

OFF THE MAP

By Scot Gardner

RECOMMENDED FOR: Ages 14-18 years old*

Young adult fiction, suited for Years 8-12, SECONDARY and SENIOR SECONDARY

THEMES: Identity, masculinity, family, friendship and the nature of life

CURRICULUM LEARNING AREAS:

- **ENGLISH:** Literacy, literature and language

NOTES WRITTEN BY: Nita Jonsberg

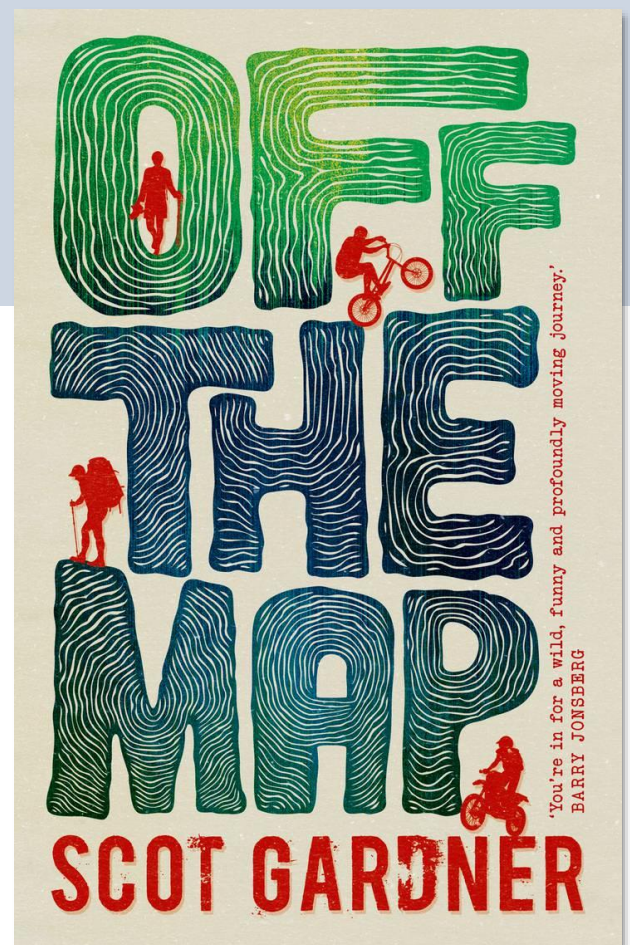
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* Refer to table titled 'Themes and Applicability' on the last page of these notes to determine dominant themes within each story and the author's estimation of age group applicability across a range of variables (some are suitable for students younger than 14 years old). Teachers can choose to either read the book in its entirety with the class, or pick certain stories to focus on.

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INTRODUCTION

These refreshingly candid stories are suitable for students aged between 14 and 18 years old and will expand their understanding of identity and self. In some stories it will also highlight ethical issues about computer technology and its uses; particularly artificial intelligence.

Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR, SCOT GARDNER

Off the Map is a compilation of 15 short stories told by 15 different narrators, all containing various themes. Can you tell us what inspired some of your ideas and outline the essence of the stories?

Answers

Sometimes the internet can seem so big and all-knowing that it looks like a god. Combine that notion with the gut-sick feeling of losing your best work amongst all the ones and zeros, and you'll want some answers too!

The Tunnel

This is a story about an adventure in a storm drain inspired, in part, by my own adventures in storm drains as a kid and, if I'm honest, as an adult too. There's no hidden meaning – it's fun to be underground. Feels a bit creepy, maybe even a bit dangerous at times. I like that.

Stray

We lived in the bush for a long time. Twenty years or so. We never locked the doors. Ever. A stray dog turned up one time, whimpering at the flywire. It was skinny, muddy and ragged. I fed it and gave it water, but I couldn't bring myself to let it inside. It's really a story about asylum seekers.

The Wave

Secret double lives. Genetic Sexual Attraction (GSA) is a poorly researched and somewhat controversial idea that posits children who grow up apart from their siblings or parents can be overwhelmed with strong feelings for them if they meet later in life.

The Kid

I've met a lot of young people who have fallen through the gap when their parents separated. They feel forgotten as their mum and dad start new lives and new families. This is a story about that feeling.

