

Teachers' Notes (Secondary)

by Anita Jonsberg

Ironbark

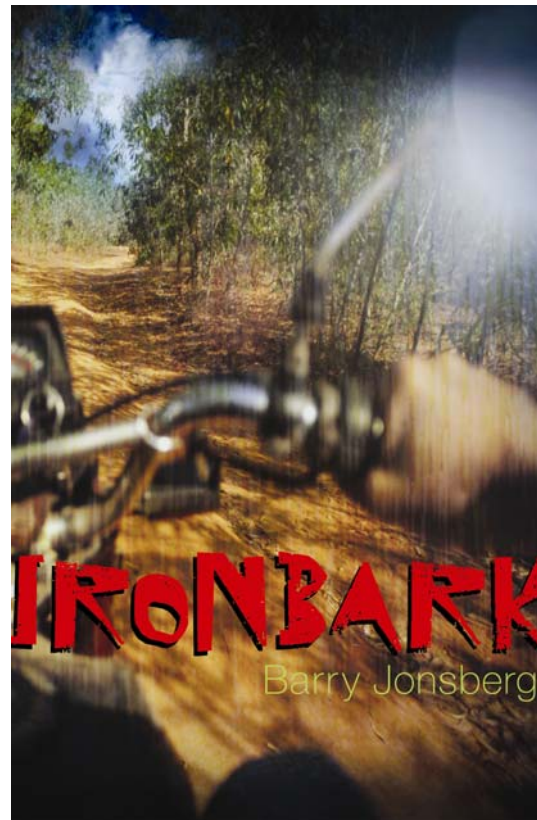
Barry Jonsberg

ISBN 9781741149555

Recommended for age 14 and over.

These notes may be reproduced free of charge for use and study within schools but they may not be reproduced (either in whole or in part) and offered for commercial sale.

Introduction	2
Pre-reading activities	2
During reading:	
Chapter summaries and tasks	3
Post reading:	
Major assignment suggestions	8
Meet the Writers	8



INTRODUCTION

Told with humour and sensitivity, *Ironbark* charts the personal journey of a teenager caged by his own personality. After a violent outburst, he is taken to stay in Tasmania with his grandfather, an uncommunicative but perceptive man. The narrator sees his stay in Van Diemen's Land as incarceration, and it is ultimately the island itself that challenges this impression. Chronicled over six days, *Ironbark* looks into the abyss and explores what happens when a boy's worst enemy is himself...

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

EXPLORE TASMANIA

The natural landscape of Northeast Tasmania features in the novel. Students can explore Tasmania via the Internet, the library, and other resources you may have access to. Many cross-curricular links can be made by looking at the geography, history, flora and fauna and economy of the island.

Some useful Internet sites are:

<http://www.parks.tas.gov.au/index.php> (Tasmanian Parks & Wildlife Service)

<http://www.parks.tas.gov.au/index.php> (Tourism Tasmania)

<http://www.about-australia.com/tas.htm> (Online Travel Guide)

Remember to check all websites to ensure suitability of content and currency before using with your class.

EXPLORE THE COVER

- What does the cover design suggest about the book? Students may consider the image of the motorbike – does this suggest that the book is aimed mainly at boys? Does the image of the sky imply the mood of the story? How? The title's font also gives clues about the story. What does it suggest?
- Do you think this book might link with others you have read? How?
- How does the 'blurb' affect your expectations of the novel? Isolate key words and suggest why they are effective or ineffective in enticing a potential reader to open the book.

DURING READING

Below are suggested activities for use alongside specific parts of the novel. Major assignments are in a separate section (below). Bullet-pointed questions are intended mainly for discussion, though they may be interchanged with 'tasks' where appropriate. *It is in no way suggested that you use all of the following activities and questions, rather that you select and adapt those best suited to the make-up and level of your class.*

DAY I

'I'm miserable and sixteen. In that order.'

