

Readers Notes  
**Dangerous Places**  
by Ann Charlton

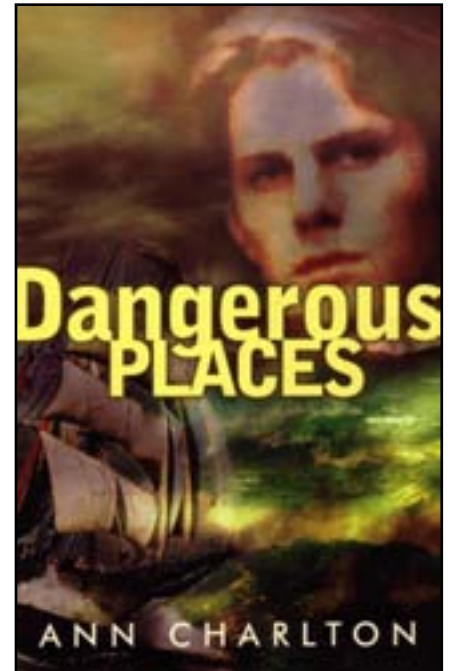
**SYNOPSIS**

*Dangerous Places* is set in 1852, London. Fourteen-year-old Will Kerwan is kidnapped by a malevolent man known as Screwface, reminiscent of Dickens's Fagin, who forces him to work as a cook's lackey on the *Southern Star*, a ship bound for Melbourne.

Will is ostracised and lashed, but his one friend on board is a simple 16-year-old named Runt, who steals scraps of paper for Will so he can try to write to his family.

When they have the opportunity to escape in Melbourne, Runt is at first reluctant to do so: for all the hardship, imprisonment is ironically more secure than freedom. But his friendship with Will gives him the courage to go, and they are taken in by storekeepers Rose and John, who are ex-convicts and now landowners. Legally free as they are, John and Rose are not allowed by the upper class to escape their history or to forget.

After an argument with one of the gentry, the four are forced to leave for the Ballarat goldfields. Here Will and Runt become embroiled in the miners' uprising and are confronted by Screwface once again. But when Will uncovers the truth about his enemy, he finally has the opportunity to return to England and clear his name. And Runt makes the ultimate sacrifice of friendship and lets him go.



**STYLE and EDITOR'S COMMENT**

Mark Macleod writes: 'The first thing that attracted me to Ann Charlton's first novel for young adults was the language. I have to read just a page of Dickens and I'm there with him in 19th century London. And that's how I felt as I read *Dangerous Places*. Charlton gives her narrative a strong visual and aural presence, and creates a dramatic immediacy that makes the story accessible even to young readers who feel comfortable only with contemporary fiction.'

'There are wonderful characters here, too: Screwface the villain; Runt the touchingly faithful friend; Will, the privileged, naïve young man who believes that his essential goodness and family background will eventually save him.'

'It might well be a cliché that those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it, but given political events around the world, it could do with restating. Many publishers have been concerned at the apparent lack of interest in historical fiction for young people today. At the annual book fair in Bologna we've been surprised to hear that even German, Dutch and Italian young readers are no longer interested in historical settings: a view we've learned to associate with other cultures.'

'So I was doubly attracted by the themes in *Dangerous Places* of class and independence, friendship and family in settings that are both foreign and familiar to us in 2004, and if I were still a teacher I would love to give students access to their country's history by using this novel as a discussion starter.'

**AUTHOR'S COMMENT**

Ann Charlton writes: 'Writing *Dangerous Places* gave me the chance to explore the importance of friendship and, expressly, the importance of loyalty in friendship. The idea of the story came from a Government Gazette, printed in August 1851, where the government of the day was offering a reward of five pounds each for two boys that had deserted their ship in Sydney. The concept of why they had jumped ship fascinated me, and I was sure that the trials they must have suffered would have forged a strong bond between them. To set my story 150 years back in time was a way of proving that the importance of friendship has never changed.'

## EDUCATIONAL APPLICABILITY

*Dangerous Places* can be used in the classroom in various ways:

- A discussion on friendship: what chance does a friendship formed at school/university/sports have of surviving the working world, marriage to each other or different partners, different creeds, class or backgrounds? What is expected of a friend? Share your knowledge of, or research, famous friendships. Write a short story, one or two pages, real or invented, on an instance when a friend has been, or could be, especially important.
- Think about the difficulties of communication for a person in the days before sign language was widely practised. Carry out a game of Charades where you must communicate a book/song/film title or a sentence without using words.
- Discuss whether sign language could or should be taught more widely to speaking people, and whether it could become international: a means of communication with tourists visiting countries speaking a different language to their own.
- Discussion/research on child labour, either past or present, or both.
- The Miners' League formed in the gold rush days is usually considered to be the beginning of the union movement in Australia. Discuss/research how relevant unions are today compared to 150 years ago.