



HOME

and AWAY

TEACHERS NOTES

JOHN MARSDEN
& MATT OTTLEY

HOME AND AWAY

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INTRODUCTION

'Oh, hope, to know that there is still hope.'

This story of a family which is forced by war to flee their country is written as if it's a disjointed diary of a fifteen year old's experience of being first 'at home' and then 'away'. John Marsden and Matt Ottley make it powerful by beginning with a very ordinary, presumably Australian family which is suddenly thrust into an unexpected conflict. For those who don't understand the issues involved in the experiences of people (like those in Iraq and Afghanistan) who are driven to leave their countries during unrest, and to purchase space on boats ill-equipped to carry them, this book gives an immediate and very moving insight into their suffering.

Marsden's text is cryptic and casual, written as if by any teenager who is very used to writing emails (and entries on Myspace and Facebook) about their ordinary concerns. The events being described are therefore all the more shocking when this voice has to relay to the reader the impact of totally unexpected and horrific changes in her life. Matt Ottley's graphically arresting images simultaneously give a sense of individual involvement in these grim events, and also leave many ominous 'silences' to be explored by the reader as well. Home and Away invites its readers to feel empathy with those whose plights are viewed through the prism of misunderstanding, self-interest, prejudice or fear. It invites them to feel compassion for those ... who are not like 'us'.

STRUCTURE

This story is told as a series of entries written by a fictional narrator in a **chronological structure** with the narration covering April 26th until September 29th the following year. However, there is nearly a year's gap in the narrative from October 1 until September the following year, and the last three entries are undated, as if time now has no real meaning.

QUESTION: How does this structure inform the story's meaning? Why are there gaps?

THEMES

Several themes are covered which might be related to other curriculum areas:

- **REFUGEES AND DISPLACEMENT**

The plight of refugees is a major issue in the world today. A person is deemed to be a refugee 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail him/herself of the protection of that country' (United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees 1951). Since then, however, the terminology defining refugee has been subject to several legal revisions of this definition and has been interpreted by many national governments in ways determined by their own national policy directions.

ACTIVITY: Research refugees and the reasons 14, 047, 300 people in the world are currently refugees and asylum seekers (World Refugee Survey 2008) and therefore do not have a home. The UN Refugee Agency also reports that 'At the start of 2006, the number of people 'of concern' to UNHCR rose to 20.8 million, up 6 percent from the 2005 total of 19.5 million.' (UNHCR website) There is also a lot of information available on Wikipedia and on many other internet sites. Give a brief talk to the class on any aspect of the problem which interests you.

QUESTION: What are some of the reasons why people become refugees?

ACTIVITY: Discuss the reasons the 'government' gives in this book for not immediately welcoming this family and the rest of the refugees to their shores. Compare these statements with the actual reasons given by Australia's government during the last few years, for keeping refugees in detention camps.

DISCUSSION POINT: Citizenship Tests routinely invite potential immigrants to identify 'Australian values' and to answer questions about 'facts' relative to the nation's culture and history. But aren't such tests arbitrary when most immigrants come with a limited understanding of their new nation? Research the various hurdles negotiated by refugees when they come to Australia.

DISCUSSION POINT: Read about some of the incidents in Australia's treatment of refugees. eg SIEVX-com <<http://www.sievx.com/>> See also the SievX National Memorial project <<http://www.sievxmemorial.com/>> Do the events described here surprise or concern you?

ACTIVITY: Compare this book with Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* and Armin Greder's *The Island* which deal with a similar issue but in a different way. In Shaun Tan's wordless picture book he shows the new world through the eyes of one new arrival. In Greder's, the arrival of an unnamed man on an island is viewed through the reactions of the inhabitants.

DISCUSSION POINT: What kinds of displacement have you ever suffered? Discuss the feelings you had in being sent to a new place, or in leaving your home for a new one. [Note: Teachers may need to treat this issue with sensitivity where their class members may have suffered a variety of traumas. This may, however, also be a powerful way of conveying to the entire class the many experiences endured by members of our own society.

DISCUSSION POINT: The book suggests that long term detention can have catastrophic effects which are mental, emotional and physical. For example, Toby (the youngest child) does drawings which depict his confusion. And the text describes his deterioration. Should children ever be kept in detention?

QUESTION: These refugees travel to a place called Hollania. Why has Marsden used a made-up name for this country?

• DISASTER AND WAR

The situation in the society and country described here breaks down very quickly. The first entry in the narrator's diary is April 26th; war begins on the day after, and by May 21 'The city's in ruins, blackouts nearly all the time, food is hard to find.' And it grows progressively worse thereafter.