The narrator sweeps us through his arrival at his Grandfather's shack in the middle of a state forest in Tasmania. The boy walks in the forest – there is nothing else to do – and feels a presence watching him. Communication between him and his grandfather is strained, and the boy discovers that his grandfather hears voices in the forest ('they tell me things'). Before going to bed, the narrator records an incident that occurred in his home city of Melbourne – he smashed up a burger bar because of a perceived insult to his girlfriend, Kris. He also feels eyes watching in the forest and is disturbed by this. He scratches an 'I' into his bedpost, feeling very much like a prisoner.

Discussion

- We are given a very strong sense of the main character and his father on the very first page. As a class, discuss these impressions.
- On page 7, the narrator suggests that the fence is a continuation of the 'penitentiary motif'. Why might the character feel as if he is being punished? What might he be punished for? Discuss the possibilities here – there is no need to arrive at a conclusion. What other references are there to crimes and punishment?
- Look at the narrative perspective. How does first-person narration affect the reader's understanding of the unfolding events?
- How would you describe Granddad? How is his character established? Does he seem like 'just another stranger with his own agenda'? (page 5)
- Discuss how earlier impressions of the narrator compare with the person who is capable of wreaking the destruction described on pages 18-22.

Tasks

1. Pretend you are Granddad. Write about your first impressions of your grandson.
2. Rewrite the scene in the burger bar from the perspective of one of the following: Kris, an employee, the little girl or the police officer.

DAY II

'I can feel her all around. Taking care of the place.'

The new day brings a new experience – chopping firewood. Afterwards, the boy climbs a nearby mountain, in the hope of receiving a signal on his mobile phone. At the summit,

he makes brief contact with Kris. On his descent, he is caught in a storm and becomes lost. Panicking, he believes that something is tracking him through the forest. An 'impossible' text message seems to direct him safely home. After an unsatisfactory dinner, Granddad relates that he believes his dead wife, the boy's grandmother, is a guardian angel in the forest, and that she watches over him. The boy records another entry in his journal and marks off another day of his incarceration.

Discussion

- Explore the idea of 'self-talk' with your class – your school counsellor may be able to assist you with this. What is it? How can it help or hinder a person's state of mind?
- What causes the narrator's panic in the forest?
- How might the weather and surroundings be reflecting the action in this section? Discuss the notion of pathetic fallacy. (i.e. the fallacy of attributing human feelings to inanimate objects; `the friendly sun' is an example of the pathetic fallacy. It is often used to reflect or emphasise action or emotions.)
- The narrator has turned his phone off (page 38). Suggest how he is able to receive a text message just after his fall in the forest (page 45). Do your ideas match those of the narrator later in the story?
- How does the narrator's experience affect the way he relates to his Granddad?

Tasks

In his journal, the main character expresses his feelings about Intermittent Explosive Disorder.

1. Using the Internet, research this condition. Summarise your findings in two paragraphs, or through collage or drawing. If you are musical, you may like to source or compose a piece that expresses the characteristics of this disorder.
2. Consider how other people may think about someone with IED. Write down possible reactions and thoughts they may have.

DAY III

'The worst kind of enemy to make in a small town.'

The boy and his grandfather drive to the nearest town in Granddad's beaten-up Ute. The boy shops for food so that he can cook the evening meal. He then reports to the local police-station, a condition of his sentencing for the incident in Melbourne. He meets Richie, a huge police officer, whose hobby is wood chopping. Richie is not impressed with the boy, and uses threatening behaviour in his dealings with him. On the way home, the boy loses his temper and throws himself from his grandfather's Ute. Despite this, he talks Granddad into giving him a driving lesson. In the evening, he cooks dinner. Granddad is impressed with the boy's efforts.

Discussion

- Discuss the narrator's meeting with the police officer, Richie. What do you think Richie's impression of the narrator is? Why?
- What do you think Richie is trying to achieve by behaving aggressively?

