

Beyond Duck River

Angela Martin

*Teachers' notes written by Robyn Ewing
(B.Ed Hons, PhD, University of Sydney)*

Teachers' Notes

ANGELA MARTIN



BEYOND DUCK RIVER

*it's what's in the earth - what's in the heart
and mind that counts*

'an honest and lovable novel centred on a rare subject.'

RUTH PARK

HODDER HEADLINE AUSTRALIA

HHA

Introduction

Beyond Duck River is a very moving novel. It focuses on one family over several generations and particularly the experiences, struggles and relationships of Hazel who is a small child when the story begins. While fiction, the story provides a very accurate historical picture of life in twentieth century Australia. A number of very important themes are developed through the story and the stories within the story. These are intertwined and include:

- search for identity
- the difficulty of having mixed ancestry and straddling two cultures
- the need for forgiveness, peace and reconciliation both on a personal and a larger scale—which has taken on even more significance since September 11, 2001.
- the centrality of story in making meaning in our lives.

This novel will have significance for both indigenous and non-indigenous Australians as it explores the complex cultural and societal issues prevalent in Australian history, depicted through the lives of one family.

In addition, the novel explicitly celebrates the power of narrative in our lives. It will be important to provide opportunities to reflect on the primacy of storying/storytelling in making sense of our world and experiences.

Brief Biographical Notes

Angela Martin draws on her rich Aboriginal and British ancestry in writing her first novel. She has worked as an Arts Educator at the Art Gallery of NSW and also in media, arts administration and education.

Originally born in Sydney near Duck River, Angela has travelled widely and now lives in Canberra.

Although the novel is fiction, Angela's cultural heritage and own experiences, together with her other studies in sociology, fine art, philosophy, history and education provide a rich tapestry which informs the events of the story.

Before Reading the Novel

- Discuss the title and the sepia photo, which provides the front cover of the book. What is the implication of the word beyond?
- What is the significance of the quote reproduced on the cover (it's what's in the earth—what's in the heart and mind that counts)? Why is the earth linked with hearts and minds?
- Discuss the dedication:
*To Waianya and all those who have fought a good fight and lost:
nothing is lost.*
- Who could Waianya be? What is the author's meaning here? Is this a different way of looking at the world?
- Depending on students' past experiences, it may be useful to read a selection of Aboriginal Dreaming stories and discuss the centrality of the earth and place to indigenous understandings of life, creation and spirituality.
- It could also be valuable to discuss the white invasion of Australia and the experiences of indigenous people as white settlement encroached on their culture and heritage.
- Depending on location, students could study the history of a nearby river over the last century, noting how it has changed with growing urbanisation, etc.

Getting into the novel

- The novel opens with a vivid description of a small girl's (Hazel's) family being photographed. Students could discuss the effect of the metaphor: the family being likened to the Royal family (pp.1-2). How are the two images different?
- Students could depict the opening scenes as described: the family photo contrasted with the goodbye at the wharf. It will be useful to tap into the emotions of the two experiences.
- Students could build up a timeline or story-map to plot the events as they are described.

Themes

As students read the novel, they could be encouraged to identify the theme(s) they find important in this novel and explore how they are developed over time. These could be recorded in a reading log or journal with relevant page references noted. While it is not intended that every theme be discussed, those relevant or appropriate could be explored as the class reads the novel together.

Themes could include:

- Identity and cultural heritage
- Hope
- Self-discovery
- Childhood innocence

- Diversity
- Conservation and the environment
- The trauma/repercussions of war
- Social class in 20th century Australia
- The power of story
- The importance of family/friendships/relationships
- Survival