Bad Billy

I stayed a couple of nights at an Airbnb in Wagga Wagga, flying foam aeroplanes with the 7-year-old boy of the house. The boy had an imaginary friend who told him stories about life between the wars, only the imaginary friend knew more about the world than the 7-year-old ever could. His mum played me some of the recordings she'd made of him telling the imaginary friend's tales. They were creepy... and extremely cool.

Your Mum's Nightie

This piece explores the notion that music, like love, means different things to different people.

Magellan

A teacher at a school I visited once, advised me not to talk about death with her class – one of the students' fathers had died suddenly the weekend before. We didn't talk much about death, but the girl who'd lost her dad told us all to treasure every moment you're alive together. It was one of the bravest things I'd seen.

Thingless

On a motorbike trip around Australia I met a swagman who made me think long and hard about possessions. He carried everything he owned and had slept on the roadside for more than thirty years. He seemed complete. He inspired the character of Vince in *Changing Gear* and shaped the voice of Sparrow in the book *Sparrow*.

Grass

Some parents are worse than useless. The only thing they give their kids to play with are scars. Some, on the other hand, are naturals. This is a tale about a fierce young mum finding her community.

Another Theory of Relativity

One lunchtime at a school in rural NSW a Year 10 guy gave me his extraordinary take on moral relativism.

Redbeard

On the last day of a pretty tough Outdoor Education camp, a ranger told us that a hiker had died the night before on another section of the track. My head can't leave ideas like that alone. What if our group had discovered the body?

The Thing

I taught woodwork and metalwork for a while. We hosted an exchange student, too. Add the cultural awakening we experienced living in rural Japan, and you'll find all the ingredients necessary for 'The Thing'.

Karma

Young people often lament about the poor choices their divorced parents have made when re-partnering. They're not all horror stories, but this one is.

Bone Moon

Another Outdoor Education-inspired adventure that shines its head-torch on secrets and the shades of love.

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

BEFORE READING *OFF THE MAP*

Before reading *Off the Map*, ask students to consider the title and cover design.

- What visual techniques has the designer used? Consider font, colour, image and composition to create a mood for the story to come.
- Compile a list of words to describe the mood that the cover evokes.
- Do you think the patterns within the title font are significant? What do they remind you of? Why?

ENGLISH

LITERATURE, LITERACY AND LANGUAGE

Note: The wide-ranging themes of these stories make them relevant to a variety of age groups. In the table titled 'Themes and Applicability' on the last page of these notes, the author has summarised the dominant themes within each story and his estimation of age group applicability across a range of variables. Teachers can choose to either read the book in its entirety with the class, or pick certain stories to focus on.

Answers

- Split the class into pairs. Read to page 3 and work together for ten minutes to predict what might happen next. Tabulate your main ideas and then share with the class.
- It's clear that Artificial Intelligence is powering the website providing the 'answers' to the protagonist's questions.
 - Research AI online, starting with <https://www.britannica.com/technology/artificial-intelligence>
 - What can AI be used for?
- Write a short account of what you might do if you came across a website that seemed to know far too much about you.
- Imagine you came across this website. Think about the sorts of questions you would ask it. What do we discover about Jael through the questions he asks later in the story?
- Google the same questions Jael asks about global warming and stopping war. Using the information you find, break away into small groups and design global warming awareness or anti-war posters for your classroom.
- As the story progresses, it's clear the AI has answers for even the most pressing questions – who or what do you imagine the AI to be? Justify your answer with reasons for your view.
- What do you think the AI's answers to the questions 'Is there a heaven' and 'Is there a hell' mean? Discuss with a partner and share with the class.
- When you have read to the end of the story, write a short sequel, narrating what happens with the numbers Jael wrote down on the notepaper.

The Tunnel

- The character of Alex tells readers that 'boredom is the mother of insane stunts'. After reading about Meat's stunt on Madigan Street (pp 19-20), consider risks you've taken that in retrospect don't seem like such great ideas.
- Gardner briefly describes the character Nick at the beginning of the story. What impression do you have of him and why? Use quotes to justify your opinion.
- The character 'Meat' is quite different to Nick – how do readers discover this? Use examples from the text to illustrate your ideas.
- Are there any points in the story where you feel really uneasy? Outline these points and try to isolate which techniques the author used to evoke these feelings in you. Is it only the setting? The interactions between the characters? The dialogue? Be as detailed as you can.
- Re-read pages 30 and 31. How fast is the water rising? Online, research the dangers of playing in pipes and drains and document statistics of the most dire outcomes.

