

# Teachers Notes by Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright

## THE ISLAND Armin Greder

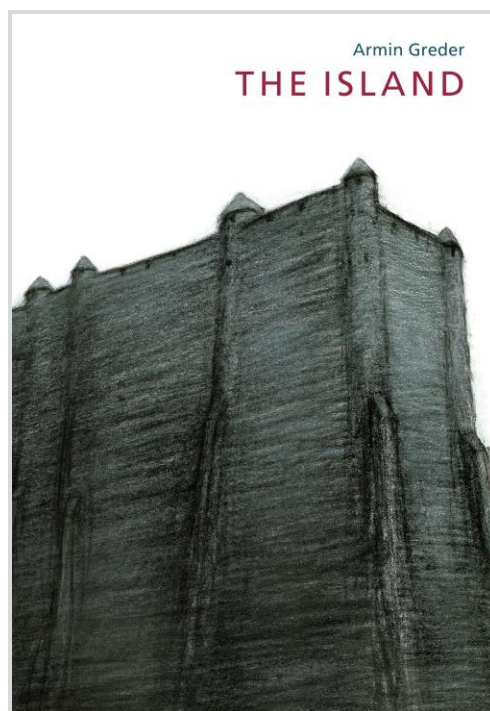
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Recommended for ages 7-11.

**Older students and adults will also appreciate this book.**

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## INTRODUCTION

### **'He wasn't like them.'**

*The Island* is a metaphorical account of the way in which prejudice and fear create artificial barriers between people which they use to exclude others in order to 'protect' themselves. It offers reasons for why refugees exist and why detention centres and refugee camps have become so prevalent throughout the world.

No man is an *Island*, intire of it selfe; every  
man is a peece of the *Continent*, a part of the maine;

—John Donne

Armin Greder has created a masterpiece about human frailty and the capacity for ordinary people to do impossibly cruel things. Hitler knew the power of mass prejudice. People have often expressed puzzlement that so many ordinary people sanctioned or ignored the evidence of his policy of genocide. The simple explanation lies with fear and complacency. This cautionary tale is frighteningly paralleled in the society we currently inhabit.

Beware of how we treat 'them', because 'them' is 'us'.

## THEMES

This book could be studied in a range of ways in a classroom. It is a philosophical treatise which could be used to explore the themes of:

- Insiders and Outsiders ('Us' and 'Them')
- Race and Prejudice
- Compassion
- Fear
- Freedom
- Power
- Difference
- Sharing, Neighbourliness and Citizenship

Use quotes from the book to explore these themes and their often-ambivalent implications. For example:

*'We can't just feed anyone who comes our way.'*

*'Their act of kindness had not been the end, merely the beginning.'*

*'He is not one of us. He isn't our problem.'*

## CURRICULUM TOPICS

### LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

- See the Bibliography of Related Texts, below. Classes could compare *The Island* to other picture books for older readers.
- Collect political cartoons about similar issues by (for example), Jon Kudelka (*The Australian*), Sean Leahy (*The Courier-Mail*) or any local or national journal and discuss them with your class.
- Discuss other books for young people which have used the idea of an island to explore complex themes. For example: *The Lord of the Flies* (1954) by William Golding; *Treasure Island* (1883) by RL Stevenson; *Coral Island* (1858) by RM Ballantyne; *The Goats* (1999) by Brock Cole.
- The written text is deliberately allegorical in tone, suggestive of a folk tale or fable. How does this style of writing influence the reading of this and other such tales?
- Rhetorical language is a powerful means of conveying messages. Governments use the persuasive power of words to set political agendas. Choose a list of topical quotes which symbolise some of the issues being explored in this work and discuss or debate them. For example:
  - *We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances under which they come.* (John Howard, Prime Minister of Australia, 1996 - 2007)
  - *No, I don't know that atheists should be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered as patriots. This is one nation under God.* (George Bush Jr, President of the USA, 2001-2009)
  - *Fear is the main source of superstition and one of the main sources of cruelty. To conquer fear is the beginning of wisdom.* (Bertrand Russell, philosopher)
- Discuss the use of phrases such as 'one nation', 'one people', as positive or negative definitions of national or community cohesion.
- Discuss the way the characters in *The Island* are objectified as 'he' and 'they'. The 'man' is not given a name and the people are not either—they are simply given occupations such as fisherman, carpenter, priest, innkeeper. Why?

