

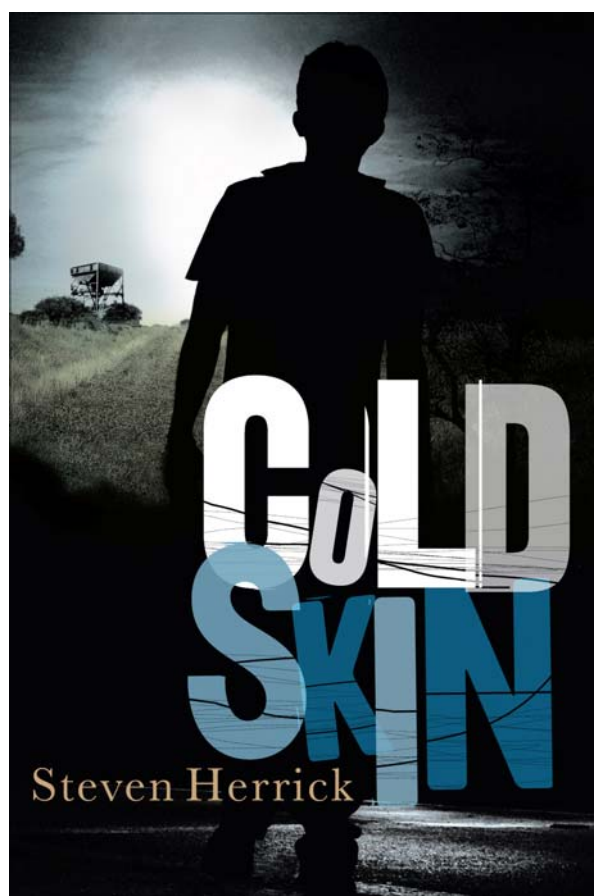
Teachers Notes
by Dr Wendy Michaels

Cold Skin
Steven Herrick

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Recommended for ages 13-16 yrs

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INTRODUCTION

THE AUTHOR AND HIS WORK

Steven Herrick was born in Brisbane, the youngest of seven children. At school, his favourite subject was soccer, and he dreamed of football glory while he worked at various jobs, including fruit picking. Now, he's a full time writer and performs in many schools each year. He loves talking to students and their teachers about stories, poetry, soccer and even golf.

Steven Herrick is a poet whose body of work includes poetry collections for young people and adults such as *Water Bombs*, *Love Poems and Leg Spinner*, *The Sound of Chopping* and *My Love, My Life, My Lasagne*. He has also performed his poetry in pubs and public venues in Australia and overseas.

Steven Herrick is renowned for his verse novels for young readers and young adult readers including *A place like this* (1998), *The spangled drongo* (1999), *The simple gift* (2000), *Tom Jones saves the world* (2002), *Do-wrong Ron* (2003), *By the river* (2004), *Naked bunyip dancing* (2005) and *Lonesome howl* (2006). Several of his verse novels have won awards throughout Australia and have been released in the US and other countries. His works have been short-listed for Children's Book Council Awards on a number of occasions, and have won various awards including the NSW Premier's Literary Awards. The young adult verse novel, *The simple gift*, has been listed in NSW on the HSC English text list – one of very few works by Australian poets to be listed in 2004-2005.

Steven lives in the Blue Mountains with his wife and sons. Visit his website at www.acay.com.au/~sherrick.

YOUNG ADULT VERSE NOVELS IN AUSTRALIA

Steven Herrick's first verse novel was *Love, ghosts & nose hair* (1996). The publication of this book marks something of a watershed in narratives for young people as it re-introduced narratives told through verse. While narrative verse is as old as storytelling itself, Herrick's work has taken narrative verse in new directions.

Other renowned Australian writers, such as Margaret Wild, Libby Hathorn and Catherine Bateson have also turned their hand to verse novels for young adults and younger readers and this has allowed them to tell some different kinds of stories in a compact format. The developing genre of the young adult (YA) verse novel has become a significant story-telling genre in Australia – even though it causes some librarians a degree of angst in determining where such books should be shelved in libraries – with the poetry or with the novels.

THE YA VERSE NOVEL GENRE

The young adult (YA) verse novel genre is now well established in Australia and the USA. Verse novels commonly allow the poet to tell a story from more than one perspective. In Herrick's first collection of poems, *Water Bombs* (1992), we find the essential features of the verse novel in the series of vignettes from the perspectives of the two main characters Joe and Debbie – adolescents who grow up in the same neighbourhood, go the same school, become friends, fall out, get back together "in Year 11" and eventually marry and have a son – "Joe Junior". There is a loose narrative thread that binds these vignettes of juxtaposed poems in the individual voices of the characters into a connected story. Herrick's subsequent verse novels build on these essential features and extend and expand them to explore more complex issues and relationships.

The hybrid form of the verse novel draws upon not only narrative poetry, but also lyric and dramatic poetry forms. The individual poems spoken in the voice of different characters are similar to the soliloquy in a play in which a character directly addresses the audience. The juxtaposition of these monologues allows the reader to hear the different characters' perspectives on the events. In some ways the contemporary Australian verse novel has much in common with ancient Greek drama.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

INVESTIGATING THE VERSE NOVEL

Before beginning the study you might ask students who are familiar with the works of Steven Herrick to share their impressions and responses to his other verse novels or poetry with the class.

Students could research the various verse novels written by Steven Herrick and draw up a catalogue of the works of the poet-storyteller. They might draw upon the back blurb of the published novels to determine the kinds of thematic concerns that have featured in his works to date. Perhaps they could use this information to devise some questions that they might like to ask him in an interview – simulated or real.

Students could also research other Australian verse novels by YA writers such as Catherine Bateson, Libby Hathorn, Margaret Wild, or adult verse novels by writers such as Dorothy Porter, Alan Wearne, Geoff Page or Paul Hetherington. They might focus on the issues explored in these narratives and compare those for young adults with adult works. They might note the publishers of these works and visit the publisher websites to investigate how these works are promoted.

It might also be useful for students to carry out some research into Australia's social situation in the immediate post-World War II period. In particular, they might focus on country towns and the way they memorialized those who signed up for war service. You might like to play Peter Sculthorpe's

evocative piece of music, "Small Town", about the southern NSW town of Thirroul. This piece is often played on Anzac Day each year.

BEFORE READING *COLD SKIN*

Title

Before beginning the verse novel, *Cold Skin*, have students speculate about the title. You could point out that Herrick's book titles tend to be short and punchy. They are often expressing in a key image a central issue in the story. What issues do students think this title might be encapsulating? Students might express their ideas in writing and after reading the work they could test their responses to the story against their written predictions.

Cover

Have students examine the cover of the book. Encourage them to discuss what the image suggests about the story – its setting, characters and ideas. You might point out that Herrick's verse novels are often set in Australian country towns and sometimes they have historical rather than contemporary settings. Encourage them to discuss what the designer of the cover is suggesting through the design composition. Encourage students to focus particularly on colour. You might point out that many crime fiction novels use this "noir" look. Perhaps students could research the "film noir" genre – a film movement that dates to the post-World War II period – and use the Internet to find examples of noir film posters. Have students speculate as to why the designer might have used these techniques in the design for this book.

Blurb

Have students focus particularly on the back cover blurb. You might encourage them to talk about what the purpose of this blurb is in relation to the book as an object in the bookselling marketplace, and how the language of the blurb positions the reader in relation to the content of the book. Have students discuss the form of this blurb: the quote, the comment about the main character, Eddie, the setting, and the author. They might like to compare this format with other books by Herrick or other writers.

Ask students to consider what impression they are forming about Eddie, his father and the town of Burruga from this information.

Have students consider the quote – "Cowards don't always hide. Sometimes they're so gutless they need to stand out." Encourage students to explore the ideas suggested by this quote and how they think it might relate to the story.

The Crime Genre

Ask students what they know about crime stories. You could tell them that this genre has a long history going back to ancient times and that it has evolved over the centuries to flourish in print form during the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries. One of the features that promoted its flowering in the nineteenth century was the development of intellectual rationalism. This led easily to the invention of the detective character who used logical deduction to solve the crime, and then to forensic technology that provided both the clues and the evidence to the detective/police investigators. In the mid-to-late twentieth century the crime fiction genre hybridised and diversified – partially under historical/political influences and partially under the influence of developing technologies (both cinematic and scientific).

This means also that a wide range of fictional forms, including verse novels, are now employed to tell crime fiction stories. Students in groups could research some of the diverse forms of narrative within the crime fiction genre – eg the detective story, the police procedural, the amateur sleuth, serial-killer drama, courtroom drama, psychological thriller, spy thriller, and even parodies of crime fiction. Allow time for the research and presentation of their information.

Encourage students to identify the key elements of crime fiction as a genre – particularly issues relating to justice and revenge, and the establishment of the truth.

Preliminary pages

Tell students that they are about to read a verse novel that has eight parts and falls loosely into the crime fiction genre. Have them examine the table of contents (page v) and discuss what the titles of the eight parts suggest about the content of the narrative. Have them look at the list of characters (page vii). Why do they think the poet/storyteller has included this list at the beginning? Point to characters who are also given titles – Mayor, Mr, Sergeant – as opposed to those whose first names are included. What might this indicate about their roles and relationships in the story?

WHILE READING *COLD SKIN*

“One: A bright future”

Have students read part one. In this part we meet Eddie, his brother Larry and his parents – although we do not hear the mother’s voice. It is not uncommon in Herrick’s work that the mother figure is absent or does not speak directly to us. We also meet Sally and Mayor Paley.

Encourage students to discuss their impressions of the town, the time period (post World War II) and relationships in the Holding family. Why do they think the father has such antipathy for the mines? Ask students to consider how our impression of the family might alter if we were to hear the

mother's voice. Perhaps they could experiment with writing a monologue for the mother and consider where it might be included in this section of the story.

Encourage them to find images of Australian towns that resemble their impressions of Burruga. Encourage them to discuss the patterns of life in such towns particularly in the post-war period. You might have to point out the isolation of such towns at this period in history without the communication technologies that permeate students' lives today.

Have students re-read Mayor Paley's monologue. How do they respond to this character? Point out his use of words and phrases such as "truly", "Trust me.", "mind you". Do they trust him? What issues does his monologue raise? Remind students that this story is in essence a crime fiction story and that one of the conventions of the crime story is that you meet the criminal early in the story. Have them speculate whether they have met the criminal yet – and if so who it might be. Encourage them to justify their speculation by close reference to the words in the monologues.

"Two: Coal town"

In this section we move into the everyday activities of the town and meet other adult characters such as Mr Butcher and Mr Carter as well as hearing more from Mayor Paley. We also meet Colleen. Encourage students to discuss their impressions of each of these adult characters. They might consider the following in relation to each of the adult characters:

- What motivates the character?
- How does the character relate to others in the town?
- How do their personal values relate to their role and position – i.e. teacher, newspaper editor, mayor?

Have students work in groups of three with each one taking on the role of one of these characters. Have students imagine a scene where the three meet. They could first improvise the scene and then write a transcript of the dialogue. Allow time for presentation to the class.

In this section we also see more of Albert Holding. Have students re-read his monologues (pp.51-53, 69-70). Encourage them to discuss the ways in which Herrick presents this character. Have them consider particularly whether they are invited to judge him harshly because of his behaviours or to understand his vulnerabilities as a result of his war-time experiences. You might need to remind students about the ideas about courage that were prominent at the time of the war and to read this character within that context. Encourage students to speculate as to how the reader might be given a different perspective on this character – eg by not hearing his voice, by learning about him only from other characters, or hearing his wife's perspective, etc.

In this section we also see more of Larry, Eddie and Sally and we meet Colleen. Have students discuss the relationships amongst these adolescents.

“Three: Town and city”

In this section the various narrative threads are teased out. Have students read up to Eddie’s monologue on page 109. The main narrative thread involves Eddie’s spying on Mr Butcher’s excursion to the city prostitute. Encourage students to discuss the issues that this raises in the story and for Eddie’s understanding of male-female relationships.

In this section we are also introduced to Sergeant Pete Grainger, the key character in the murder investigation that is to follow. You might point out that Sergeant Grainger is introduced to us in classical Shakespearean manner by another character, Mr Carter. Have students examine how this introduction positions us in relation to Grainger. Are these impressions confirmed in his following monologues?

By the end of this section we have a body. Before students read the rest of this section you might like to ask them who they think will be the murder victim. Ask them to justify their speculations by reference to what we know of the characters. They might also like to think about who the perpetrator might be. Have them consider who cannot be either victim or criminal.

Have students read to the end of the section. Were they surprised that Colleen is the victim? Encourage students to think about the events in the city with Mr Butcher and how this relates to the events at Taylors Bend. Encourage them to discuss Grainger’s response as he finds the body.

Point out the last question Sergeant Grainger poses to himself in the final monologue: “Who in my town could do this?” You might point out that this question commonly asked by investigators has three aspects to it: motive, means and opportunity.

Have students take on the role of the Sergeant and write a monologue in which Grainger considers the various characters in relation to whether they have the motive, means and opportunity to kill Colleen in this way. The monologue could be written in either prose or verse. Allow time for presentation of their monologues and discussion of any differences in the suspects that students propose.

“Four: Cold skin”

In this section the main threads of the narrative start to come together. Have students read the section up to page 148.

One of the threads is the relationship between Sally and Eddie, which starts to blossom. Encourage students to talk about how they view this relationship. Ask students to re-read Sally's monologue (page 140). Point out the lines:

*I want to escape this place
and what's happened,
what's going to happen.*

What does Sally think might happen?

A second thread involves the responses to Colleen's death. Have students examine in particular Mr Carter's monologues (pp. 131, 134-5, 141-2). What do these reveal about how a country town and a family deal with this awful crime? Have students write the obituary that Mr Carter wrote for his newspaper. Students might like to consider how a city newspaper might report such a crime.

A third thread involves the investigation. Have students examine the monologues of the Sergeant and Mr Butcher (pp. 128-9, 130, 143-4, 145, 146-7, 148). Encourage them to discuss the ways in which the Sergeant is approaching the investigation. Do they think he has the right suspect? If not, who should he be suspecting?

The final thread in the narrative involves Albert Holding. Have students read his monologue (pp.149-151). In this monologue we not only get some back story that helps us further understand Albert, but we are also pointed to the crime's solution. Point out the last verse paragraph of this monologue.

*If Grainger can't put two and two together
then I'll do it for him.
No one in this town will think of me as gutless.
Not this time.*

Encourage students to consider who Albert thinks is the culprit. Albert is here talking about taking the law into his own hands. You might explain that the fine line between justice and revenge is an issue often raised in crime fiction. You could share with the students the essay *Of Revenge* by Francis Bacon which begins with the famous line – "Revenge is a kind of wild justice". The last two lines also reveal something important about Albert's personality and motivation. Ask students to predict what they think Albert will do.

"Five: Burning candles"

This section depicts the funeral service and the aftermath of the event on the various characters. Have students read the section and discuss the story developments.

Point out the advice that Albert offered Grainger (p168):

The bloke who did it was gutless.

A coward.

That's who you should be looking for, Grainger.