QUESTION: In the event of a war, why would things break down like this? What systems would be interrupted? Why would food be hard to find?

ACTIVITY: Dad in this story sells everything they have to buy their passage on a ship. Compare this to the price paid by some of the refugees (from places like Iraq) who have attempted to arrive in Australia over the last decade.

ACTIVITY: How might war affect the lives of children and teenagers? Secondary students might read other novels about war as it affects ordinary people:

John Marsden's *Tomorrow When the War Began* and *The Ellie Chronicles* series; Morris Gleitzman's *Boy Overboard*, *Girl Underground*, *Once and Then*; Jackie French's *Hitler's Daughter* and *A Rose for the Anzac Boys*; Meg Rosoff's *How I Live Now*; David Metzenthen's *Boys of Blood and Bone* and *Black Water*; *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne; *Brother in the Land* by Robert Swindells; *Refugee Boy* by Benjamin Zachariah; *Refuge* by Libby Gleeson; *Parvanna*, *Parvanna's Journey* and *Shauzia* by Deborah Ellis; *No Gun for Asmir* by Christabel Mattingley; *No More Borders for Josef* by Diana Chase; *War Game* by Michael Foreman; Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Falling Suns*.

You could also relate this when working with secondary students to some recent memoirs of immigrant experiences such as *Unpolished Gem* by Alice Pung.

Primary and secondary students might read picture books on war as well: *Rose Blanche* by Roberto Innocenti; *The Enemy* by Davide Cali and Serge Bloch; *War and Peas* and *War Boy: A War-Time Childhood* by Michael Foreman; *Let the Celebrations Begin!* by Margaret Wild and Julie Vivas; *When the Wind Blows* and *The Tin-Pot Foreign General* and *The Old Iron Woman* by Raymond Briggs; *My Hiroshima* by Junko Morimoto; *Memorial* by Gary Crew and Shaun Tan; *Ziba came on a Boat* by Liz Lofthouse and Robert Ingpen.

- **FREEDOM & POWER**

The book encourages students to think about their personal freedom and to place a value on it, by showing them the perspective of others who have lost their freedom.

DISCUSSION POINT: In Australia we are relatively free. But do we make the best use of our freedom?

DISCUSSION POINT: On September 26, the narrator writes: 'Hope is the most wonderful thing on earth. I never knew that before.' Discuss the notion of hope and how you might have experienced it. Compare your hopes with the very basic hope of the family in this book—which is to survive.

DISCUSSION POINT: In this story there is no real sense of who, or what, is in power, or has created this disaster. This may be a deliberate reflection of the fact that very often 'ordinary' people have little inkling of what has determined the impact of such events on their lives. Discuss.

- **PREJUDICE**

Prejudice can be overt or covert. It can consist of very obvious forms of racism such as segregation, persecution or apartheid. But it can also consist of government policy which sanctions inhumane treatment of those in need, or of individual actions such as bullying and mental or emotional abuse.

DISCUSSION POINT: It's hard to imagine anyone turning desperate people aboard a ship away and yet this is what Australia has done on several occasions in recent years (eg The MV Tampa crisis and the Siev-X incident etc.) Is this the result of prejudice against people from other cultures? Is Australia a racist or prejudiced country?

ACTIVITY: Invite students to discuss their own experiences of prejudice.

ACTIVITY: Read other novels about the fear of others and racism eg *Falling* by Annie Provoost; *Bone* by Tony Johnston; *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee.

CURRICULUM TOPICS

This picture book might be used in conjunction with curriculum topics with upper primary or secondary school students in the following suggested areas:

- **STUDY OF HISTORY, SOCIETY AND ENVIRONMENT**

This book touches on all the themes above and can be used in studies of history, society or environmental issues.

ACTIVITY: Research the effect of lack of resources such as water, food, and power on a society.

ACTIVITY: Research the history of any country which has been torn by war. How has this affected the lifestyles of the inhabitants of that country? How have they been treated when they have tried to find refuge in other countries?

ACTIVITY: Research Australia's history of treatment of refugees, dating back to earlier times, and policies like the White Australia Policy.

- **ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERACY**

This work is written in a first person narrative voice by a fifteen year old character. But it is also the story of other family members too.

ACTIVITY: Write a brief description of these events in the voice of either five year old Toby or eleven year old Claire. Write it in the third person as if it's someone writing a history of these events after they happened. How does this change the narration?