The Stray

- Analyse Rhiannon's description of the approaching storm. Identify Gardner's use of figurative language here and the role it has in conveying her character to readers.
- Read to page 36 and identify the genre of this story. Justify your view. Revisit this idea at the end of the story. Would you classify this story the same way or differently? Explain why.
- Read the section where Rhiannon hears knocking at the door. What has the author done to create tension in this part? Write down your ideas and then share them in a class discussion.
- Is Cyclone Francine real? Conduct some online research. What can you find out?
- How would you have reacted to the stray dog? Why do you think it was alternating between growling and being affectionate? Rewrite this section, but have Rhiannon let the stray in. What happens next?
- Reflect on the ending of the story. Gardner says the story is really about refugees – what parallels can you see? Discuss as a class.

The Wave

- Summarise the story in your own words, explaining what's going on.
- Describe how Martin and Pippa's father manages his deceit.
- What foreshadowing can you find to the climax of the story? Work in pairs to search the text.
- At the beginning of this story, Martin describes how he experienced 'hearts fluttering and birds singing' as well as other tropes and clichés related to love. In small groups, note other tropes and clichés associated with love and romance, then share with other groups.
- Martin messages Pippa and says, 'I knew you. We'd never met, but I knew you.' In light of what happens later in the story, what may have made Martin feel this way? What could they both have been reacting to?
- When describing Martin's feelings about his internal organs at various parts in the story, Gardner uses lots of figurative language – how many examples can you find and what is the effect of each?

The Kid

- This is an extremely sad story about Chloe, a year eight child caught between her warring parents. At what point in the story do you know there will be a sad ending? What gives this away? Answer using evidence from the text.
- Using quotes from the text, describe how adult relationships are characterised in this story.
- Silence plays a large role in helping to convey families 'rotting from the inside'. Where and when does Gardner's character note silence? What effect does it have on her?
- Animals depicted in this story play an important role. Which ones are significant and why?
- Charlie the goat is a symbol – but of what? How does he convey Chloe's helplessness? In what ways is his fate linked to Chloe?
- The description of Charlie's slow death may also be a metaphor for relationships; he died slowly and in plain sight. What other links can you find between his death and the death of relationships in the story?
- Write a personal response to this story, noting how you feel at the end of it and why.

Bad Billy

- Before reading this story, and from the title only, predict what the story will be about. Who is Billy? How old is he? Describe the orientation, complication and resolution of his story.
- In your own words, describe why you think Chen and Tariq are speaking with Boots and Mason when Mason suggests they wouldn't normally.
- How important is the setting of the story in making a successful text? Use quotes to justify your opinion.
- The author based this story on an encounter with a child who had an imaginary friend who told him of things a seven-year-old would be unlikely to know.
 - Read this article: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/you/article-7891245/What-kids-ghosts-Anna-Moore-hears-ghosts-send-shivers-spine.html> (Note for teachers: Reproduce the article to remove potentially unsuitable advertising).
 - In your opinion, are ghosts or spirits real? Can they be imaginary friends? Explain your point of view.
 - Can you describe any experiences that don't seem to be able to be rationally explained?
- Write Chen's thoughts after the evening around the fire. This can take the form of a diary or monologue script. What does Chen think of Mason and Boots and Mason's story?
- How do you think the evening changes Mason's view of himself?

Your Mum's Nightie

- This story begins with a detailed description of a song – using a musical linguistic register. What musical terms can you find in the first three pages? Note them all. Some useful resources to explain the main types of register can be found here: <https://www.thoughtco.com/register-language-style-1692038>
- Think of words that could form part of a scientific register and a legal register. When certain elevated or technical registers are used to exclude, this is known as jargon.
- Describe your personal reaction to the lyrics of the band's first song – then describe what they tell you about Marchie and the other band members. How does Stretch feel about the song?

