

THE YEAR MY LIFE BROKE

John Marsden

Teachers' Notes by Shanyn Limpus

These teaching notes will be useful in addressing the Australian Curriculum: English for students in years 6 and 7.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will have the opportunity to:

- Understand the way language evolves to reflect a changing world, particularly in response to the use of new technology for presenting text and communicating (ACELA1528)
- Understand how language is used to evaluate texts and how evaluations about a text can be substantiated by reference to the text and other sources (ACELA1782)
- Identify and explore ideas and viewpoints about events, issues and characters represented in texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts (ACELT1619)
- Make connections between students' own experiences and those of characters and events expressed in texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts (ACELT1613)
- Reflect on ideas and opinions about characters, settings and events in literary texts, identifying areas of agreement and difference with others and justifying point of view (ACELT1620)
- Recognise and analyse the ways that characterisation, events and settings are combined in narratives, and discuss the purposes and appeal of different approaches (ACELT1622)
- Create literary texts that adapt or combine aspects of texts students have experienced in innovative ways (ACELT1618)
- Experiment with text structures and language features and their effects in creating literary texts; for example, using imagery, sentence variation, metaphor and word choice (ACELT1800)

- Analyse how text structures and language features work together to meet the purpose of a text (ACELY1711).

SYNOPSIS

Tarrawagga was a hole. Its only ambition was to become a crater, and it had every chance of getting there.

Josh and his family have moved to the most boring street in the most boring town in Australia. Josh is finding it hard to adjust to his new neighbourhood. And what exactly is going on with the creepy, abandoned house next door? To make matters worse, everyone at school thinks Josh is the biggest loser in Grade 6. When the school unites in their attempt to win a cricket match, Josh is keeping a secret that could finally see Tarrawagga end their losing streak. When they realise the truth, teachers and students alike will be in for the shock of their lives.

The Year My Life Broke is a gripping novel that is full of surprises at every turn. John Marsden effectively captures the difficulties of fitting into a new place and finding your identity. Readers will love the honest, humorous storytelling, and the cricket content will grab the attention of even the most reluctant male readers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Marsden was born in Victoria in 1950. He published his first book, *So Much to Tell You*, in 1987, which was followed by a string of successful hits including the *Tomorrow* series and *The Ellie Chronicles*. In 2006, John started his own school called Candlebark, which is his proudest achievement. He is one of Australia's bestselling and most awarded authors.

THEMES

- fitting in
- change
- self-image / identity
- teamwork
- ambition

- trust
- responsibility

CHARACTERS

- Josh** Year 6 student who was popular at his last school for his sporting ability—he was known as a ‘meathead’ because he lived and breathed sport. He is stubborn; has a bit of a temper; loves cricket, Lego, reading (especially *Harry Potter* books), and drawing and painting. Josh’s ambition is to play cricket for Australia one day, yet he lets students and teachers at his new school believe he is useless at sport. Josh wants to be known for something other than being good at sport.
- Red** Year 6 student who plays sport regularly and always gives his best. He has a lot of pride in his school and wants to motivate the students to train hard so that they can finally win a netball or cricket match.
- Harriet** Year 6 student who lives next door to Josh with her dad, Lenny, a senior constable. She is an average bowler but doesn’t like batting because she hates doing anything she isn’t good at. She is cautious about making friends because she worries people will judge her for being a policeman’s daughter. Harriet and Josh become friends.
- Mr Surrey** School PE teacher who favours children who are good at sport. Josh and Mr Surrey do not get on from the start, and Josh’s attitude and lack of effort in class only make the relationship worse.
- Mr and Mrs Smith** Josh’s mum and dad. Cameron Smith was an employee of Antelope before he and his wife lost all their money and had to move to Tarrawagga.
- Callan** Josh’s younger brother. He spends a lot of time on the computer.
- Pippa** Josh’s younger sister. She keeps to herself.
- Woody** Lonely child from next door who is under police protection.
- Wally** Josh’s Cypress Under 14s cricket coach.
- Mr Barnes** Josh’s Year 6 teacher.

BEFORE READING

Identity

Josh feels as though his identity is limited by his sporting ability so he tries to create a different persona. Describe your self-image—what identifies you: your hobbies, abilities etc.? Make a list of labels we use to group people at school.

Truth

Josh hides his cricket skills from his PE teacher and the other students. What is the difference between keeping something from someone and lying? Consider when it is OK to keep a secret or to tell a lie.

Adjustment

Josh finds it hard to adjust to the big changes in his life when his family moves to Tarrawagga. Pick three things that could happen to you that might break your life. Discuss with other students.

WHILE READING

Imagination

Were our neighbours big-time crims? What were they doing? Growing drugs? Was it the local Mafia headquarters? How many bodies were buried in their backyard? It made me nervous (p. 4).

Josh has a very active imagination about his neighbourhood and his family. Make a note of his imaginative theories and comment. Which theory do you think would make the most interesting story? What do *you* think is the story behind the deserted house?

Extension: Imagine that one of Josh's theories is true and develop it into a short story.

Figurative Language

The way the engine smoked, it could have been hooked on cigarettes. It coughed like it had lung cancer (p. 1).

John Marsden uses similes and metaphors to create interesting imagery for the reader. Choose five similes as you are reading and create alternative similes that could easily fit in their place.