### VISUAL LITERACY

- Discuss the layout and design of the book, and of the individual double page spreads within it. Encourage students to read for the 'sub-text' and observe how the pictures often add to or illuminate meaning, complementing and enriching the text. For example:
  - Wordless frames (title page and pp. 6-7) show the vastness of the ocean from which the man is escaping, emphasising the unknown terrors there, and the implicit cruelty attached to the people's decision to send him back into that anonymous maelstrom of water.
  - Men with pitchforks (pp. 4-5, 8-9) are suggestive of the ugly, primitive violence aroused by prejudice which has been evinced (for example) in the eras which saw witches burned at the stake in Europe, and which gave rise to the Klu Klux Klan in the US.
  - On pp. 10-11, the man's internment in a goat pen is made starkly painful by the visuals which in contrast include a strip of four images showing

people eating, bathing, drinking and enjoying life. Beneath that strip is a smaller image of small boys with sticks bullying another boy, suggesting that such cruel indifference begins in childhood.

- Discuss the use of perspective, spatial relationships, and proximity of figures to each other. Discuss the artist's choice of the medium of charcoal and of dark colours in terms of the meaning and themes in this work.

## **CREATIVE ARTS**

This book could also lend itself to exploration in a range of other creative arts such as acting, improvisation, music and dance.

- Improvise the scenes in the book by suggesting the emotions conveyed in each.
- Choose a piece of instrumental music which is suggestive of these emotions.

## **SOSE**

In a SOSE unit *The Island* could be used to discuss a range of current affairs issues such as:

### **Refugees and their Treatment by Australia and Other Nations.**

- Refugee Week is celebrated every year and coordinated by the Refugee Council of Australia. Discuss ways in which your class/school might become involved.
- Start by defining 'refugee', and then discuss both the causes of the contemporary refugee crisis and the extent of the problem - 33 million people throughout the world live in temporary shelters. [World Refugee Survey 2005, US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants. Quoted on RCOA website]
- You could discuss government policy – Australia, for example, changed the name of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, then to the Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP), which has now been subsumed into the Department of Home Affairs, which combines its responsibilities with a number of other portfolios – and its policy appears to be to delete references to multiculturalism in favour of the notion that we are all 'one' as citizens of this nation.
- Read about local government issues e.g. the NSW town of Tamworth's Regional Council decision to welcome refugees who are Safe Haven Enterprise Visa holders.
- Which organisations and individuals have been prominent community advocates on behalf of refugees and how/what have they achieved? [See websites in **Other Sources** list.]
- Discuss the dichotomy inherent in policy which either defines diversity by celebrating difference, or recognises commonalities between all races and cultures. Are these views mutually exclusive?
- The people in *The Island* also turn on one of their own when they burn the fisherman's boat. Fear of such retribution is another reason why people sometimes choose to remain uninvolved in the face of others' needs.
- Apply this discussion to students' own lives and communities.

### **Islands**

The word 'Island' conjures up conflicting ideals—one is of the exotic location, or 'tropical paradise'— the other is of a place of remoteness and isolation, where survivors are

stranded or shipwrecked, and where small communities can become paranoid and/or incestuous, and fearful of strangers. Discuss the following:

- The Australian National Anthem includes the line: 'Our home is girt by sea.'
- Government policy in recent years has 'excised' neighbouring islands from Australia's borders, in order to deter would-be asylum seekers from claiming such status by landing in that vicinity.
- The Australian government has adopted the controversial policy of 'offshore processing and detention' on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea and on Nauru.

### **Walled Cities and Fortresses**

Compare the role and function of walled cities and fortresses in medieval society to their role in this book, and then to the increasing incidence in our cities of walled or 'gated' communities.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY OF RELATED TEXTS**