A coward.

Ask them whether they think Albert's advice is correct? Who do they think are cowards in Burrage?
Do they think Sergeant Grainger is putting "two and two together"?

"Six: Cowards"

Have students read this section up to page 183. Point out the comment (p.183):

I had a hunch

that it's not a young bloke.

It's a man.

Ask students whether they agree. Who does this eliminate? Which man would they suspect?

Have students read to page 195. Ask them to speculate on what "hits" Mr Carter at the end of this section.

Have students read to the end of the section and discuss their responses to the events. How do they judge Albert's revenge action?

"Seven: The bridge"

Have students read the section and discuss their responses.

Have students read Mr Carter's monologue (pp.225-6). Have students write the rest of the article for the newspaper.

Have them focus on the first monologue of this section (pp. 222-4). How do they respond to Eddie's "witness statement"? Compare this with Eddie's monologues (pp.227-231). Then re-read Eddie's monologues (pp.238-241). Encourage students to discuss the way Eddie is sorting out his new understandings of his father and his life. Have them re-read the final monologue. What do they think is the answer to the final question he poses: "How can I begin to accept all this?" (p 251)? Ask students to imagine that he has put that question to either Sally or his mother. Write the response that they would give him.

“Eight: The miner”

This section wraps up all the narrative threads. Have students speculate as to what will be the resolution for all the characters. Then read the section and compare their predictions with the resolutions that Herrick constructs.

Have students re-read Sergeant Grainger’s monologue (pp. 257-8). This raises the key moral issues. Encourage students to discuss the issues and how they have developed throughout the verse novel. Have them use the last two lines – “If you don’t look at what’s in front of you,/ you get overrun from behind” – as the opening of a piece of writing.

Have students re-read Larry’s monologue (pp. 259-260). In this monologue Larry quotes his mother’s words – “We spent years waiting for your father...And now we’re going do it all again.” Have students write a monologue in the mother’s voice that elaborates on that theme.

AFTER READING *COLD SKIN*

In one sense this novel is also a *bildungsroman* – a coming of age novel for both Eddie and Larry. Have students write an essay in which they explore how Herrick presents this coming of age for the two young men.

After reading the verse novel encourage students to discuss their responses to the issues it raises about truth, justice, revenge, cowardice and personal responsibility. Have students explore one of these ideas in a personal, reflective essay.

Encourage students to think about the hybridized form of the verse novel and how it enhances the immediacy of the characters and events. They might like to consider transforming the story into a dramatic or cinematic form.

Finally, have students work in groups. Imagine that they are committee members for the Premier’s Literary Awards. Herrick’s book has been nominated for the top award of Book of Year. The criteria include:

- Content appropriate to a young adult and adult audience
- Issues of significance to a contemporary readership
- Writing of outstanding quality that will stand the test of time.

Have each group discuss the book in relation to these three criteria and write the report for the Premier that outlines why (or why not) the book should receive this honour.

ABOUT THE WRITER

DR WENDY MICHAELS

Dr Wendy Michaels is a former lecturer in the School of Humanities at the University of Newcastle on the Ourimbah Campus. She taught courses in Children's Literature, Creative Writing, Gender Studies and Education. Her research interests are in emerging genres in young adult fiction, representations of gender in children's literature, interanimation of word and image in picture books, and writing for performance. Dr Michaels was also an English teacher and English Inspector at the NSW Board of Studies. She has published a number of books for students and teachers and has written teachers notes for Allen & Unwin on *Jinx*, *A Step from Heaven*, *Parvana*, *And what about Anna*, *Njunjul the Sun*, *Pankration*, *Wolf on the Fold*, *Guitar Highway Rose*, *By the River*, *Lonesome Howl*, *The Glory Garage* and *Australia Locked Up*. Her own published writing for children includes the genres of poetry, drama script, prose fiction, and the picture book, *Secret Smiles*.