Extension: Write a description of your school or town using similes and metaphors to help make your writing more interesting.

Cricket Terminology

Keep a list of cricket terms that you come across while you are reading: yorker, square leg, wicket, stumps, LBW, mid-off, sledged, over, innings, wickie, duck, six, fours, top edge, leg slip, half leg etc. Write a definition for each of these terms.

Extension: Think of a sport that you like and create your own sports dictionary to explain all the commonly used words for that sport.

STRUCTURE

The Year My Life Broke is narrated in first-person perspective by the protagonist Josh.

1. Plot the main narrative elements using a story arc (exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution).
2. How important is the setting to the structure? How does Tarrawagga set up the everyday situation that triggers the story?
3. A critical moment in the story is when Josh finds himself in the same cricket match as Red. What does this moment reveal about Josh's character?
4. How does the author build the tension towards the climax? Which event is the high point of tension in the story?

5. Are there any plot points that are unresolved at the end? What event could trigger a sequel?

AFTER READING

Alternative Perspective

A first-person narrative can limit the storytelling to the main character. Discuss which secondary character would also have an interesting story to tell. Choose a point of conflict or excitement and write the scene from another character's perspective. For example, when Red finds out that Josh can play cricket, when the shooting occurs next door or when Harriet makes the winning play for Tarrawagga.

Art

You wouldn't go to Tarrawagga for a holiday. The biggest attraction in Tarrawagga was a park down the end of our street, about half the size of a basketball court, with two swings, a climbing frame and a slide that dumped you in a sandpit decorated with dog crap (p. 5).

Imagine you have to sell Tarrawagga as a great place to visit or live. Design a positive poster about Tarrawagga that would encourage people to come to the region. Hint: put a positive spin on all the negatives Josh describes—spacious instead of empty, quiet instead of boring, etc.

Change

So why did we have to shift to Tarrawagga? Ask my parents. It wasn't my idea (p. 1).

Change is one of the major themes of the novel. Discuss some of the consequences of the changes in Josh's life. How do the characters respond or cope with change?

Extension: Write a personal reflection of a major change that you have experienced in your life. How did you cope? Did your experience teach you any important lessons or change you in any way?

Descriptive Writing

My skin kept crawling like I had goose pimples running up and down me in waves. I felt paralysed, especially in the lungs. I wanted to do something brave, something heroic, because I knew he must be there for a bad reason, but I couldn't move (p. 116).

As evident in this excerpt, the author is able to describe emotions effectively. Pick five emotions (fear, anger, happiness, excitement, jealousy, etc.) and break into five groups. Using a large piece of butcher's paper, trace around a student in each group to create the shape of a person. Write the emotion at the top of the page and then make notes around areas of the body to describe how you would feel. For example, fear gives you goose pimples on your arms, your mouth feels dry, hairs stand up on the back of your neck, palms feel sweaty, your stomach drops and your feet feel like cement.

Extension: Using the notes from one of these emotions, create a one-page fictional story by placing yourself in a scenario where you would feel like this. Use as many descriptive sentences as you can to effectively create the mood. Read it to the class.

Newspaper

'We'll have to keep an eye on the newspapers,' said Mum. 'No doubt it'll be in there sooner or later.' (p. 169).

Imagine the reason that Woody and his family are in witness protection. Create the newspaper story that Josh and his family could see that would explain the court case the neighbours may have been witnesses for OR create the newspaper story that might occur after Tarrawagga's victory on the cricket field.

Extension: Write a letter from Woody to Josh thanking him for his help during the shooting, and explaining what life is like in witness protection and the reason why he had to keep his identity hidden.

Book Review

Write a short book review of the novel to provide your opinion. Discuss the writing style, characters, plot and action. Do you agree that John Marsden is one of Australia's greatest fiction writers for boys? Does this story also appeal to girls?

QUESTIONS FOR READING AND DISCUSSION

1. Which part of moving do you think Josh is most upset about: lack of money, new house, new town or new school? Josh takes a while to accept that his parents don't have as much money as they used to, yet no one at school comments on him being poor. Discuss.
2. Josh describes the old woman who rides the ride-on mower as NQR? What does this stand for? Discuss some other abbreviations and communication terms from technology (mobile phones and instant messaging) that have become the norm.
3. Josh is the oldest sibling and therefore gets first pick of the bedrooms in the new house. Are you the youngest, the oldest, a middle child or an only child? What are the advantages and disadvantages of your place in the family?
4. Josh's mum tells him that if he gets to know some people then Tarrawagga won't be so bad. Do you agree with her advice? Do people really make a place rather than the place itself?
5. Josh doesn't want to rely on his sporting skills to make friends. What strategies could you give him to make friends and to learn to fit in at a new school?
6. Josh's cricket skills are eventually revealed. Do you think that Josh would have survived at school if they weren't?
7. While some girls play cricket for Tarrawagga, do you think cricket and netball are traditionally for boys or girls only? Discuss.
8. Do you think Mr Surrey is a bully? Discuss his behaviour and remarks towards Josh.
9. Do you think Josh would be a good motivator, like Red? List the strengths and weaknesses that would or wouldn't make Josh a good school captain.
10. In what ways do you think Josh changes throughout the story? Do you think his life is still broken at the end?

