

Teachers Notes (Secondary)

by Anita Jonsberg

Dreamrider

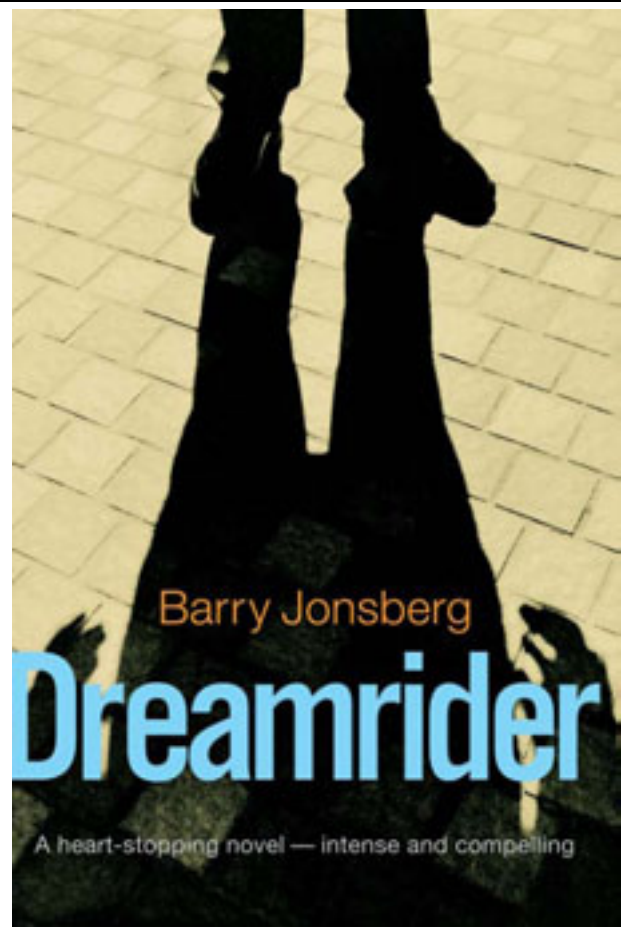
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ISBN 9781741144611

Recommended for age 14 and over.

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INTRODUCTION

Dreamrider takes the reader into a world of uncertainty, fear and darkness. The main character, Michael Terny, is a 'fat boy', lost in his own perceptions of reality and fantasy. He can lucid dream, and begins to realise that he can effect real change – in the 'real' world - while dreaming. His friend Leah and the dangerous bully Martin both have something to offer, as Michael tries to escape the demons of his past.

This is a complex and challenging book that can only be truly understood on a second reading. As one student remarked, "This book did my head in. I couldn't stop thinking about it."

USING THESE TEACHERS NOTES

The main character, Michael Terny, is fascinated by the idea of a Möbius strip, and the narrative itself relies heavily on this concept. As you progress through the novel, much of it is mysterious until the end is reached. For this reason, these teachers notes are divided into first-reading notes (chapter summary with questions) and second-reading notes (in a shaded box) for each section of the novel. ***If you have not finished the book, the notes in the shaded boxes will act as spoilers of the plot.*** The notes are arranged, as the book is, in chronological sequence. The final section suggests some major assignments.

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

- Use the Internet to research the idea of lucid dreaming.
Some good sites are:
<http://www.lucidity.com/LucidDreamingFAQ2.html#LD> [Frequently asked questions]
<http://www.dreamviews.com/whatislucid.php> [Addresses the "how to" of lucid dreaming in a balanced way]
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucid_dreaming [concise description]
- Discuss the results of this research with your class, ensuring everyone understands what lucid dreaming is – there will be many students who have experienced this phenomenon and who will be happy to share their experiences.
- Ask students to imagine they can lucid dream and control the events within the dream. What would they have happen? Who else would be in the dream? What would the setting look like? Some excellent creative written or visual material can stem from this exercise.