- Bradford, Clare 'Children's Literature in the Age of Terrorism' *Magpies* Vol 20 Issue 1 March 2005 pp. 20-3
- Briggs, Raymond *The Snowman* Hamish Hamilton 1978
- Briggs, Raymond *The Tin-Pot Foreign General and the Old Iron Woman* Hamish Hamilton 1984
- Dechian, Sonja, Heather Millar and Eva Sallis (eds) *Dark Dreams: Australian Refugee Stories by Young Writers Aged 11-20 Years* Wakefield Press 2004
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- Dudek, Debra 'Of Murels and Snigs. Detention-Centre Narratives in Australian literature for Children and Young Adults' *Overland* 185 Summer 2006 pp. 38-42
- Evans, Alwyn *Walk in My Shoes* Penguin 2005
- Gleitzman, Morris *Boy Overboard* Penguin 2005
- Gleitzman, Morris *Girl Underground* Penguin 2005
- Greder, Armin and Libby Gleeson *The Great Bear* Scholastic Press 1999
- Heffernan, John *My Dog* Margaret Hamilton Books/ Scholastic 2001
- Miller, David *Refugees* Lothian 2004
- Oliver, Narelle *Home Omnibus*/Scholastic 2006
- 'Refugees' *The Literature Base* Volume 13 Issue 1 February 2002 pp. 18-23.
- Tan, Shaun *The Arrival* Hachette Livre 2006
- Tan, Shaun *The Lost Thing* Lothian 2000
- Tan, Shaun and John Marsden *The Rabbits* Lothian 2003

## INTERNET RESOURCES

**Amnesty International** <http://www.amnesty.org.au/>

See Refugee Resources for Education page on the AI site.

**Chilout** <http://www.chilout.org/> AND <https://www.facebook.com/chiloutrevived>

Due to continued detention of child refugees in Australia, this organisation was revived in 2010, having been wound down in 2005 in the belief it had achieved its objectives to see no child still in detention in Australia. This website includes a brief history of Australian law and policy concerning asylum seekers, FAQs about children in detention and personal stories from young asylum seekers.

NB: Teachers should review the site before sending students to it as some sections contain disturbing information and images.

**Doherty, Ben 'A Short History of Nauru, Australia's Dumping Ground for Refugees' *The Guardian* 10 August 2016**

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/10/a-short-history-of-nauru-australias-dumping-ground-for-refugees>

**Julian Burnside** [www.julianburnside.com](http://www.julianburnside.com)

Burnside is a leading advocate and human rights lawyer in Australia. His website contains some very useful information including speeches and responses to government policies.

**Manus Island** Wikipedia

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manus\\_Island](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manus_Island)

**Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA)** <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/>

This site offers facts, definitions, statistics and useful information about refugees on the 'Our Work' and 'Get the Facts' pages of this website. The 'Myth Busters' page could be used to provoke discussion with students and to test their own biases and opinions.

Most of this website is aimed at refugees and makes complicated reading for young students. However, the pages cited above are more student-friendly. The RCOA offers an incursion program for schools in Sydney, Wollongong and Melbourne. See

<https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/our-work/schools-program/>

**Refugee Transitions**

<https://www.startts.org/resources/refugee-transitions-magazine>

'Tamworth ready to welcome refugees' *Tamworth Regional Council* 11 October 2016

<https://www.tamworth.nsw.gov.au/News-articles-Archive/2016/October-2016/Tamworth-ready-to-welcome-refugees>

**US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants** <http://www.refugees.org>

Describes the resettlement of refugees in the USA and provides facts about refugees.

## ABOUT THE WRITERS

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR/ILLUSTRATOR

**Armin Greder** was born in Switzerland. In 1971 he migrated to Australia where he worked as a graphic designer and later taught design and illustration at a tertiary art institution. Books he has illustrated include *The Great Bear*, *An Ordinary Day* and *I am Thomas*, all written by Libby Gleeson and *Flight* by Nadia Wheatley. Other books he has authored and illustrated include *Australia to Z*, *The City* and *The Mediterranean*. His work, in which charcoal is prominent, reflects his European background. *Flight* was CBCA Picture Book of the Year in 2016. He is the recipient of a number of international recognitions such as the Bologna Ragazzi Award 2000 and has also been nominated for

IBBY's Hans Christian Andersen Award 2004. He now lives in Lima, Peru, and travels regularly.

**See also:**

'Playing by the Book: An Interview with Armin Greder' *Playing by the book*  
<http://www.playingbythebook.net/2016/05/10/an-interview-with-armin-greder/>

'Meet Armin Greder' *Reading Time* June 26, 2015  
<http://readingtime.com.au/meet-armin-greder/>

Sheahan-Bright, Robyn "An Australian First", *Magpies*, Vol 15, No 3, July 2000, pp 6-7.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THESE NOTES**

**Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright** operates *justified text* writing and publishing consultancy services, has published widely on children's and YA literature, and in 2011 was the recipient of the CBCA (Qld branch) Dame Annabelle Rankin Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Queensland, in 2012 the CBCA (National) Nan Chauncy Award for Outstanding Services to Children's Literature in Australia, and in 2014 the QWC's Johnno Award.