish to explore their local community in the 60's, responses to the Vietnam War, classic American literature and the changing values of society from then to now. Charlie and Jeffrey have a penchant for hypotheticals and for a bit of fun within the class, students could challenge themselves to creating and responding to these.

Jill Richardson, Wynyard High School, TAS

Late one evening Jasper Jones comes to Charlie's house and asks him to come with him. From the moment Charlie agrees to go, a sequence of events is triggered and Charlie's life is changed forever. In *Jasper Jones*, Craig Silvey expertly captures the feel of any small country town in the 1960's. This is not just a story of trust and friendship, self-discovery and first love but it is also a portrayal of the darker side of human nature. The fringe dwelling part-Aboriginal boy, Jasper, is fundamental to the narrative but he is absent from much of the story. Instead, Charlie Bucklin is the narrator and the issues of bigotry, racism and the 'fear of difference' of white Australians are exposed through his eyes during one summer school holiday.

Charlie Bucklin would stand out in most country towns. He is different because he enjoys being good at schoolwork and he is hopeless at sport. Charlie's best friend, Jeffrey Lu, is a cricket fanatic. The brilliance of the story is that the two pivotal characters - Jasper and Jeffrey - don't meet but their lives are revealed through Charlie's regular interactions with each of them. The wonderful understanding between Charlie and Jeffrey is beautifully revealed through their funny non-stop dialogues.

Silvey analyses the good and horrible aspects of country town life. He recognizes the importance of sport in the Australian psyche and shows how the pride in a successful sporting team is often the only thing that keeps a town together. The superficiality and hypocrisy that may develop in some small town officeholders is well illustrated through the incidents suffered by Jeffrey and Jasper. The bigotry, emotions and tensions are still relevant in Australia today but the story hinges on the lack of communication due to the time period – something today's teenagers never experience with mobile phones.

Rosalie Knox, ACT

'Jasper Jones has come to my window. I don't know why, but he has.' So begins the story of Charlie Bucklin and his relationship with the town half-caste outcast, Jasper Jones. Bookish, intellectual and 13, Charlie is trying to get to grips with his own life, when Jasper steps abruptly in and demands his help. Jasper has found the body of his girlfriend Laura hanging from a tree in his 'special place'. Fearing the prejudice of the town will declare him guilty without permitting him a fair hearing, he persuades Charlie to help hide the body until they can find out who was really responsible for her death.

What follows is an uncomfortable but beautifully observed tale of small-town Australian prejudice and fear. Using Charlie's voice as the narrator, in much the same way as the voice as Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we are given a teenager's-eye view of human reactions to the most extreme of circumstances.

Determined to keep his promise to help Jasper, Charlie carries the secret with him as he watches the town and his own family unravel. In the background his best friend, Jeffrey Lu, a cricket-obsessed Vietnamese immigrant, and Eliza Wishart, the girl he loves first from afar, then with growing intensity, vie for his attention.

This award-winning book, shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award, is a powerful and evocative story of 1960's Australian life. For students who study *To Kill a Mockingbird*, this would make an excellent cultural comparison. As the material in the story is challenging and there are passages of strong language, I would recommend this story for mature readers. But I do most definitely recommend it.

Debbie Williams, Mountain District Christian School, VIC

We read books like *To Kill a Mockingbird* and sense the reality of the classic that captures a moment in time and allows cultural reflection. Silvey examines the way in which we find it more difficult to reflect on issues closer to home.

Jasper Jones explores prejudice in Australia in the 1960s. A crime has been committed and Jasper, a part Aboriginal boy, knows the direction the finger will point. No one else would inflict this upon one of their own. Or would they?

As this book looks so carefully at so many flawed character traits it also exposes a reality. The racism vented towards the hard-working Vietnamese family by this rural community allows for much discussion in the context of the Vietnam War.

This is a coming of age novel in a time of turmoil and struggle, yet Silvey is able to weave humour into the text. We sense a feeling of connection to these characters, more so than *To Kill A Mockingbird*, which this novel parallels. We are the people in the town. We are the adolescent minds trying to make sense of our world and the people around us. We can connect to the conversations, the Australian mind and the familial “knocking” of friends. This novel looks at desire to be loved and to love and the desire to run away from pain.

Silvey’s characters are real, from a country town with country town mentality. Just be shocked by the beginning, the remoteness and fear. Once you start, you sense the need to resolve this tale. Yes, it is “neatly” resolved for the reader but we sense the remoteness of the town is highlighted by the remoteness of the people. The “resolutions” confirm what is hidden behind all closed doors yet expose the fact that we all have something we want to hide.

Silvey does use strong “real” language in this text, he does explore issues Australians would like to ignore. Just remember *To Kill a Mockingbird* was banned in some US states, as was *Harry Potter*. If your objective is get students reading and understanding context, this is the book for you, but it is confronting, so be wary of sensitive readers. I have already recommended it to boys in my class who enjoyed *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

I said issues are “resolved”, but I still have one question: who is the greatest superhero? Batman or Superman?

