

Resource Kit for use in schools

Thunder Road

Ted Dawe

THUNDER ROAD – you find it in any city after the cops are in bed. It's where street racers go to test their machines – and their nerve.

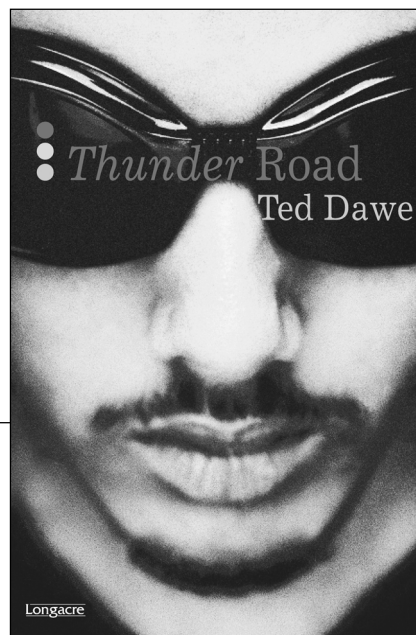
For me it was ... the steep rising pitch of the turbo, the screaming tyres and curtain of white smoke hanging behind me: all the stuff that spells street racing.

Trace is 19 and has grown out of small town ways. He's hungry for more. In Auckland he hooks up with Devon, a guy with the Midas touch, who introduces Trace to burn-offs, big city style. Soon everything is smoking.

There is a code with us drivers: you don't criticise and you don't show fear.

When Trace falls for a girl even Devon says is out of his league, loyalties are stretched. Then Devon hits on a scheme for hauling in cash. Soon enough he and Trace find out who really controls the strip. As the underworld closes in, it looks like their friendship is heading for burn-out.

Menacing, suspenseful – a gripping novel from a remarkable talent.



SPECIFICATIONS

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This RESOURCE KIT contains:

- Author's notes
- Themes
- Close Reading
- Writing
- Debate Topics
- Theatre/Drama
- Visual Responses

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When I wrote Thunder Road...

When I wrote *Thunder Road* I had a particular reader in mind.

This reader was probably male, but not necessarily.

He/she was 14/17 years old. He/she liked cars, speed.

He/she was someone looking for independence but hungry for real relationships.

Most of all I wanted the reader who wasn't a reader. The sort of person who would not say that reading was one of their favourite activities.

As I've been a teacher for many years I know how difficult but how important it is to find that one book that unlocks the world of books to a teenager. Something that shows them there is a new dimension that is huge and satisfying and entirely at their command. This marks a step which is as important and as liberating as passing your driving licence.

For me it didn't happen until I was 17 and made to read a book called *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck.

Suddenly all the planets were aligned and everything clicked. I experienced the power of books and ventured into the worlds that they created.

From that point on all books became accessible and English became a subject I enjoyed and succeeded at for the first time.

I have read a pile of books since then but I've never forgotten Steinbeck's dusty old classic.

As an English teacher hooking kids on books has been my biggest blast... better than the one I get from students who top the class... or who have read every book in the library.

In *Thunder Road* I tried to incorporate all the aspects of a satisfying adult novel, but these were

blended into a story about two 19-year-olds. They may be racing around in stolen cars, swapping bags full of dak for bags full of money, learning about sex, having fights, but this world of speed and excitement is underpinned by a recognition that life is passing and death is only a moment away.

Trace is looking for something, but he doesn't know what it is. Devon seems to have all the answers. Feeding off each other's strengths they venture into a world which has few rules and no safety nets. It is a world where you can't ask for help and you can't drop out when the stakes get too high. In some ways it is the world of adults but in others it is the law of the jungle.

Thunder Road has embedded in its plot a number of incidents which some of you may have experienced.

See if you can find similar stories for these scenarios.

- Being treated unfairly
- Meeting someone for the first time and things just click
- Doing something that makes you hero for the day
- Being excluded ... by language, background or friendship groups
- Developing a world view
- A full-on drag race
- Being invited to someone's place for dinner and disgracing yourself
- Being persuaded to do something against your better judgement
- Being caught stealing
- Being chased
- Being pressured into taking drugs
- Seeing yourself in a different light
- Being torn between loyalties to two friends
- Being in an accident
- Being in a hospital
- Finding yourself in the heavy crowd
- First love
- Attending the funeral/tangi of someone you love
- The desire for revenge
- