

**The Divine Wind**  
by **Garry Disher**

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Teachers Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

**Themes**

1. "You could say that this is a story about friendship, and the betrayal of friendship, and friendships lost and regained" (p 21). Four teenagers-Hart, Alice, Mitsy and Jamie-are thrust into World War II which not only changes their friendship, but everything they know and believe in. War highlights the differences between the friends, differences which are symbolic of the local, national and international relationships which form the Australian cultural identity. These relationships determine the fates of individuals and communities, and cause tragedies such as wars. There are many kinds of "friendship" implied in the novel: love affairs and marriages; alliances between different races; international relations.

Activity : Discuss the meaning of friendship and its various manifestations in this novel. Who would you put first in a time of war-your friend or your country? Can you define nationalism as a sort of friendship? It is often said that sex always spoils a friendship." Discuss.

2. Racism and the mistreatment of indigenous peoples is implied throughout: Saltwater Jack was "lured by force or slippery promises" and his wife, Bernadette, was "separated from her family when she was little" (p14).

Activity : Research one of the issues implied: "Stolen Children", conditions for black workers on cattle stations, or the virtual enslavement of island peoples in many parts of Australia. Discuss the manifestations of racism which the novel presents.

3. Racism is often based on fear or insecurity: "Your Abo is unreliable... He'll collaborate. He'll guide the Japs through the bush" (p 76).

Activity : Try to discover any historical information about such collaboration theories.

4. "No-one knew the sacrifices we made...in unknown Australia...We were the true Australians, in a country going begging, ruled by governments, cities and absentee landlords who knew nothing and cared less about resource development, soil erosion and the teeming threat of Asia" (p 55-6).

Activity : These are attitudes of the thirties. Are there still people who evince such attitudes today?

5. Assimilation is a concept conveyed in the novel. Broome is a melting pot of different races and classes.

Activity : What do you understand by the word assimilation? Are there positive and negative aspects of assimilation?

6. The novel demonstrates that British Imperialism was still very evident in Australia in the thirties and forties, and how powerful literature can be in perpetuating such attitudes. For example Hart tries to forget the encroaching war and his personal conflicts by reading popular fiction: "the terrains of England began to impinge on my consciousness, altering, then effacing, the world outside...I was wrapped in a pleasurable dreaminess. I was in a better place" (p 56). Imperialist ideology is grounded in the concept of negating the validity of the place where you live in favour of the "home country".

Activity : Why were Australians so responsive to the defence needs of the United Kingdom at the start of the Second World War? When and why did that change? Do you think that Australians still cling to British traditions, or have they been replaced with other ideals? Are modern-day Australians still loyal to the United Kingdom?

7. Various forms of displacement occur in the novel: the internment of the Japanese; the flight of the Dutch from Java; personal displacement.

Activity : Discuss the causes and effects of these displacements.

8. The novel is about national sentiment and identity, and the paradoxes they represent. Australians who pride themselves on their egalitarianism and on their allegiance to the tradition of "mateship" have not always evinced these characteristics when tested.

Activity : Our national failure to come to terms with Aboriginal issues and our attitudes during war demonstrate that we are not as neighbourly as we would like to think. Discuss.

9. Choice is a major theme in the book. For example, Ida's decision to return to the UK; Alice's decision to become an army nurse; Hart and Michael's decision to give shelter to Mitsy and Sadako.

Activity : Discuss the choices made by various characters, and possible alternative scenarios had they not been made.

## **Plot**

1. The novel describes the friendship between Hart and his sister Alice, children of Michael Penrose, a Pearlling fleet owner, Mitsy, a Japanese Australian, daughter of Sadako, and Jamie Kilian, the son of the local Magistrate. The romantic links between these characters and Alice's relationship with a property owner named Carl Venning highlight the prejudices and the insecurities which make up our national identity. Their innocent romances are an ironic prelude to the devastating advent of war-a war which changes all their lives and leaves them with scars which will never heal. The novel vividly demonstrates that war destroys lives, even those of the living. It is an ardent lament for the ordinary lives which are shattered by conflicts which have little to do with them.

Activity : What do you imagine might have happened to these characters if the war had not eventuated? What did the war mean to each of them? What might the future have held for Hart, Mitsy and Alice? Discuss.

2. The plot traces events of the late 1930s and the first two and a half years of WWII.

Activity : Construct a chronology detailing the events of the late 1930s and the war years, and the local and family events which they parallel. You'll find that the chapter headings provide a sort of link between the two sequences.

3. The novel mentions a number of actual military encounters.

Activity : Find out all you can about one of these engagements: Pearl Harbour; the bombing of Darwin etc.

4. Alice's treatment as a prisoner of war is graphically conveyed. "Many of her teeth had fallen out and tropical ulcers had left craters in her legs" (p 148).

Activity : Research Japanese prisoner of war and internment camps in Australia. What would life have been like for Mitsy and Sadako in the internment camp? (One starting point is the author's earlier novel, *The Stencil Man* (Collins/Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1988.)

### **Structure**

Writing in "flashback" the author is able to play with the timeline: it begins in 1946 with a discussion of events in 1941, and then proceeds to earlier years.

Activity : If the novel was written in the present tense, what changes would have been necessary in the structure of the novel? Discuss.

### **Style**

Disher uses various literary devices. He deals with the terrible mistreatment of black workers on stations by describing Carl's behaviour in the negative: "Carl didn't force his recalcitrant black stockmen to dress in women's clothing...He didn't lay on black velvet in the visitors' quarters..." (p 70).

Activity : Try to construct a similar piece of writing. Does this device have more power than if it had been written as a straight description? Why?

### **Characters**

1. Personality in fiction is revealed through speech, actions, thoughts and attitudes.

Activity : Write a personality profile of the main characters, pointing out their similarities and differences.

2. Relationships are fluid and never remain constant.

Activity : Discuss what happens when relationships come under strain in the novel: when Mitsy and Hart become lovers; when Carl's true nature is revealed to Alice; when the events of the war alter Michael's perceptions of Mitsy and Sadako.

3. Hart and Jamie are contrasted by the use of "binaries": "Where I was tall, graceful and lazy, Jamie Kilian was compact, restless and alert" (p 23).

Activity : Try to write a piece describing yourself and your best friend in this way.

4. "Mitsy saved me from myself " (p 9).

Activity : What does Hart mean by this?

5. Carl Venning is a product of his environment.

Activity : How difficult is it to resist the influences of your upbringing? Discuss.

6. Sadako seems a more forgiving character than her daughter Mitsy.

Activity : What gives her such inner strength?

7. Ida's inability to settle in Australia is a family tragedy.

Activity : What effect does her defection have on her husband and her children? Discuss.

### **Language**

1. Metaphor is used to describe feelings and events: "And so Alice, Mitsy and I became Jamie Kilian's shelter from the storm" p 30).

Activity : Find other examples of such language.

2. Garry Disher's historical research is evident in many details and words which are not common to us now: "Koepangers" (p 1), " solar topees" (p 4).

Activity : List some of these words and try to discover their meaning in dictionaries and encyclopedias.

3. Feelings are difficult to describe without using clichés.

Activity : Isolate passages in which Michael and Hart express their feelings for Ida and Mitsy. How does the author make them fresh and original?

4. Different contexts require different discourses. For example the legal interview recorded on pp 94-7.

Activity : Using the discourse of personal reminiscence, describe Derby's memories of the night Kitty Worms was killed

5. Ideological movements use slogans to express their messages: "Good English stock" (p 27) ; "populate or perish" (p 26 ). Chapter titles here are also suggestive of theme, rather than being literal.

Activity : What is the meaning of "Phoney War", "Hard Liberty" and other "symbolic" phrases?

### **Setting**

1. The novel is powerfully evocative of Broome's multi-racial nature : "I liked to take a long route through Chinatown, attracted by the Chinese gamblers, the Japanese divers, the lemon-squash stallholder, the Ambonese woman stirring mangrove crabs in a spitting wok, the sly-grog sellers, the half-dozen languages, and the slap of sandals and bare feet" (p 9).

