

# Teachers' Notes by Nita Jonsberg

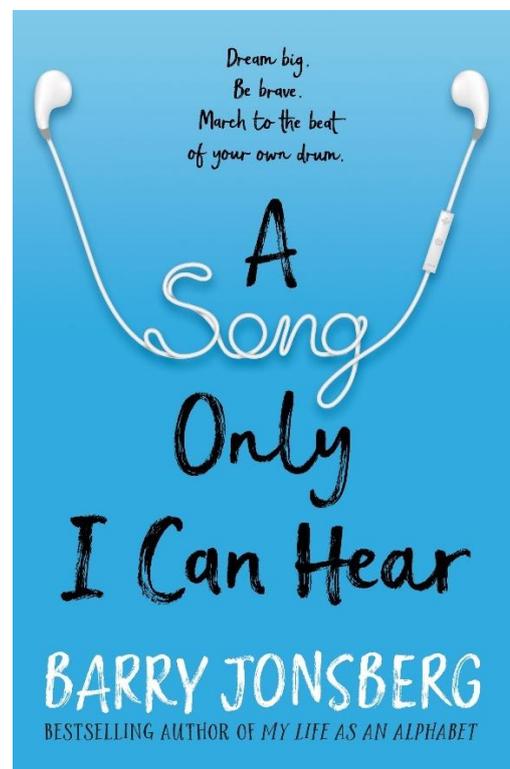
# A SONG ONLY I CAN HEAR

by  
Barry Jonsberg

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Recommended for ages 10 - 14 yrs

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## INTRODUCTION

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Introducing Rob Fitzgerald: thirteen years old and determined to impress the new girl at school, but it's a difficult task for a super-shy kid who is prone to panic attacks that include vomiting, difficulty breathing and genuine terror that can last all day. An anonymous texter is sending Rob challenges and they might just help. Or not.

Beautifully moving and full of heart and humour, *A Song Only I Can Hear* is a delightful novel about dreaming big, being brave and marching to the beat of your own drum.

'Funny, heartfelt and surprising. *A Song Only I Can Hear* is as timely as it is entertaining. A must-read.'

— Michael Gerard Bauer

'...it is subversive, surprising, moving, complex, and revelatory. With the release of *A Song Only I Can Hear*, it may finally be time to stop describing every emotionally intelligent middle fiction book as 'the next Wonder'; Jonsberg has raised the already very high bar. In other words, give this book to everybody—it is urgent fiction and a true must-read.'

— Books & Publishing

## PLOT SYNOPSIS

Rob Fitzgerald has reached that tricky age when hormones are raging and love appears both delicious and dangerous. So when Destry Camberwick moves from WA and appears in Rob's class it is love at first sight – at least from Rob's perspective.

But Rob is super-shy, suffers from panic attacks and Destry doesn't seem to be aware of his existence. He can only impress her by making himself noteworthy and that necessitates overcoming his social awkwardness. A mysterious and anonymous texter issues him with a series of challenges to encourage and develop his self-confidence, but will this be enough?

Destry isn't the only love in Rob's life: there is Rob's grandfather, a curmudgeonly Vietnam vet battling his own demons, as well as Rob's mum and dad and his best friend, Andrew. It is a complicated and stressful time, but Rob tackles everything with humour and a belief that people are generally good and decent.

Will Rob maintain this attitude in the face of personal tragedy and the struggle of dealing with other people's perceptions of his identity?

### Spoiler Alert

Teachers should know the nature of the surprise ending of this novel. Click [here](#) to discover it.

## THEMES

### Family

Rob's family are clearly cohesive and supportive – at least that's what Rob has us believe. Rob's relationship with his grandad is deep and mutually valued. It allows Rob to explore his feelings in a safe way.

### Bullying

Daniel Smith has the knack of always turning up at the worst of times. He is the 'archetypal' bully. Fortunately, Ms Pritchett has her own skill – always turning up to prevent bad things happening to Rob. As the novel progresses, readers understand how it is that this bully and Rob's 'saviour' seem to be everywhere.