- We learn that the narrator has considered suicide, an idea that comes unbidden into his mind again when he discovers the blunt knives in the kitchen drawer and he says, 'I couldn't cut my own wrists if I sawed on them for half an hour.' (page 94) It's easy for the reader to see why suicidal thoughts might haunt the narrator, but important that the class explores the types of real-life support that are available to anyone in that position. Again, your school counsellor will have resources you can share with students.
- The narrator clearly enjoys cooking. Discuss what functions this hobby might fulfil. (Control, creativity, catharsis, railing against his father.)

Tasks

1. With a partner, make notes about the narrator's preconceptions of the small town he finds himself in, and how these preconceptions are challenged.
2. Find out about David Foster. Where in Tasmania would you go to see his trophies and memorabilia?
3. On page 86, the narrator suggests that Granddad knows more about what happened in the Ute than the narrator does. Re-write the scene from Granddad's point of view.

PART IIII

'Freaky as.'

In the morning, the boy discovers that Granddad talks to his dead wife every day. He finds a run-down motorbike and drives it to the mountain-top. There, he talks to Kris on his mobile phone. He suggests buying her a new phone, since her father has confiscated hers in the hope of preventing contact with the boy. Back at the shack, Granddad shows the boy how to roll a cigarette. The boy realises that there is more to his grandfather than meets the eye. The boy again cooks, and then writes in his journal. After dinner, the two discuss guardian angels.

Discussion

- The narrator realises he doesn't really know much about his grandmother, and suggests the only memory he has of her 'may be some random film-still' (page 107). In pairs, discuss how much you know (and don't know) about members of your family, and what this might say about modern society.
- The narrator chats to Kris, his girlfriend. Discuss her attitude to the narrator's wish to buy her a phone. What are the possible motivations behind her reluctance?
- What do their conversations so far in the novel reveal about their relationship? What is the narrator's explanation for her not texting him as much as she could?
- The narrator describes his surroundings as 'not bad' (page 118). What might be responsible for this new attitude?
- The narrator and Granddad talk about Gran, and her presence in the landscape. Just as the narrator succumbs to the romance, Granddad farts loudly. This is an example of bathos – an abrupt transition from the lofty to the commonplace, creating a humorous or ludicrous effect. What is the effect of its use here?

Tasks

1. On pages 124-5, Granddad compares the narrator to the ironbark tree. In two paragraphs, explore whether this is a good comparison or not.
2. Read the narrator's account of his court case (pages 129-131). What is he discovering? Is the journal he's writing helping him? If so, how?
3. On page 130, the narrator says he was described in court as the result of bad maths or a 'dodgy recipe': 'subtract a mother, add an incompetent father, take away the number you first thought of...' Devise your own 'recipe' or maths equation - *you* are the result. You can fictionalise family details if preferred.

PART III

'I need to be behind bars.'

It's a dismal morning, and the boy and Granddad drive again to the town. The boy has a run-in with Richie, who finds the boy in an antique shop and humiliates him in front of the shop-owner. The boy persuades Granddad to take him to a bigger town, Milton, where the two watch a movie and the boy buys a new phone for his girlfriend, Kris. At a games arcade, the boy explodes as a result of some teenagers making fun of his grandfather. Having violently assaulted the ring leader, he is hauled out of the arcade by his grandfather, who later covers for the boy when they are stopped and questioned by Richie. Back at the shack, a storm blows in, scaring the boy, who feels its violence is somehow personal.

Discussion

- Look closely at the scene in the antique shop. What might the narrator be feeling? Is this 'attack' by Richie worse than when they were alone in a room at the police station? Explore the reasons for this.
- As Granddad gets his grandson out of the centre, he spots a car and rips off a wing mirror. Why does he do this? What does this action reveal about him?
- How does Granddad try to calm the narrator? How might this technique work?
- On page 171, the narrator says 'the only way to get rid of a parasite is to kill the host'. What does this tell the reader about the way he views his IED?
- How does Granddad's faith in the narrator contrast with his father's way of helping him? Which is likely to be more successful?