- What do you think of the band's name, 'All Day Wood'? Justify your answer.
- Stretch describes his relationship with Emily Taylor (p73) – what technique is used here and what makes it so effective?
- Stretch describes having a 'musical conversation' with Phuong on the drums (p74) – explain what this is. Do you have an example of a similar kind of conversation you've noticed or experienced when listening to a favourite band or song? Share an audio or video track with the class.
- Look at the conversation about potential drummer Ray (p76-77). How does Gardner have Marchie get himself out of trouble at this point?
- How are readers positioned to empathise with Stretch's relief at ending All Day Wood and beginning something new? Include quotes in your answer.

Magellan

- Magellan is a place named after a person. Research this place online to find out more about the person after whom it is named.
- Having read the story, describe the message it gives.
- Are any of the situations in this story familiar to you? Describe any similarities you notice between Tiff's family and your own.
- Tiff finds Magellan stunningly beautiful. How does Gardner depict what makes it attractive to viewers?
- Where is the loveliest place you have ever been? It may be overseas, interstate, your suburb or your garden. Share your ideas with the class, explaining why it's a favourite place. Do the same again, but this time, describe the worst place you have ever been.
- Tiff describes the trip as 'superglue' for her family, holding them together. What holds your family together? Is it something you do, or are interested in? You can write about this and choose whether you'd like to share with the class.
- How does Tiff honour her mum's memory?

*Remind students that there is support available online and at school if this story upsets anyone.

Thingless

- Before reading this story:
 - Look at the title and describe what you think it might mean. What is a 'thing'? What does it mean to be 'less' a thing?
 - Make a list of the ten possessions that mean the most to you. Briefly note why they are important.
- Gardner notes that this story was inspired by a swagman he met while travelling. How is this narrator's tone different to others in this collection? Work in small groups to compare narrators from two other stories in *Off the Map* with this one. Note also how the tone changes in 'Thingless' from the descriptions of the 'hot' people to the swagman's own voice.
- Research transferred epithets and oxymorons and explore how Gardner uses them to good effect here.

- Consider this excerpt:

They get at you when you're little and they culture this culture of Things, so when you get old enough to want, you know what you're supposed to want for.

Do you agree with this statement? Think about your experiences and those of your family and friends. Do you know what you're supposed to want? Do you and your friends want the same things? Review the lists you made before reading. What might they tell you?

- The swagman describes how every day is a 'school day' and how everyone he meets is a 'teacher'. Explain what this means and think about your own experience. When was the last time someone who was not a school teacher taught you something? What was it?
- Has this story altered your view of 'homelessness'? Explain why or why not.

Grass

- Cassie's story is bleak, yet has a hopeful ending. Design a line graph showing the highs and lows of her journey. Annotate with events from the story.
- Complete character profiles for each of the main characters. You can find an excellent selection of blackline master profiling templates here: <https://www.literacyleader.com/sites/default/files/Character%20Graphic%20Organizers.pdf>
- Pretend you are an embryonic Darcy. Narrate Cassie's pregnancy from his point of view, considering the things she does and takes, and their probable effect on him.
- Why do you think the author has Cassie's mother pepper her speech with French phrases? What does that convey about her?
- Spider is clearly a criminal – write a first-person account of how the bodies got into the drums at the back of his workshop.
- Gardner says of this story that 'the only thing [some parents] give their kids to play with are scars'. How far is this seen to be true? You can think about other stories in this collection too.

Another Theory of Relativity

- Carefully re-read the story, noting Gardner's use of puns. What's the effect of the wordplay? How are readers encouraged to react?
- There are some serious points here – summarise them in your own words. What might you have thought about in a new way?
- What is this narrator's view of religion? How far do you agree? Discuss with a partner, then respond in writing.
- Hold a class debate: the topic is that 'God is an imaginary friend'. Remember that you are debating the topic, not individuals' beliefs. This is an optional task. If you're not comfortable, discuss with your teacher.
- Re-read page 127. Think of some negative aspects of your life and see if you can respond positively to them.

- ‘Being happy is a choice you make’. Is it? If your school has access to the Fish Foundation’s video, then watch that. You may also watch Amy Cuddy’s TED talk on how your body language may shape who you are to see the effect of your body on your mind:
https://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_may_shape_who_you_are?language=en
- If everything is relative, how does this help encourage tolerance?
- Research the relationship between all Earth’s inhabitants and design a booklet showing our interconnectedness.

Some useful sites:

<https://phys.org/news/2013-08-dna-earth.html#:~:text=New%20research%20by%20Peter%20Ralph,more%20closely%20than%20previously%20though t.>

<https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-19331938> (some religious lineage here)

Redbeard

- Read the first page of this story (p133) and stop. In pairs, discuss what might have just happened, then share with the class – is there much agreement? Who are Hector and Marley?
- Continue reading to the end. Describe the relationship between Bren and his little brother. What has Bren learned from having a sibling and how is this reflected in his actions with the dead man?
- Why do you think Bren doesn’t immediately tell Hector and Marley about the dead man?
- Bren gains perspective in this story. How and why does his experience reframe the anger he felt at the beginning of the story? Also, think about how this links to the previous story ‘Another Theory of Relativity’ and to ‘Magellen’.

The Thing

- Exchange student Kazu reacts very differently to Amy, Adam and their mother on the discovery of a silicone penis in Kazu’s schoolbag. In light of what we later learn, why is this?
- Ben and Caleb’s joke backfires badly. Why is this so humorous? Do you think Kazu meant to get them into trouble?
- What does this story say about subjectivity? Think about why Kazu likes the woodwork offcut. How does subjectivity affect our everyday lives and how important is culture in creating it?
- What does Mr Charalambous do to engage Kazu in his class?
- Why do you think Kazu ‘arrives’ after Amy tells him about her hospitalisation? Write a stream of consciousness that shows his thoughts after her revelation.
- The Kanamara Matsuri festival is real – you can read about it here:
<https://tokyocheapo.com/events/kanamara-penis-festival/> Do we have any similar festivals? How has this shaped Kazu’s attitudes, do you think?
- How do Dr Cunningham’s reactions to Kazu’s speech and gift convey typical Australian attitudes to genitalia?

Karma

- Brent's character is almost a caricature – what aspects do you recognise and which are foreign to you? List the stereotypical attributes of him, his possessions and his behaviour.
- Explain why you think Brent is so different from their father.
- Write a first-person account of what Ang's mother thinks when Brent defecates in the water.
- List five websites you think Brent would use regularly.
- How does this story demonstrate karma? You can see a detailed explanation of what it is here: <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/karma.htm>

Bone Moon

- How did you react to reading that Parko shared her wine with Jack? Is it okay? Discuss together.
- How does Jack feel about knowing that and having discovered Aaden and Tariq together? How does his personal reaction differ from the others' he imagines?
- How many 'flavours' or types of love can you discover in this story and how are they communicated?

Assessments

- The author notes at the start of the book that Nerrima, Clarendon, Maybeline and the Magellan Peninsula are fictional locations that don't exist in the real world, but are a bit like places in Australia. Produce a map of Nerrima, referenced throughout the book in various stories. Show where each featured character lives, as well as other landmarks.
- Using evidence from all the stories, draw a Venn diagram showing how the characters are connected and how. Free templates can be found here: <https://www.templatehub.org/venn-diagram-templates-3510.html>
- Choose three stories connected by theme and answer the question: How does Gardner explore the theme of _____ in *Off the Map*?
- What was Gardner's purpose in writing this collection of stories? Answer this question in essay format using evidence from at least five stories.
- How important is characterisation in conveying the main themes of this collection of stories? Answer in essay format, using evidence from at least three stories.
- Perform a monologue from the point of view of a minor character in the collection.
- Create a diorama of one of the homes featured in the collection.
- Choose one story that resonates with you and write or record your personal response to it.
- Create another family who would fit well into Nerrima. Describe each member with a short biography, including any challenges they face. Mention which other characters they are connected to and how, then write a detailed description of their home.

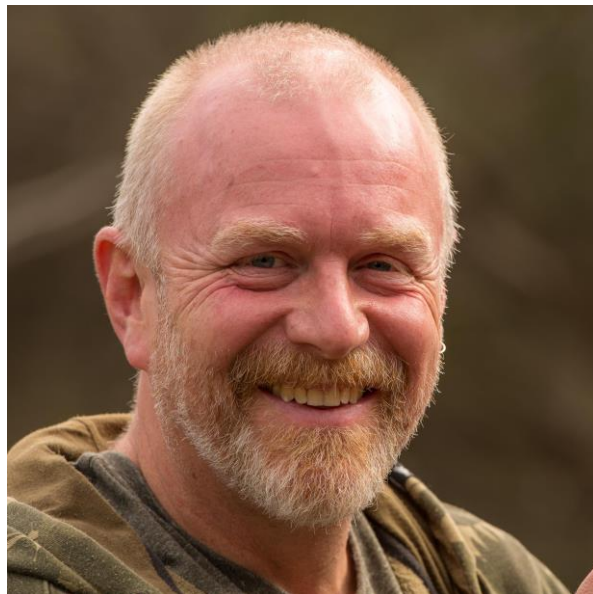
AUTHOR BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Scot Gardner became a writer after a chance meeting with a magazine editor while hitchhiking in eastern Australia. Magazine articles led to op-ed newspaper pieces and eventually novels. Scot's first fiction for young adults, *One De ad Seagull*, was published after he attended a writing conference with John Marsden.

More than a decade later, his many books have found local and international favour and garnered praise and awards for their honest take on adolescent life. They include books like *White Ute Dreaming*, *Burning Eddy* and most recently *Changing Gear*, shortlisted for the CBCA Book of the Year Awards; *Happy as Larry*, winner of a WA Premier's Book Award for young adult fiction; and *The Dead I Know*, winner of the CBCA Book of the Year Award for Older Readers.

Scot lives with his wife in a vegetable garden in country Victoria.



OTHER NOVELS FOR OLDER TEENS BY SCOT GARDNER

Changing Gear

Sparrow

The Way We Roll

The Dead I Know

Happy as Larry

The Detachable Boy

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

School Library Association of Victoria (SLAV) Book review prompts, writing tips and assessment sample sheets:
<https://www.shelftalkers.slav.vic.edu.au/resources/>

ABOUT THE WRITER OF THE NOTES

Anita Jonsberg lives in Darwin with her husband Barry and Blue Heeler Zorro and loves teaching English to Years 10, 11 and 12.

THEMES AND APPLICABILITY

A summary of themes found within each story alongside the author's estimation of age group applicability across these variables, in order to assist teachers to either read the book in its entirety with the class, or pick certain stories to focus on:

Page	Story title	Themes	Year applicability	Sexual references	Street language
1	Answers	AI, supernatural, sibling death, absent parent, faith, Internet	Years 7-10	N	N
16	The Tunnel	Friendship, dares, peer pressure, adventure, danger, underground	Years 7-9	N	N
33	Stray	Fear, self-confidence, autonomy, responsibility, death, farm life, asylum seeker	Years 6-9	N	N
44	The Wave	Double lives, step-family, truth and lies, debating, romance, faith	Years 8-10	N	N
57	The Kid	Farm life, animals, family breakdown, death	Years 6-9	N	N
62	Bad Billy	Ghost story, outdoor education, imaginary friends, unexplained, social status	Years 8-10	Y	Y
72	Your Mum's Nightie	Music, ego, friendship, ambition, gender	Years 8-10	N	N
81	Magellan	Parent death, adventure, camping, self-confidence, autonomy, grief	Years 5-9	N	N
90	Thingless	Material possessions, social media, FOMO, autonomy, homelessness, poverty	Years 7-10	N	N
95	Grass	Teenage pregnancy, autonomy, family breakdown, community, drugs, violence, leaving school	Years 8-10	Y	Y
124	Another Theory of Relativity	Step-family, self-confidence, self-image, sexual identity, poverty, social responsibility	Years 8-10	Y	N
133	Redbeard	Friendship, death, sexual relationships, outdoor education, hiking, autonomy, family, young siblings	Years 8-10	N	Y
146	The Thing	Cultural differences, sexuality, depression, exchange students, sibling rivalry, woodwork	Years 8-10	Y	N
157	Karma	Post-divorce relationships, family breakdown, camping, sexual preference, animal cruelty, behaviour	Years 8-10	Y	Y
166	Bone Moon	Lies and secrets, friendship, sexual preferences, outdoor education, endurance	Years 8-10	Y	N