## **Love**

The love of family and friends, romantic love and, ultimately, love of self are all explored in 'Song'. Indeed, the novel begins with Rob's naïve (and consequently humorous) questioning of his parents about how love actually feels. His love for his grandfather is clear in each exchange between the two and Grandad's refusal to alter his language in front of Rob suggests a refreshing authenticity. Readers also see the many types of love that can extend throughout one's life. Rob's 'thunderbolt' moment when Destry Camberwick arrives at school and the physical symptoms of love he feels are familiar to anyone who has felt romantic love for the first time.

## **Grief**

Grief is delicately explored in 'Song', both through existing external stories and within the narrative itself. It is dealt with as a rite of passage for Rob and is part of his personal realisations of what and who is important.

## **Identity and Acceptance**

This is the core of the novel and underpins the central tenet that we have to accept ourselves as we are before we can experience others doing so. Within these themes, Rob's experience of anxiety can be seen as both a barrier to, and a catalyst for, change.

## **The Effects of War**

Through Grandad's narration of his time serving in the Vietnam War, its effects on him are laid bare. He describes the 'ghosts' that are always with him and how they have never left. The deft drawing of what PTSD can be like for those who served and serve still leaves a lasting impression on readers.

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# **CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT**

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## **LANGUAGE**

Students can recognise that vocabulary choices contribute to the specificity, abstraction and style of texts. In addition, they can identify and evaluate examples of how rhetorical devices reveal the dark or serious aspects of a topic in ways that cause laughter or amusement, for example by making a statement but implying/meaning the opposite (irony); exaggerating or overstating something (hyperbole); imitating or sending up something (parody), and making something appear less serious than it really is (understatement)

## **LITERATURE**

The range of characters in 'Song' is readily recognisable. Students can understand and explain how combinations of words and images in texts are used to represent particular groups in society, and how texts position readers in relation to those groups.

## **LITERACY**

Students can analyse and evaluate the ways that text structures and language features vary according to the purpose of the text. They can experiment with text structures and language features to refine and clarify ideas to improve the effectiveness of students' own texts

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## ACTIVITIES FOR THE CLASSROOM

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### PRE-READING

It's advised to prepare students for the presence of the topics below. How much or how little time you spend can be tailored for your students – you may have already covered some of these in Social/Emotional lessons.

#### **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**

Rob's Grandad appears to be suffering from this. Students may have relatives and acquaintances currently experiencing this disorder or may be experiencing it themselves.

Familiarise students with the term and explore some causes, as well as what it can mean for sufferers. Advise how to seek help – maybe have your school counsellor in this and the exploration of anxiety and panic (below). Some good information can be found here:

<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/anxiety/types-of-anxiety/ptsd> (helpful links)

<https://www.sane.org/mental-health-and-illness/facts-and-guides/post-traumatic-stress-disorder> (very clear examples of who and how people can suffer)

#### **The Viet Nam War**

Rob's Grandad served in this war and it is the cause of his PTSD. It's highly likely that your Social Studies Department has many resources you could use.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-08-18/battle-of-long-tan-explainer-vietnam-war/7710612> (a description of what happened in the battle)

<http://theconversation.com/the-battle-over-long-tans-memory-a-perspective-from-viet-nam-64121> (an interesting article suggesting an alternate view)

<http://battleoflongtan.com/timeline/> (detailed timeline of events throughout the battle)

#### **Anxiety and Panic Attacks**

Rob experiences general anxiety as well as panic disorder. Help students understand the symptoms, how an individual can feel and some strategies that may help. Lifeline gives 24/7 assistance for sufferers.

[https://au.reachout.com/mental-health-issues/anxiety?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIgoL13emx2wIVAyUrCh3BXApMEAAAYAiAAEgLYwvD\\_BwE](https://au.reachout.com/mental-health-issues/anxiety?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIgoL13emx2wIVAyUrCh3BXApMEAAAYAiAAEgLYwvD_BwE) (detailed links and resources)

[https://www.lifeline.org.au/get-help/topics/panic-attacks?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIgoL13emx2wIVAyUrCh3BXApMEAAAYAyAAEgJIPPD\\_BwE](https://www.lifeline.org.au/get-help/topics/panic-attacks?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIgoL13emx2wIVAyUrCh3BXApMEAAAYAyAAEgJIPPD_BwE)

#### **Bullying**

Rob is bullied. Describe your school's anti-bullying strategy and outline who can help.