Tasks

1. The narrator loses his temper in the games arcade (pages 165-167). Why is he so upset about what the teenagers are doing? Compare this incident with the one in the burger bar in Melbourne. What similarities and differences are there? How do these help the reader to understand the narrator? Write at least two paragraphs.
2. What does the reader find out about Granddad in this section? Is his view of IED different to the narrator's? Discuss with a partner and then summarise your thoughts.

PART III I

'I'm ironbark, dude.'

In the morning, the boy makes breakfast and again takes the motorbike to the mountain's summit. He argues with Kris and smashes his phone. In a rage, he careers down the mountain on the bike. The evil presence in the forest is back, and approaching him. The boy rides directly towards it, crashes, and, in his fury, attempts to kill the 'stalker'. The ringing of a phone brings him to his senses, and he sees Richie clinging to the side of a cliff. He has a crucial choice to make...

Discussion

- Discuss the narrator's description of his cooking. What is the tone of this section? How does it contrast with his tone previously?
- The narrator is eager for Granddad's approval. What tells us this?
- The discussion and joke about women shows the reader that Granddad has become much more real than the stereotypical impression given on the first day. What key events have led to the narrator's realisation of this?
- The word 'ironbark' is repeated several times in this section. What is the intended effect of this?
- The motorcycle symbolises freedom for the main character. What is its function in his 'therapy'?
- On page 193, the narrator thinks that 'the view has improved'. Has it changed, or just his perception of it? How might this help him cope with his IED?
- How does the author suggest the change of mood that occurs with Kris's phone call? (page 194)
- As a class, list reasons why Kris is upset at being sent a new phone. Are her concerns justified?
- What is the narrator's view of the cause of her unhappiness? How does he react to it?
- After being thrown from the bike, the narrator becomes aware of being watched. He realises that he cannot avoid whatever stalks him (page 201). Who or what is the enemy?
- Explore how Richie's presence in the forest helps save the narrator, both in a literal and metaphorical sense.
- What does the ending suggest about the narrator's future?

Task (just fun)

1. The narrator details his breakfast recipe on pages 187-188. Your teacher has booked the Home Ec. room and you get to make it! (You'll be assessed on how quickly you eat...)

POST-READING ASSIGNMENTS

1. [Imaginative] Write a parallel narrative about one of the events in the novel from Granddad or Richie's point of view.
You will need to consider what your character knows about the chosen event in the novel and what they think about what is happening. Try to create a world for them outside of what you know from the novel.
2. [Argumentative Oral] 'The main character of *Ironbark* is a victim, not an offender.' Argue for or against this statement.
3. [Analytical] How does the relationship between Granddad and the narrator change during the novel?
4. [Imaginative] Pretend that you are going to make a movie of the novel. Cast the parts of the narrator, his father, Granddad and Ritchie. Give detailed reasons for your choice of actors.
5. [Creative] Present the action of the novel as a photo story.
6. [Analysis/synthesis] '*Some of the boy's problems are caused by his feelings of insignificance – possibly with regard to his father. His nameless state reflects his insecurity about who he really is.*' (Barry Jonsberg) Discuss, using quotations to support your points.
7. [Analytical & creative] Write a *detailed* outline of a possible sequel to the novel. The plot must fit with what has already taken place and the characters must stay consistent with what we already know of them.
8. [Creative presentation] Create a suitable alternative book cover and present it to the class using a computer software package such as MS Paint or Photoshop. Explain your decisions regarding images, fonts, colours, layout and blurb.

MEET THE WRITERS

BARRY JONSBURG

Barry Jonsberg is an award-winning author of Young Adult fiction. He lives in Darwin in the Northern Territory with his wife and children. His books have been published in ten countries and translated into five languages.

ANITA JONSBURG

Anita is a high school teacher in Darwin NT. She enjoys introducing young people to exciting new books and a lifetime of reading.