Regina Forrester, Cherrybrook, NSW

The freedom of breaking out on a night time escapade with Jasper Jones excites young Charlie Bucktin. It appeals to his insecurity as well, being sought after as a ‘partner in crime’ by the wily recalcitrant. Both ‘outsiders’, Jasper has an allure for him, and holds something of a power over Charlie. At age thirteen, highly intelligent and ‘different’, Charlie’s life is constrained by his dysfunctional family – a domineering, bitter mother and passive, retiring father - and by his school yard nemesis, Warwick Trent. Charlie’s voracious reading appetite and his writing are his escapes, as is the madcap friendship with Vietnamese mate, Jeffrey Lu – Jeffrey, ‘a pearl among the sludge’. They ‘babble, ramble and ruminate’. Life is also softened by ‘Sassytyme’, as Jeffrey calls Charlie’s developing attraction to the lovely Eliza Wishart.

It is 1965, in Corrigan, a Western Australian mining town. Insular in its outlook, and hiding behind appearances, this community is weighed down by festering prejudice and racism, dishonesty and double standards, bullying and betrayal, authority, apathy and abuse, hypocrisy and hate. Nothing proves this more than town attitudes to Mad Jack Lionel, the hermit rumoured to have killed a woman, to the Lu family, callously attacked on irrational ethnic grounds, and to Jasper, the miscreant half-caste ‘with a thick and evil curse over his head’. It was easier for people to condemn, or be apathetic, than to understand, to have trust and faith.

Beyond the simmering violence and vilification of this ‘ethical divide’, Charlie’s life buckles under the all-consuming guilt of the somewhat surreal, sickening discovery he made with Jasper that night in the glade. He learns firsthand the destructive force of fear and bigotry, as it threads through the lies and the secrets, blurring myth and truth. His gut is a ‘cavern of nesting butterflies’. Charlie repeatedly escapes to his imaginary safe haven, a Manhattan ballroom filled with literary luminaries. He retreats far from that town on edge with the disappearance of Laura Wishart, the ‘gossamer ghost’, and from the disintegration of all that he holds familiar within family and friends, for him, the ‘whole horrible alloy of sadness’. With ‘the burden of knowing’ outweighing ‘the comfort of not knowing’, Charlie is consumed by sadness and hate, eaten up by ‘the shame of the should’. He is ‘a whirring zoetrope of half thoughts and worries. Beset by bright dizzy flashes and harried by harpies’.

Perhaps we are *all* capable of doing ‘the wrong thing for the right reasons’? And just what *is* the true meaning of courage, as Craig Silvey asks his readers. Indeed, how well would **YOU**, like Charlie Bucktin, ‘walk with the weight’? Do **YOU** have ‘the strength to right **YOUR** own wrongs?’

Set against a backdrop of well-documented contemporary events – the Vietnam War, the disappearance of the Beaumont children in Adelaide and the Test Century of Doug Walters in his cricket debut, for example - this historically accurate novel reflects what Silvey himself says is a 'watershed' period in Australian society. It is powerfully written, 'with no stone left unturned', shocking, yet easy-to-read, an engaging tale in the Southern Gothic Fiction genre. Based around the word, 'Sorry', this sinister, thought-provoking expose of life's universal themes is a chilling coming-of-age story of 'adolescent escapism and anguish' which threatens to devour Charlie. His innocence may be lost, but he does learn the meaning of kinship, of loyalty and of courage along the way.

Craig Silvey's craftsmanship is brilliant. He cleverly interweaves laugh-out-loud, infectious humour with intuitive emotional and psychological analyses, touching on both Charlie's fascination with the psyche of killers and on that of adolescents themselves, teetering between The Blues and The Mean Reds. The tension increases, as unexpected mysteries unfold and the story reaches its unimagined, gut-wrenching climax. Silvey's style is totally absorbing, from the simple, snappy, alliterative title, to the beautiful, evocative language, often expressed in short, sharp sentences designed to effectively capture the mood, be it the powerful or the fragile.

As a long-time bibliophile and former Teacher Librarian of many years experience, I was certainly heartened by the wonderful, positive representation of books, of reading and of writing throughout the story, affirming these as valued pursuits. Such literary passion flavouring the story with references to the life and works of Ernest Hemingway, Harper Lee, Truman Capote, Jack Kerouac and Ken Kesey, to name but a few, further reinforces the worth of these endeavours. Charlie's father, as a teacher of literature, had passed this love of books on to his son, who was developing as a gifted wordsmith. Charlie wanted to be a writer and the yellow pads filled with his jottings are his constant companion and solace, alone in his room at night.

Award-winning *Jasper Jones* is a 'must-include' for both public libraries and secondary school library collections alike. Complemented by Author's Notes and an accompanying Readers' Group guide, the novel is also suitable for inclusion on a Senior School reading list within the English curriculum and for in-depth, extended Book Club discussion in the wider community.

For individual readers, *Jasper Jones* will appeal to a select readership of mature Young Adults aged 16+, as the time frame and literary references which pepper the text may be unfamiliar to many contemporary teens.