<https://au.reachout.com/everyday-issues/bullying> (describes types of bullying and has links to resources)

<https://bullyingnoway.gov.au/TeachingAboutBullying> (explicit information for teachers and advice about working in the classroom)

## DURING READING

1. Just prior to the Prologue, brainstorm 'what romantic love feels like' with students. Point out that because it's an abstract noun, it can have different connotations for different people.
2. Discuss initial impressions of Rob, Daniel and Grandad (pp. 1-12) and have students write their initial impressions down and justify them.
3. What made-up words might students use instead of 'blankety' in Grandad's speech (emphasize 'made up'). What does Rob's reluctance to pass on the real words Grandad uses suggest about him?
4. After reading up to chapter 6 (p. 19) discuss the type of relationship Rob and Grandad have. How has the author communicated this?
5. Having decided he is in love with Destry Camberwick, Rob sets about impressing her (pp. 18-19). What things can students suggest that might impress a potential partner? Brainstorm on the board the serious and not-so-serious suggestions.
6. Rob's best friend Andrew is introduced on p. 24 and Rob says he's 'getting tired of [writing] descriptive notes'. Have students think about whether they would rather come up with their own mental pictures of characters or have them described for them. This could develop into a 'films vs books' discussion.
7. On p. 31, we see one of Rob's unsuccessful attempts to write a love poem to Destry Camberwick. Have students work in small groups to see if they can improve upon it. Discuss the use of half/para rhyme. Have spokespeople read out their attempts. What problems are there?
8. **Attraction:** In chapter 10 (beginning on p. 32), Andrew comes up with an ingenious way to assist Rob to keep footballs out of his net. How does this reframing of a potential problem help? Link back to dealing with anxiety and how reframing can help there too. You can see how this turns out on pp. 51-52.
9. **Grief:** Chapter 11 deals with the idea of grief in the story of John Gray and his dog Bobby. Read the story here: <https://scotlandwelcomesyou.com/greyfriars-bobby/>
10. In chapter 12, Rob describes how accompanying his father to golf is 'non-negotiable'. Does Rob like some things that are 'non-negotiable'? Do we all need them? If appropriate, have your students think about some 'non-negotiables' in both school and home. Model some 'non-negotiables' from your own experience if you can.

This is tricky – debate whether we need 'non-negotiables' in order to function effectively. Discuss working life and school/family/church/courts/police – and other organisations which have a responsibility to teach. Is it that some things cannot be negotiable if society is to function?

11. In the same chapter, what elements of Rob's imagination of true love are subverted by his Dad's account of meeting Rob's Mum? Have students work in pairs to discuss and then write.
12. Andrew offers to help Rob out by getting to know Destry and her friends (p. 45). If right for your cohort, contrast this to 'Much Ado About Nothing' where Don Pedro represents Cassio in the wooing of Hero (Act II Sc.1). Discuss doubt and how it can hurt relationships of all kinds.
13. **Grief:** At the beginning of Chapter 15 (p. 47), Rob's Grandad is seen betting on who is going to die next. How do students feel about this? How can something so macabre be framed as humorous? What makes it so?
14. **Attraction:** In this chapter, Rob is desperately coming up with ways to attract Destry. How does he think having a dog will help? Have students read the chapter and write

what they think will happen with his plan. The truth will be revealed in Chapter 17 (from p. 53).