Activity : Write a research project on Broome, and the pearling industry, in the 1930s. Discuss climate, lifestyle, racial mix, race relations, etc.

2. "We enjoyed our tropical existence: mangoes and barramundi on the table, bamboo furniture, siestas, sundowners, pearlshell ashtrays, servants" (p 2).

Activity : What does this description suggest about the attitudes of people living in this time and place?

### **Other Activities for Discussion**

1. The novel is a recollection of youth. One of the painful lessons of life is that the past is always with us. The narrator tells a first person account of his teenage war experiences, and is therefore able to make more sophisticated observations than if the novel was written in the present. We hear an adult voice recalling youth, focussing on the issues of choice and fate in determining each of our futures. Read and compare with other novels of childhood and youth: Randolph Stow's *The Merry Go Round in the Sea*; LP Hartley's *The Go-Between*; Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mocking Bird*; Richard Ford's *Wildlife*.

2. "We always hurt the ones we love". Discuss.

3. Write a short history of flight in the 1930s, tracing some of the triumphs and tragedies of England to Australia record attempts, flyers lost in the desert, etc

4. "Populate or Perish" was a popular catchcry in the 1930s. (See p 26.) What was meant by this? How realistic were these aims? Do the fears underpinning this concept still apply in present-day Australia? How would Pauline Hanson and the One Nation Party have fared in the 1930s? What was the White Australia Policy?

5. Ernestine Hill, Frank Clune and Ion Idriess were hugely popular travel writers of the 1930s. What did they have to say about northern Australia?

### **Other Writing Activities**

1. Write the letter Alice might have written to Hart and her father describing her return to Singapore. (See p149.)
2. One of the advantages of the "flashback" approach is that the narrator knows what is going to happen and is able to tease the reader with his knowledge: "Before it all went wrong"(p 8). Write about an incident in your life while it's happening. Then write it again as a recollection.
3. Write an excerpt from Hart's diary describing his feelings after Mitsy is interned.
4. Write a short explanation of the meaning of the novel's title.
5. Create a script for a brief radio broadcast describing the bombing of Broome. (See chapter "The Divine Wind".)

### **Author - Related Activities**

Garry Disher is a highly acclaimed writer for adults and young people. He has degrees in history and his family background is also important to his work. Both *The Bamboo Flute* and *The Sunken Road* are set in the "wheat and wool country" of South Australia where he grew up. They are also set during the Depression, based on stories he has heard from his parents and grandparents.

### **Interesting Facts:**

Garry won the CBC Book of the Year Award (Younger Readers) for his first children's book *The Bamboo Flute*. He is also the author of a series of crime thrillers. He's well known as a teacher of writing and has written books about writing : *Writing Fiction: An Introduction* (1989). He has written more than 30 books including several short story collections. His last book for Hodder was *The Apostle Bird*.

### **Other Activities**

Read some of Garry's other books. How important is history to them?

What other common themes can you identify in Garry's books?

Search the internet for information about Garry.

Garry writes that: "It's better to look to your own lives for inspiration than to soap operas and films." Isolate a period in which you were involved in events which would make a good story: a bully at school; an accident; a holiday in a unique location. Try to write a story based on that time.

What questions about Garry's inspiration in writing the novel would you ask him if you could meet him?

Read other novels about this historical period: Randolph Stow's book *The Merry Go Round in the Sea*; Joan Lingard's *The File on Fraulein Berg*; *Summer of My German Soldier* by Bette Greene; *The Machine Gunners* by Robert Westall.

Research the making of an air raid shelter.

The power of radio broadcasting in disseminating propaganda is suggested in the book. It made the war seem remote, exotic and unreal. "If I sound like a newsreel, it's because that's the way we thought" (p 36). Try to discover information about the role of radio during war.

Interview any members of your family who experienced WWII and write down their story, illustrated by photos (if you can locate any), or your own drawings.

Try to discover any maps showing the military engagements which threatened Australia's coastline during WWII.