ACTIVITY: When the narrator describes the family, it's in cryptic sentences eg 'Mum: Rehab counsellor for people with alcohol problems. Loves anchovies on pizzas. Watches the CSI channel on cable. Looks after her mother. Grandma Raynor lives next door.' You can convey a lot about someone in just a few words. Write a description of each of the people in your family (or the group of people you live with) like this.

QUESTION: Is the narrator male or female? How do you assume that?

QUESTION: Why do you think John Marsden gave this book the title Home and Away? Discuss its possible implications?

DISCUSSION POINT: Persuasive language is a powerful tool which is often used to influence, or prejudice people regarding particular groups or individuals. In recent debates about refugees words such as 'queue jumpers' and 'boat people' have been used to denigrate and to deny refugees individual respect for their legitimate claims. Discuss the use of language in government documents and media statements eg the Former Prime Minister John Howard was quoted as saying: 'We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come.' (6 December, 2001) What does this statement imply? What does it deny?

QUIZ: There are many words and phrases relating to refugees which students might not fully understand. Test their knowledge with a **quiz** asking them to briefly define:

1. Refugee
2. Asylum seeker
3. Sanctuary
4. Mandatory detention
5. Visa
6. Displaced person
7. Illegal alien
8. Ethnic cleansing
9. Trauma
10. Diaspora

VISUAL LITERACY

This work has a rich visual text which might be examined in this curriculum area in a number of ways.

DISCUSSION POINT: Matt Ottley tells the story via a range of illustrative styles each of which give the reader a different perspective on the action. eg Double page spread 1 is a photo taken by the fifteen year old narrator. Double page spread 2 is one of five-year old Toby's drawings of his family and his home. Discuss the various styles employed in each spread. Why did Ottley choose these various styles? What meaning do they add to the work?

QUESTION: The way a text is printed (or the use of typography), can be important in making meaning too. Before the disaster, the text is printed, and after the disaster, the text is hand-written on torn pieces of paper. What does this technique suggest?

QUESTION: Some images seem to deliberately invite interpretation eg the cowboy with the gun in double page spread 3 suggests an American cowboy; this might also suggest that America and its Texan president George Bush Jnr are being referred to here. Were there any particular images which suggested such interpretations to you?

ACTIVITY: The cover of a book is an important part of its message. 'Read' the cover of the work, which depicts a child looking through a barbed wire fence with the words 'home and away' written above him. (The word 'home' is scratched out as if by a child.) What does this cover image suggest to you?

DISCUSSION POINT: Juxtaposition of images in the narrative line is carefully designed to create a filmic narrative of the story, and of the emotions suffered by this family. eg Toby's colourful but confused picture of them being waved away by the naval boat, is followed by a grim oil painting of the faceless and sinister figure of a camp guard...and then by another painting of Toby's which seems to suggest suicide. Discuss this sequence of pictures with the students.

QUESTION: Colour can convey meanings too. How does colour affect your reading of this work? Are their colours which seem to have a symbolic meaning?

• CREATIVE ARTS

Celebrate annual **Refugee Week** which in 2009 will be held from Sunday, June 14 to Sunday, June 21. Each year, Refugee Week coincides with World Refugee Day, being held in the week (Sunday to Saturday) which includes June 20. There are many creative activities you could take part in during the week.

- Invite students to paint a picture exploring some of the questions you have discussed in class. **Hold an art exhibition** and auction the works for charity. Donate the money to a cause which assists refugees.
- **Create a play** which explores some of the feelings expressed in this book. The play might be wordless or be mimed, or might include a script and music.

- The SievX Memorial Project aimed to commemorate the people who died on the SievX vessel in 2001. [See <<http://www.sievxmemorial.com/>>] **Create your own school Memorial Project for Refugees...**think of a creative way to display your feelings.

• LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES

The topics raised in this book are very well suited to internet research.

ACTIVITY: Research refugees on the internet. There are many sites which give you an insight into their experiences. [See **Bibliography** below.]

• MATHEMATICS

The study of populations and immigration might also lend itself to related mathematics activities.

ACTIVITY: An analysis of refugee status and statistics (country by country) can offer students an insight into the scale of the problem. It can also make it clear which countries have the major problems and which have offered the most generous solutions.

FURTHER TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION & RESEARCH

- Follow the links from the Refugee Council of Australia's website to the speech given by SBS football broadcaster Les Murray AM, who came to Australia as an 11-year-old refugee from Hungary, as guest speaker at the NSW launch of Refugee Week. <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/docs/refugeeweek/Les_Murray_NSW_RW08_speech.pdf> Discuss the speech with your class.
- Your class could conduct an oral history project interviewing members of the class or their parents or grandparents who have immigrated to Australia.
- Australia is a nation of immigrants. Discuss.
- Research the works of both Matt Ottley and John Marsden.

- Compare this work to John Marsden's *The Rabbits* illustrated by Shaun Tan, which is actually about immigration but offers a different perspective on the issue. Compare it to Matt Ottley's *Requiem for a Beast* which is about prejudice amongst other things.

CONCLUSION

This work offers a powerful insight into a universal problem as it's experienced by individuals. Having a home is the basic right and need of every individual, but for many people in the world, a real home is actually too far away.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Marsden lives in Kerrie, Victoria. He is Australia's most popular writer of young adult fiction. His books have sold more than four million copies worldwide and he has won, or been shortlisted for, every major award for young adult literature in Australia, including the Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year, the National Children's Book awards and numerous children's choice awards. His gripping war series, which began with *Tomorrow when the War Began*, has broken all sales records for young adult fiction. *Burning for Revenge* was awarded the Bookdata-ABA Book of the Year Award (1998). John's move into picture books has been highly acclaimed, following the release of *Prayer for the 21st Century* in 1997, *Norton's Hut* in 1998 and *The Rabbits*, illustrated by Shaun Tan, which was awarded CBCA Picture Book of the Year, in 1999. <<http://www.johnmarsden.com.au/home.html>>

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Matt Ottley was born in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, moving to Australia when he was eleven. After almost failing high school in Sydney, he lived the itinerant life of a stockman for some years on cattle stations in Queensland, before returning to Sydney to study fine arts and music. He is now one of Australia's most popular children's author/illustrators and has been published in several different languages around the world. Matt also works as a composer and flamenco guitarist. His most recent book, *Requiem for a Beast*, was published in 2007 and was shortlisted for the 2008 CBCA Picture Book of the Year.

For more information visit <http://www.mattottley.com>

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GENERAL INFORMATION WEBSITES

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<<http://www.ajustaustralia.com/home.php>>

Amnesty International <www.amnesty.org/>

Amnesty International Australia <<http://www.amnesty.org.au/>>

Amnesty International Refugees and Asylum Celebrate Refugee Week
<<http://www.amnesty.org.uk/content.asp?CategoryID=10838>>

Australian Refugee Association <<http://www.ausref.net/>>

Australians Welcome Refugees: The Untold Story. A Report to the 60th session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights April 2004 prepared by Margaret Reynolds
<<http://www.safecome.or.au/welcome-report.htm> > This report documents how some Australians have been actively challenging what they consider to be inhumane treatment of refugees.

Chilout: children out of detention <<http://www.chilout.org/>>

This organisation is being wound down having (in 2005) achieved its objectives to see no child still in detention in Australia, but still contains useful information.

European Council on Refugees and Exiles Refugee Stories Project
<<http://www.ecre.org/refugeestories/>>

International Rescue Committee (IRC) <http://www.theirc.org/?gclid=COaoz_2mw5QCFSQdagodASfcGQ>

Julian Burnside <<http://www.julianburnside.com>>

Leading advocate and human rights lawyer, Burnside's website contains very useful information.

PEN <<http://www.pen.org.au>>

The Australian body is affiliated with International PEN which exists to support the role of writing in the development of mutual understanding and world culture.

Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) <<http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/>>

This site offers facts, statistics and useful information about refugees.

Refugee Camp in Your City <<http://www.msf.org.au/refugeecamp/index.shtml>>

Médecin Sans Frontières (MSF) shows how the basic needs of people are/aren't being met in such camps all over the world. The tour is coming to Australia soon.

'Refugee' Wikipedia

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Spare Rooms for Refugees

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Unicef New Zealand Refugee Activities

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This page on the UN website will give you information about human rights, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the Commission on Human Rights (CHR), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Human Rights Council.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE NOTES

Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright operates justified text writing and publishing consultancy services, and is widely published on children's literature, publishing history and Australian fiction. She also teaches writing for children and young adults at Griffith University (Gold Coast) where she gained her PhD for a thesis on the development of the Australian children's publishing industry. Her latest publications are *Paper Empires a History of the Book in Australia 1946-2005* (co-edited with Craig Munro) (UQP, 2006) and *Kookaburra Shells Port Curtis Literature* (justified text press, 2006).