15. **Attraction:** Rob's Grandad is vegetarian and Rob has decided he wants to believe in something (pp. 65-72). Grandad tells Rob to 'Goggle' what could happen if the whole world became vegetarian and that he will 'be amazed'. Have your class do the same and have the class debate the topic: 'The whole world should become vegetarian'.
16. **Anxiety:** Chapters 28 and 29 (pp. 93-100) present potential opportunities for Rob. He has signed up for the talent competition and has an opportunity to try out for his state's U16 squad. What kind of things is Rob worried about if he pursues these opportunities? Have students form a 'consciousness corridor': two lines of students line up facing each other with a space in between for 'Rob' to walk down. After a few minutes preparation, one line - 'confidence' whispers all the positive things that may come of these opportunities, while the opposing line plays 'anxiety' and whispers all the things that could go wrong as 'Rob' walks slowly between the lines. Have the student who plays Rob talk about how it felt to hear the opposing words and phrases.
17. On p. 153, Rob receives a text that tells him to 'Get [himself] on the front page of a local newspaper'. Have students work in small groups to brainstorm viable plans to do the same. (See assessment activities for further work on this.)
18. **Effects of War:** In Chapter 50, (pp. 180 - 184), Rob begins to get to the heart of his Grandad's reluctance to talk about the war. Discuss the reasons that Grandad reveals here. What new things do we discover about the relationship between Alan (Rob's father) and Rob's Grandad. (See assessment activities for more work on the effects of war.)
19. Rob initially thinks getting on the front page of a newspaper is simple (Chapter 50, beginning p. 185). Explore with students how bathos is used to create humour.
20. **Grief:** Chapter 56 (p. 209) features the stories of two dogs: one who walked thousands of kilometres for love and Hachiko, who missed and waited for his owner for nine years. Though these might seem like non-sequiturs initially, how do they link with the story? How do they help the reader understand key messages and characters? (Especially Grandad.)
21. **The Effects of War:** Before reading Chapter 58, provide copies of Wilfred Owens' *Dulce et decorum est, pro patria mori*. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46560/dulce-et-decorum-est>) and provided at the end of these notes in [Blackline Master 1](#).  
Analysis here: ([http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english\\_literature/poetryowen/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english_literature/poetryowen/)) this is a revision page with a solid analysis. (See assessment activities for more work on the effects of war and this poem.)
22. In Chapter 59, the climax of the novel, all of Rob's world within the text is represented. Have students draw a relationship chart on A3 paper (see [Blackline Master 2](#) for an example), with Rob at the centre. Have them describe within the diagram how the people in this section of the narrative know each other and whether their interactions are negative, positive or neutral. Revisit this at the end of the novel.
23. In Chapter 63 (p. 238) Rob ponders whether his grandad would be proud of him. Have students think about the things they have done/are doing/will do to make their families or carers proud of them. List with students the things Rob has done that might make his grandad proud.
24. When his Grandad dies, Rob decides it's not the right time to say anything. Now is a good time to remind students where they too can get help if they have lost a loved one: [https://www.lifeline.org.au/get-help/topics/loss-grief?gclid=Cj0KCQjwjN7YBRCOARIsAFcB936EH8b5Po4QbzyikpoS-P-xhAR3XBh\\_xEPbUjhu\\_oRrTo2pgzdT4zMaAttBEALw\\_wcB](https://www.lifeline.org.au/get-help/topics/loss-grief?gclid=Cj0KCQjwjN7YBRCOARIsAFcB936EH8b5Po4QbzyikpoS-P-xhAR3XBh_xEPbUjhu_oRrTo2pgzdT4zMaAttBEALw_wcB)

- a. Have students think about and discuss why Rob has chosen not to speak.
25. In Chapter 64 (p.242), Agnes talks about Rob's problems with his identity. What problems can occur for students? Discuss identity – what is it? You may wish to use this structure: <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/identity-charts> You can use [Blackline Master 2](#) as an example. Discuss whether anyone found out anything new about themselves.  
This is a personal activity. Students may not wish to share.
26. In Chapter 66 (p. 254), we learn that Rob is Roberta. Has anyone in the class spotted that? How might it change parts of the narrative? Does it matter? Brainstorm what assumptions readers may have made and think about why.
27. Chapters 67-70 (pp. 255-70 are the denouement. This is where the 'fourth wall' falls and readers discover how Rob has altered real life for what Miss Pritchett says is an 'idealised world'. Have students answer the following:
- Describe how you feel at this point in the novel.
  - To what extent do you feel cheated?
  - What things make sense now that didn't before?

(See assessment activities below for more work on this.)