Characterisation

- How is Hazel described initially? Contrast, for example, the little girl who balances precariously on her chair in the opening scene with the teenager or the older woman. Also, look at the effect her father's illness and her fear have on her personality over time.
- Are there a variety of women represented? Compare Hazel's decisions about life with her grandmother's or with Ellen's. Students could construct a table listing the various women and their attributes/approaches to life with relevant page references.
- Similarly, Angela Martin paints a variety of men. Students could contrast Jack with Joe or Jimmy with Eddy.
- For Grandpa, to lose the story would be to lose the very purpose of life. It would mean falling into a moonless, everlasting night (p.8). How does Grandpa keep the story alive?
- There are various friendships and relationships explored throughout the novel. Students could discuss how these are portrayed. The friendships of Josie and Hazel and Peggy could be compared with the description of Jim and Ted Adamson's mateship and the portrait of blokes sticking together through strife (p.105).
- Whose perspective is dominant in the novel? Whose voice is strongest? Why?
- Students could think about how particular characters are linked with particular themes (eg. Ellen and Minnie Hazel with hope and new stories; Grandpa with cultural heritage and the power of story). Small groups of students could focus on one particular character and develop a character-theme profile.

Setting

- Place is very important in this novel. Students should examine the descriptions of the idyllic early family picnics at Georges River or beside the Harbour at Nielson Park, Rose Bay. It may be valuable to go on an excursion on a river, or a picnic beside a lake or harbour. Students could then write their own descriptions of this place. What role does place play in highlighting the main themes of the novel?
- The role of the river can be contrasted with the importance of the family home,

especially for Hazel. What does a house symbolise? (See for example, She had gradually built a wall, neatly cementing each brick in place to shut herself in with the safety of her childhood (p.115).

Symbols

There are many powerful symbols in the novel. Students should explore some of those that they feel are most important and share their understandings of what they stand for in the novel and in their own lives. Examples include:

- i) water, the sea, the river and Duck River in particular
- ii) the locked photo album
- iii) the Moreton Bay fig
- iv) the electric light
- v) books
- vi) the moon in its different phases

How do these symbols function to realise the author's purposes?

Students could think about the important symbols in their own lives and discuss their relationship with their own cultural heritages.

Style

- The narrative is far from a conventional story with a beginning, middle and end or orientation, complication and resolution. In many ways it is circular—with the beginnings of Hazel's family related in more detail towards the end of the novel and Minnie Hazel's connection to her ancestors. Why has the author chosen to do this? How do the students feel about the way the story unfolds? How different would the novel be if it were written in a more linear style?
- The author uses flashbacks and multiple texts including letters and poems and on occasion, a painting, to allow some of the central themes of the story to develop. Why has the author chosen to do this? How effective is this in constructing the different stories within the text?
- Metaphors and similes are used very effectively throughout the novel. Consider, for example, the meanings conveyed through:
 - a moonless, everlasting night (p.8)
 - the crumbs of war (p.17) and the image of sweeping these under the carpet
 - feeling more like an animal on its way to slaughter...(p.96)
 - The Lindendale welcome had reeled Jim slowly back into life (p.112).
- Students could keep a log to record the different stylistic devices and the feelings/reactions evoked with relevant page references. These could be linked to the themes.
- Angela Martin discusses the importance of words themselves—their sounds as well as their meanings. She also demonstrates how a person's spirit lives on despite

attempts to stifle it through stifling one's own mother tongue (see p.127). Some passages lend themselves to being read aloud. Students could choose one such passage to prepare to read aloud—either individually or as a reader's theatre in a small group. This would be an opportunity to think carefully about how the words sound. Alternatively, they could prepare a reading of one of the poems or a retelling of one of the Dreaming stories to a small group or to the class.

- Students could also sketch or paint the scene by the river or the harbour based on descriptive passages.