PROLOGUE (ON SECOND READING):

- The novel starts, we eventually realise, on the Saturday and what follows is Michael's recollection of events of the preceding week. This is a fairly common narrative structure. But it also ties in with the Möbius strip image that guides Michael's vision of the 'real' and the 'dream' worlds. If we join the beginning of the novel and the end we have a narrative loop that twists through time.
- One exercise that students could complete after reading the novel would be to create their own Möbius strip, with the days of the week (or their own narrative) printed on the plane. What effects could be produced by a story that goes round and round, seemingly with no end?

Instructions on how to make a Möbius strip can be found at the following site:

http://www.questacon.edu.au/html/mobius_strip.html

MONDAY

In meeting the main character, Michael Terny, the reader is immediately de-centred. He says that he 'killed two kids at school', which suggests he is no ordinary student, and no ordinary narrator. Two bullies set upon him and the outcome is far from predictable. Usually, anyone being bullied would be the sympathetic character, but what does the reader feel after Part 1?

Michael faces his first day at school, and he is in trouble with another student early. As he meets his homeroom teacher, Mr Atkins, it is suggested that Michael's world consists of 'angels and demons'.

STUDENT QUESTIONS:

- Of the characters introduced on Monday, which characters are 'angels' and which are 'demons'? Give details about how you have arrived at your conclusions and suggest which characters fit neither category.
- What alerts readers to the fact that all is not as it seems during the phone call with Leah?
- Why might Michael think 'the real is overrated'?
- Suggest possible reasons for Michael being at his seventh school in four years.

ON SECOND READING:

- The opening of the narrative is clearly the beginning of a dream sequence – possibly

highlighted by the surreal statement, 'I killed two kids at school today.' What other stylistic aspects help to create this dream-like atmosphere? Given that there are many dreams in the novel (both 'real' dreams and those that occur during Michael's waking moments) why is this surreal element not so evident later on in the book?

- It is worth noting that the dream bully Callum has red hair. The colour red is of particular significance to Michael. Find examples throughout the book and suggest what these references might signify.
- When we are first introduced to Joe and Mary, we naturally assume that this is a real family with real problems of communication [p.11]. Joe ignores Mary and this appears to be evidence of his uncaring and selfish nature. On second reading, of course, we realise that Mary is not there and that the 'conversation' between them is an illusion (students could be referred to the films 'A Beautiful Mind' and 'The Sixth Sense' for filmic parallels of this technique). Mary is supportive where Joe is condemnatory. Does this help to explain why Michael first created her? Discuss this idea.
- This might be a good time to explore why Michael chose the name Mary to go with his father's name of Joseph. Students could explore this biblical reference in greater detail throughout the book.
- Michael tells the reader that he 'keeps looking for differences' [p. 17]. Discuss how looking for differences might help the reader when reading *Dreamrider*.
- Mr Atkins is a magician and brings literal and metaphorical magic into Michael's life. How many kind and sensitive real people does Michael have contact with in the book? Does this help to explain why Michael creates a wife for Mr Atkins, a wife he can help and, through her, Mr Atkins? Further to this, Leah turns up immediately after Lauren Moss's unenthusiastic reaction to being given the task to look after Michael [p. 25]. Discuss how Michael's creations fill gaps that exist in the real world. Why is Leah, do you think, similar in build to Michael? Tie this in with the similarities that Michael notices between himself and Martin [p. 101].
- Michael tells us that he 'didn't care that the other students were laughing at [him]' [p. 27]. On first reading we assume that this is simple cruelty. On second reading, we know that Michael is talking to himself. Does this make a difference to our views of the reactions of Michael's fellow students during his time at Millways High School?
- Why does Michael create Martin? It is fairly simple to understand why Leah and Mary (and even Mrs Atkins) might fulfil obvious needs for Michael, but who needs a dangerous bully, particularly when there are apparently enough in the real world? In this first meeting, it is clear to the reader, in retrospect, that Michael rubs chocolate cake into his own face [pp. 29 & 30]. Is this anything more than a simple cry for help and/or attention?

- Jamie Archer, on the other hand, is real. On second reading, do we feel more sympathy for him and his attitude towards Michael? Looking at it from Jamie's perspective and given that he saw what happened on the oval, is it reasonable for Jamie to assume that Michael is deliberately trying to cause trouble for him?
- When Michael is sent home he has a conversation with Joe [p. 33]. Michael's attitude is basically that of a pacifist; his instinctive reaction is to turn the other cheek. Does this help to explain his identification with an all-forgiving God (the voice of Leah) before he later comes to identify with the Old Testament God of punishment (the voice of Martin)? Joe is fierce and critical. What effect do we think this might have on Michael's self-esteem over time? Is Mary simply the silent voice of love and support?
- The glass is the coda to every lucid dream. On second reading, we understand this to be a recurrent nightmare of his mother's gruesome death. Yet it is also a symbol of Michael's guilt (we find out later that he stood and watched while his mother died). Eventually, of course, the fall through the glass at the end of the novel symbolises Michael's final fall into madness (or hell – he talks of Jamie and him falling 'like angels' [p. 210]). In that sense is it *really* an entrance into a world where Michael can make his own rules?

TUESDAY

The character of Martin Leechy is developed early on Tuesday and it becomes clear that he is more of a threat than other bullies Michael has met. Why is his approach more sinister than others Michael has encountered? [p. 48]

Michael gets closer to Mr Atkins and delves into his private life, looking for the reason behind what Michael thinks of as his 'secret pain'. Mr Atkins is something of a magician, which goes some way to explaining Michael's attraction to him.

Michael meets Mr Atkins' wife and cures her brain tumour [p. 68]. He follows Atkins to determine whether his dream matches reality, as it suddenly seems very real. Michael finds 'proof' that it is, when he finds a sugar lump in his pocket: the implication is that he does not have them at home [p. 71].

The pressure Michael feels to make friends is evidenced by the way Mary reacts when Martin calls at the house and mentions the social [p. 72]. Mary's reaction is a direct inversion of his own, and his disquiet intensifies as Mary's excitement grows.

The character of Joe, Michael's father becomes more apparent as he drags Michael out of bed in the middle of the night to box with him [p. 79].

STUDENT QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES:

- Is Michael's experience with Mrs Atkins real? The sugar lump 'tastes like proof': is it?

- Why are Joe's attempts to 'father' Michael so miscalculated?
- Draw a sociogram of the characters you have met so far.

ON SECOND READING:

- Michael and smoking: on first reading we assume Joe's accusations that Michael smokes are further examples of his unfairness and insensitivity. How do we re-evaluate this on second reading?
- Mr Atkins's wife suffers from cancer; we are told this by Leah who gives the impression on first reading of being reliable. On second reading we understand Leah to be an internal voice of Michael. Later, Jamie and others assert that Mr Atkins is gay. What conclusions can we draw about Mr Atkins after finishing the novel? In a dream, Michael cures Mrs Atkins's tumour [pp. 64-65]. There is an idyllic, redemptive quality to the experience that contrasts sharply with Michael's return to the real world – his fatness, the cruel note, the figure of authority striding towards him on the oval. How does this contrast help to explain the increasing attraction of the Dream for Michael?
- Michael feels the sugar lump is proof, that he has brought a physical object from the Dream into the real world. It is this 'proof' that encourages him further down the path towards making a permanent link between the Dream world and the real world. How do we explain this apparent impossibility? (A hint – the answer lies in a small incident that takes place on Friday.)
- Mary pressures Michael to go the Social and offers to make a costume for him [pp. 74-76]. Why is Michael pressuring himself? What clues are there (here and later in the book) that Michael understands, even if he buries that understanding, that Mary cannot physically affect the real world? This might be a good time to look through the novel and see if there are *any* times when Mary leaves a physical impact on the environment.
- Joe enters Michael's bedroom and as punishment for Michael smoking forces him to box [p. 79]. What is Joe's justification for this? What do we suspect are his real reasons? What is this likely to do to Michael's sense of self-worth and his relationship with his father?

WEDNESDAY

Wednesday begins with Michael's dream. It is unlike other dreams, since Michael doesn't seem to be able to control it. What might this suggest about the events in the dream? Like Michael's experience with Mrs Atkins, there is a residual element of truth: the pain Michael continues to feel in his leg even after he has woken [p. 85].

Mary again colludes with Michael in his dietary defiance of his father, and Michael expresses his insecurity at the thought of her leaving [p. 87].

Michael meets Martin Leechy in his maths class, and is excluded for disruption [p. 93]. Why isn't Martin sent out? Is Michael the focus of bullying even from teachers? Or is Martin so clever he can evade detection? (Leah suggests this on p. 95).

Michael leaves his worst enemy and finds his only friend, Leah. She arrives just as Michael is at his lowest point and to him, she seems perfect. He describes how she fits perfectly with the landscape of the corridor, her 'eyes sparkling with flecks of brightness, like the patterns in the tiles'. To Michael, it seems as if Leah has appeared 'magically' just when he needed her. To make his happiness complete, she invites him to her home.

Michael sees Jamie Archer and Mr Atkins in the schoolyard and speaks with Atkins about the nature of magic. The link that Michael perceives between them is strengthened as the teacher asserts that 'what some people think is impossible can happen' [p. 99]. Michael thinks there is marginally less pain in his teacher's eyes, and attributes this to his intervention with Mrs Atkins.

Martin Leechy joins Michael as he attempts to eat his 'forbidden' lunch. It occurs to Michael that he and Martin are 'two sides of the same material, but completely different.' [p. 101] Martin warns Michael about being distracted by the more obvious bullying from Jamie Archer, suggesting that 'it's all about us, Michael'.

The Assistant Principal, Miss Palmer, asks to see Michael and tells him she has some information about his previous school 'about bullying and ...other things' [p. 104]. What might these 'other things' be? Why mightn't Michael's father have passed on all relevant information about his son?

Tea at Leah's house is dream-like for Michael; her house is wonderful, her mother solicitous and warm. There is even the smell of baking bread. To top it all off, Leah's mother's name is the same as Michael's mother, Carol. Michael confides in Leah about his family, and it is here the reader gains some insight into Michael's sad childhood and the reason for the glass and flames that sometimes haunt Michael's dreams. He elucidates the nature of his dreaming, and finds Leah a willing partner in testing his theory of the Möbius strip – where his dreams can interact with and affect reality. She asks Michael to achieve 'a simple miracle' involving her dog Scamp [p. 114].

Michael goes shopping, and we discover he is a connoisseur of supermarket fare. He buys large amounts of fresh fish and foccacia bread – two items that are far superior to his normal diet: he eats frozen fish, peas and potato wedges later that night. Michael secretes the foccacia and fish in the cleaning aisle, and he goes home with three cheap white loaves, milk and a generic-brand shower gel. During the trip, Michael catches glimpses of red and he believes these to be evidence of Jamie Archer stalking him.

Michael's father Joe returns later that night, having been contacted by the school about Michael's problems there. Instead of challenging him, Joe is uncharacteristically gentle. He talks about moving on, despairing of Michael ever finding anywhere to fit in. As Joe leaves the room, Michael reaches for his Bible and discloses

that when his mother died, he and his father had attended church for a while, and that Sunday School was the only place Michael had ever felt accepted. He sometimes thought the Bible 'was telling [him] stuff, for [his] ears only' [p. 128].

STUDENT QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES:

- Look at Michael's visit to Leah's house [pp. 105-114]. It is an idyllic time. Find evidence to show how perfect his experience is and how it contrasts with his own home life.
- Of his Bible, Michael reveals that he sometimes thinks it is 'telling [him] stuff, for [his] ears only' [pp. 128]. What are the implications of this revelation to the reader? Could it link with the 'miracles' Michael seems to be able to produce?
- What is the most significant aspect of Michael's trip to the supermarket? How does this help you to further understand his character?

ON SECOND READING:

- Is it a coincidence that Michael dreams of his mother immediately after the boxing bout with his father? [p. 84] How does this dream differ from the others that Michael controls and what does it tell us about his relationship with both his father and his mother?
- Michael feels sudden insecurity about Mary leaving [p. 87]. Is this more poignant given we know that Mary exists only in Michael's head?
- The maths lesson [p. 90]. This is a key scene. How realistic is it that the teacher doesn't seem to notice the presence of Martin? One useful discussion point might be how often perceived unfairness occurs in classrooms, when students are punished and others who are guilty seem to get away with it (in my experience, many students claim this to be the case). In retrospect, what evidence is there in this scene to indicate that neither Martin nor Leah are real?
- It might interest students to know that an early reader of the manuscript suggested that this scene gave the game away – that readers would and should know that Martin is an invisible presence in the classroom. Hence, by a logical extrapolation, Leah and Mary must be constructs, too, since they have direct contact with Martin. Was this true of your students' own reading? Exactly when did they realise that Michael populates his head with fictional constructs? If this occurred in the maths scene, did this spoil the remainder of the book or did it add to the interest?
- For those who realised that the maths scene exposed Martin as a construct, the conversation between him and Michael on the oval is further evidence. Note and discuss how clues are given – Martin can read Michael's mind...

- Michael's visit to Leah's house [p. 105]. This is another crucial scene and the sensitive reader might well have come to the understanding that none of this takes place in the real world. Time is crucial here. Find references to the clock and demonstrate how there is not enough real time for Michael to do all the things he claims to have done.
- What is Michael actually doing in this time? (Note his comments in the supermarket about looking down every aisle.)
- In retrospect, the whole situation at Leah's house is absurdly idealised. Identify those idealisations and what they tell us about Michael's yearnings for a good home and family?
- Possibly, the only 'real' element in all of this is Michael's description of his history with his father [p. 110]. How far does this help to explain the nature of Michael's present problems?
- The supermarket is a somewhat surreal scene, though, ironically, it takes place in the real world [p. 115]. Is Jamie really there, as Michael suspects? Why does Michael pick up five loaves and two fishes? [it might be interesting to guide students towards this religious reference: <http://www.zeitun-eg.org/mirac7.htm>]
- When Joe comes into Michael's bedroom, we see a different side to his character – he is much more sympathetic and sensitive. Later, he seems to revert to his normal antagonistic, brutal self (the interview with Ms Palmer and Mr Atkins is a clear example). But are things as they seem?
- Look for differences, as Michael would say. Get students to think about what Michael is drinking, the shorts that he finds on the floor in the morning [p. 130], the red mark on his face, noticed by Mr Atkins [p. 135] and Leah [p. 141] and the comments made by Joe [p. 165].
- In the light of this, what *really* happens when Joe comes into Michael's room? What does this discovery tell us about Michael's character?
- The Bible tells Michael stuff as if 'for [his] ears only.' How does this tie in with the ending of the book?

THURSDAY

Michael wakes to find evidence of another miracle: Leah has brought a newly-sighted Scamp to see him. When Leah has gone, Michael gives an account of how he removed the dog's cataracts: 'I placed one hand over his eyes...I gathered the thin film into my hand...it was easy' [p. 132].

For the first time, because of the powers of which he now has proof, Michael is unafraid of going to school and seeing Martin Leechy. When he arrives in home-room, Mr Atkins notices a red mark on Michael's cheek.

Both Michael and the reader wonder where it came from. When and how did Michael receive an injury to his face?

After going to see Mrs Atkins, to check that the 'cure' he had effected in his dream was real, Michael returns to school with Leah. He is found by Miss Palmer standing disorientated in the sun. As Michael returns to lessons, he hears Jamie Archer and some other boys suggesting that Mr Atkins is gay. Michael violently threatens Jamie and finds himself in Miss Palmer's office.

As the boys are questioned about the incident, Michael prides himself as one who merely seeks justice, and as one who is 'admired' by Miss Palmer for his cool, clear thinking. This delusion is as clear to the reader as Jamie Archer's fear. Michael's father Joe is called to the school to speak with Michael, Mr Atkins and Miss Palmer. During the interview, Mr Atkins reveals that Michael 'retreats into worlds of his own' and that 'he talks to himself' [p. 161]. It is implied that Michael's previous school has given more sinister information about Michael, but Joe doesn't want to hear it. Michael is suspended for fighting but requests that he is still allowed to attend the Social. He is given permission.

Michael takes Leah home and wonders if the strange weather is of his own making: he is not sure what is and isn't real. He tells Leah he has something to do that evening. Martin phones and seems to add fuel to Michael's already simmering state. Michael visits Jamie Archer and breaks the fingers of Jamie's left, or 'sinister', hand. He then leaves, to join Leah and to go to the hospital to work some miracles.

STUDENT ACTIVITIES:

- Read the scene when Joe visits the school [pp. 158-163]. In pairs, discuss what information Michael's previous school might have passed on to Millways. Continue the scene, writing the script for Mr Atkins and Miss Palmer, as they reveal what they have found out.
- Draw your impression of Jamie Archer's house as it is described by Michael.

ON SECOND READING:

- It might be worth noting the reactions of fellow students to Michael's presence. Before, they just laughed at him. Now, they avoid him on the bus [p. 133] and in the school yard [p. 150]. Is this evidence of Michael moving from a figure of ridicule to a strange, disturbing threat? This coincides with a more confident Michael, sure now of his ability to make a mark upon the world.
- With Michael's assumed power comes responsibility; the two separate conversations with Leah and Martin reflect the choices open to him. There is Leah's vision of the good he can do (she is the angel on his right shoulder) and Martin's vision of the retribution he can exact (the devil on his left). Michael is listening to two diametrically opposed voices in his head. At the moment he inclines towards Leah, but note that at the end he acknowledges that there is room in his head for both.

- Kites. This might be the time to consider the symbolic significance of the kites. What do they represent? Students could discuss the following conversation between Jonsberg and his editor, Jodie Webster:

Webster: What do you intend the kites to symbolise?

Jonsberg: I wanted the kites to be a reminder of the harshness and predatory nature of the environment that Michael inhabits. He is being hunted too. Martin, towards the end, reminds Michael that the world is without pity and the exercise of power is all that drives it. I wanted the kites to be a subtle reminder of that 'red in tooth and claw' philosophy.

Webster: I love this explanation and I certainly think these elements are coming through. I wanted to know what you intended them to symbolise, because I liked their presence and I actually got the feeling the kites were in some way also a symbol of Michael's escalating madness. When we first see them there are 4 or 5 circling rather benignly, hovering on the air currents, riding the air lazily, rather than hunting. Then, as the week goes on, there are more of them, then a swirl, hunting and then circling, perhaps in a predatory way, when he is standing in the sun at school. I want to highlight them a little by including them in the design of the part titles [in increasing numbers] to subtly show a progression from calm to out-of-control, from a semblance of sanity to a descent into madness.

- Michael returns to Mrs Atkins's house. Where is he in reality?
- The important part of this scene is Mrs Atkins's parting comments to Michael: 'You are destined for greatness.' she says [p. 149]. 'You're the miracle.' The voice is, obviously, in his head only, but it signifies the idea of his divinity growing within him.
- Perhaps this explains his violence outside the maths classroom. Michael, assured of his invulnerability, has lost his fear (as Martin tells him on pages 168-169) and is now outside the boundaries of moral restraint.
- Michael thinks that Miss Palmer is 'beginning to admire me'. What do you think are her real thoughts and why?
- The interview in Miss Palmer's office: Michael is not the only one unable to face reality. Joe refuses to listen to reports from Michael's other schools (denying the reader the opportunity to hear them also!) and his delight in Michael's violence validates the increasing drive for vengeance in Michael's mind. It would be worth noting that although Michael threatens to hang up on Martin, he actually listens to him quite attentively [p. 168], whereas he barely acknowledges Leah's messages of goodness and healing [p. 167]. Similarly, we are given a graphic description of the breaking of Jamie's fingers, yet Michael's dream visit to the children's ward at the hospital is glossed over.
- Jamie's home: obviously another construct, but we notice the change in Michael's behaviour.

He is calm, controlled, violent and enjoying himself (as Martin predicted). This is the child that Joe wanted for a son, but all we see is a monster.

- The sinister/dexter comments, plus Michael's remarks about left-handed people are all accurate [p. 175]. It is, of course, no accident that at the end of the book, Leah is always on Michael's right and Martin always on his left.

FRIDAY

Mr Atkins visits Michael at home, and comments that he didn't know Michael had a step-mother. He seems to accept this and suggests that Millways 'update' their (very recent) records. Atkins warns Michael against using violence as a way of protecting people he likes, and never once denies the idea that he is homosexual. As Atkins leaves, Michael says 'give my best wishes to your wife', which earns him a strange stare. Michael dismisses this as Atkins' ignorance of Michael's meeting with his wife.

As Michael gets ready for the Social, he sees a boy down the road, watching his house. Though he can't see the boy's face, Michael instinctively feels he knows him. Michael settles down for a nap, and goes into a dream about his mother: It is here that Michael's full torment is illustrated: where he remembers with full clarity the accident which ripped his mother from him [p. 188].

In the hall where the Social is held, Michael is told by Mr Atkins that the trick is to 'only connect'. Michael is making many connections: only time will tell if they are the right ones. Leah goes off to get them a drink, and does not return. Michael looks for her outside of the hall, and finds himself on the walkways that surround the upper floors of the school. Michael assumes that Leah has been 'abducted' and thinks that the 'flash of red hair' he sees must mean that Jamie Archer is involved in her disappearance.

In attempting to escape from Jamie Archer and his friends, Michael slips, and grasps onto a ledge with his fingertips. He is hauled to safety by Martin Leechy. This time, Martin reveals that he knows more about Michael than he could possibly know. He asks Michael 'Call yourself a Dreamrider?' and proceeds to tell Michael that he has 'no idea...no idea at all' [p. 203]. Martin also knows what Michael has done to Jamie, and pronounces it 'cool'. How can Martin possibly know all of this?

As Michael expresses concern that perhaps Martin has hurt Leah, Martin says 'I wouldn't hurt Leah. She's a part of me as much as a part of you.' What might he mean by this? Michael sees Jamie Archer approaching and drops to the hall roof, where he can see the lights from the Social through the skylight. As he approaches, Leah says that Michael made her and Martin in his own image, and it is revealed that Leah McIntyre and Martin Leechy are anagrams of Michael Terny: they only exist in Michael's head, as does his step-mother, Mary [p. 207].

Martin continues to goad Michael with his own self-loathing that he did nothing to save his mother after the car accident, and the reasons for Michael's delusions are laid bare. The skylight flashes red and orange: replicating the fire that consumed his mother and Michael is drawn to it. As Jamie Archer, who is real and

seeking revenge, approaches Michael, Michael grabs him, and they tumble through the skylight together [p. 210].

ON SECOND READING:

- A quiet start to the climactic day. How is the reader given the impression that Mary finishes the costume (when clearly it is all Michael's work)?
- Michael's conversation with Mr Atkins: the clues should be obvious by now, but students might find it interesting to discover them. Suggest possible reasons for Mr Atkins's nervousness. How do Michael's thoughts about Mr Atkins's pacifism represent a change in his personality, a dangerous spiralling towards violence (a movement towards the sinister side, represented by Martin)?
- The dream about the death of his mother is the final piece of the jigsaw from Michael's past. Students might wish to discuss how the glass is important within the dreams and how it helps to shape Michael's personality.
- At the school Michael comes across a group of boys smoking. Why was this scene included? What does it tell us about the changes in Michael's personality?
- Michael hangs from the roof's edge and is about to fall. He attributes his rescue to Martin, but obviously Martin is not physically there. What happens here? It might be useful to think in terms of the dichotomy within Michael's character, represented by Martin and Leah, and where he finds strength in moments of crisis.
- Martin reveals himself to Michael as a facet of his mind ('Call yourself a Dreamrider?' [p. 203] and, talking of Leah, 'She's a part of me as much as a part of you' [p. 204]), but Michael is reluctant to accept this. How far is this scene on the roof an epiphany for Michael?
- Did students notice the anagrams? A fun exercise might be to see if students can create alternative personalities from the letters in their names...
- Michael and Jamie fall 'like angels'. What other references are there here (and throughout the book) to hell?
- Michael makes a 'final twist' – for the reader, this is a physical movement (that kills Jamie), for Michael a metaphorical twist that seals the Möbius strip. Why does Michael kiss Jamie? [p. 210]

SATURDAY

Michael is in a hospital in restraints, which is also where the book begins. His real visitors, Mr Atkins, Miss Palmer and his father Joe, come and go, but we discover that Martin still resides in the darkness at the left, or 'sinister' side of his bed, whilst Leah is on his right, the side of goodness and truth. Mary is, as always, close by, at the foot of Michael's bed. Lost completely in his delusion of being all-powerful, God-like, Michael bestows blessings on the world, and speaks of how he will bring 'light' and 'hope' to the world. The book ends on a Saturday, with the biblical direction 'let there be light' and there is, but as the reader has known from the first page, there is something very wrong with it.

The voices in Michael's head talk constantly, presenting him with two alternative views of the world – the redemptive voice of Leah and the vengeful voice of Martin. Students might wish to research the notion of voices, particularly with regard to mental illness (especially schizophrenia) and delusions of divine status.

Michael embarks upon a monologue that, in its quasi-Biblical style, shows how he has surrendered to madness. It might be worth comparing his speech to that made by Samuel L. Jackson in Tarantino's film, *Pulp Fiction*.

Michael's final words echo the words of Genesis (and refer back to references to light in the Prologue) and represent his acceptance of divine status. Students might like to consider how God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. 'Let there be light', however, preceded the creation in the Bible. But Michael has looped time, through the Möbius strip, and now stands outside it.

A note from the author:

I suppose Dreamrider is about all sorts of things – bullying, mental health, dysfunctional families. For me, though, the essence of the book, its defining characteristic, is the idea of loneliness and the damage that loneliness can inflict, particularly on the young.

- Barry Jonsberg

Students could go through the novel and work out how much time Michael spends interacting with real people. It should be possible to express this in terms of minutes spent in a week. How much of this time is positive time (in other words, subtract the time when Michael is having unpleasant experiences with people like his father and Jamie Archer)? Compare this time with the time that 'normal' students spend in positive interaction with others in a week (with friends, teachers, parents etc). Does this effectively demonstrate the extent of Michael's loneliness?

MAJOR ASSIGNMENTS

1. Imagine you can lucid dream. Describe a dream in which you act out your deepest fantasy.
2. Michael has rested and is now ready to avenge his mother's death. Describe his visit to the drunk driver responsible for the crash.
3. Write a review of the book, making sure you do not give away too much information about the story-line.
4. Produce a PowerPoint presentation, documenting and illustrating Michael's descent into madness.
5. Produce a large Möbius strip with a narrative running along its plane.
6. Design a poster, leaflet or pamphlet advertising help-lines for troubled schoolchildren.
7. Create either:
 - a] a film script of one of the scenes from the novel or
 - b] a film storyboard of one of the scenes or
 - c] a musical score to accompany one of the scenes
8. One can only fully understand *Dreamrider* by reading it twice. Discuss.

MEET THE WRITERS

BARRY JONSBURG

Barry has lived with his family in Darwin NT since 1999. He is a supporter of the greatest soccer club in the world—Liverpool FC – and constantly plays his DVD of their historic win in the Champions' League Final of 2005. He also has a DVD of the English cricket team regaining the Ashes in 2005 and likes to annoy Australians by reminding them of it whenever possible. His first book for young adults was *The Whole Business with Kiffo and the Pitbull* which has enjoyed success in Australia (where it was shortlisted for the CBC Book of the Year (Older Readers) in 2005) and in the UK and the USA. Translations are due out in 2006 and 2007 of the novel in French, German, Polish and Chinese. His second book, *It's Not All About YOU, Calma!* was published in 2005. It won the Adelaide Festival Award for Children's Literature in 2006 and has been shortlisted for the CBC Book of the Year (Older Readers), also in 2006.

ANITA JONSBURG

Anita is a high school teacher in Darwin NT. She is currently working with senior students, trying to convince them that a year is not a long time to complete all of their assignments. Anita lives with her husband Barry, daughter Lauren and son Brendan.