## ASSESSMENT – CHOOSE ONE QUESTION

- Describe how Rob's friend Andrew helps him overcome anxiety throughout the novel. What specific things does he do and how do they help?  
(Look at pp. 32, 104, 149, 177, 203.)
- Rob is told to get on the front page of a local newspaper. Extending the earlier class discussion, work in small groups to produce a front page of your local newspaper, complete with article, photograph, header and any other features that are usually on the front page.
- Write a fictionalised narrative about how Pat, Rob's Grandad, meets his wife Bella and what happens from there.  
Look at pp. 154, 168, 180, 180-184 to begin with.
- Research a short biography of Rob's Grandad's life as far as we can tell from the novel. Look at pp. 132-134, 180- 184 201, 227 to begin with.
- Study the poem 'Dulce et decorum est, pro patria mori' and relate it to the effects that Rob's Grandad feels in the novel.
- Throughout the novel, Rob receives text messages (pp. 62, 78, 83, 88, 153, 161, 225, 241).  
Discuss how these and other elements of the novel shape Rob's self-esteem.
- Compare the 'real' account of Rob's experiences with his fictionalised account – what differences and similarities are there? Explain.
- How does the writer both reveal and conceal Rob's birth gender and gender identity? Refer to pp. 27, 143 and 225 for clues sown to suggest that Rob may not be who he seems.
- Look at the scene after Rob has demonstrated at the canteen and Mrs Appelby defends him (pp. 140-142).  
Re-write this chapter from the perspective of the Assistant Principal.
- 'Grandad was/is Rob's Guardian Angel'. Discuss. (Refer to pp. 122, 211, 221-222)
- How has the author obscured Rob's gender identity throughout the novel? Discuss the language used and the clues that lie within the pages.

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## FURTHER READING

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### OTHER NOVELS FOR OLDER TEENAGERS BY BARRY JONSBURG

*Game Theory*

*Pandora Jones (BK 1) Admission*

*Pandora Jones (BK 2) Deception*

*Pandora Jones (BK 3 Reckoning)*

*My Life as an Alphabet*

*Being Here*

*Cassie*

*Ironbark*

*Dreamrider*

*It's Not All About You, Calma!*

*The Whole Business with Kiffo and the Pitbull*

### SIMILAR NOVELS

*If I Was Your Girl*, by Meredith Russo

*Lizard Radio*, by Pat Schmatz

*Brooklyn, Burning*, by Steve Brezenoff

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## SPOILER

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In Chapter 66 (p. 254), we learn that Rob is Roberta. So a large part of the background to his story is his desire to be a boy, instead of a girl. To this extent, Rob is an 'unreliable narrator' until quite near the end of the book. However, there are clues to this aspect of his identity throughout the novel, though many readers will only recognise them in retrospect.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Barry Jonsberg's YA novels, *The Whole Business with Kiffo and the Pitbull* and *It's Not All About YOU, Calma!* were shortlisted for the CBCA awards. *It's Not All About YOU, Calma!* also won the Adelaide Festival Award for Children's Literature and *Dreamrider* was shortlisted in the NSW Premier's Awards. *Being Here* won the QLD Premier's YA Book Award and was shortlisted for the Prime Minister's Award. *My Life as an Alphabet* won the Gold Inky, the Children's Peace Literature Award, the Territory Read, Children's Literature/YA Award and the Victorian Premier's Literary Award and was shortlisted in the Prime Minister's Literary Awards, the CBCA awards, the WA Premier's Book Awards and the Adelaide Festival Awards.

Barry lives in Darwin. His books have been published in the USA, the UK, France, Poland, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Italy, Slovenia, Brazil, Turkey, China and Korea.

## ABOUT WRITING THIS NOVEL

### Barry says:

'I had so much fun writing this.

'As so often happens with my novels, I had no clear idea where I was going to go with it when I started. A love story? That appealed. A quirky character? I love those. As for the rest, I had to write it to find out.

'It turned out that Rob's journey became much more than a record of a first love affair. It became about the way Rob reacts with his family and his struggles towards a sense of his own identity. Love was still there, of course, but broadened into love for friends, family and most importantly, love for yourself. I would like to think that by the end of the book, Rob is hearing multiple love songs – for Grandad, Andrew, his Mum and Dad, Trixie, Agnes, but most especially for Rob Fitzgerald and all he might be.

'I'd also like to think he will keep laughing, even [especially] in adversity.

'Laughter and love. Life doesn't offer anything better.'

## NITA JONSBURG

Anita Jonsberg lives in Darwin and teaches English at Years 10, 11 and 12.

## Dulce et Decorum Est

by Wilfred Owen

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,  
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,  
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.  
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,  
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;  
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots  
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling  
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,  
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling  
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.—  
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,  
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,  
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;  
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—  
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*  
*Pro patria mori.*