Issues and questions for student discussion after reading the novel

- Revisit the title and the dedication and discuss their significance. This can be considered alongside the poetry and sayings that Hazel collected, for example, p.237.
- Should Hazel's grandfather have kept the photo album locked? Why do you think he did? Should memories stay frozen in time? At the same time, Alice and Grandpa were careful to ensure that they related the stories of the sacred places to Hazel and Jim so they would understand nature's beauty, when it is intertwined with sacredness, spiritual endlessness and lore (p.27). Why were some stories easier to share than others?
- Why do you think Hazel felt uncomfortable talking to Ellen about her heritage?
- Our society does not deal comfortably with mental illness. Were there other strategies or forms of treatment which might have helped Joe cope with the trauma he experienced during the war and afterwards? Similarly, how could Hazel's increasing reclusiveness have been treated?
- Don't ever take the story for granted or you might miss something (p.8). What is 'the story'? How can we ensure that we don't take 'the story' for granted?
- Hazel says that she lived in other people's stories. Why do you think she chose to live like this as she got older? Students could trace the changes in Hazel alongside the timeline of events.
- If you stay where you belong, you won't get hurt (p.24). Do you agree with Joe that this is the way we should live? Why? Why not? Can we avoid being hurt? Students could use some of the characters to illustrate their opinion here.
- Ignorance kills things (p.126). Students could find examples to support this quote—either from the novel or from current events. How can we avoid ignorance? What was Grandpa's solution?
- Why do people continue to trust sameness (p.127)? How can we celebrate diversity?

Beyond the novel: Further Research

- The novel provides many opportunities for further research. Students could work in small groups to research one of the nominated topics, which are important to the novel and then share these with the whole class. Possibilities could be structured around different decades in Australian twentieth century history. For example:

1910-20: The First World War and its aftermath

i) historical accounts of Gallipoli

ii) Billy Hughes—why is he termed a *turncoat* (p.24)?

iii) conscription in Australia—and its relationship to conflicts over the twentieth century

1920-30s The building of the Harbour Bridge

1930-9: The Depression

1939-49: World War II and beyond

1960s-70: Vietnam

Students could discuss the novel's assertion that it was the same war, constantly returning. Each generation faces a number of struggles. What is this generation struggling with?

- Alternatively, or in addition, research could be undertaken about some of the topics which transcend the decades. It will be important for students to debate the implications of the stolen generations, perhaps through reading some of the recent accounts alongside the experiences depicted in the novel.
- Students could investigate the history of the reconciliation struggle.
- It may be important for students to research their own family heritage and discover more about their backgrounds and the different traditions and understandings which inform who they are becoming.
- It may be useful to visit the Art Gallery or to examine a print of George Lambert's *Across the Black Soil Plains*. Does this painting really imitate life so well? Students might compare this with other art traditions. Why did Hazel and Jimmy lose what they had once seen in this painting?
- Students could look closely at some of the poetry included in the novel (eg. Byron's *She walks in beauty* p.94, the work of Banjo Paterson, Shelley's, *I am the daughter of Earth and Water*, p.209 and Ellen's poem to her mother, p. 206-7).
- Students could examine the history of art and the relationship between art, literature and society.

Related Reading

Non Fiction

Australian Dreaming: Forty Thousand Years of Aboriginal History

Compiled and edited by Jennifer Isaacs, Lansdowne.

Black Chicks Talking

Leah Purcell

Box the Pony

Leah Purcell

Novels

Willow Tree and Olive

Irini Savvides

Whisper

Fran Dobbie

Looking for Alibrandi

Melina Marchetta

Water Colours

Sarah Walker

I am Susannah

Libby Gleeson

The House that was Eureka

Nadia Wheatley

My Place

Sally Morgan

The Burnt Stick

Anthony Hill

I am David

Ann Holm

Cloudstreet

Tim Winton

Rabbit-Proof Fence

Doris Pilkington

Picture Books

My Place

Nadia Wheatley

Beyond Duck River

Angela Martin

073361325X \$21.95

Beyond Duck River Teachers' Notes

Notes by: Robyn Ewing

9999013331 FREE

Teachers' Notes are also available from the Hodder Headline Australia website at www.hha.com.au where they can be downloaded free of charge. Look out for teachers' notes on other great titles that are regularly added to the Hodder website.

HHH

HODDER HEADLINE AUSTRALIA
Level 22, 201 Kent St, Sydney, NSW 2000
ph: 02 8248 0800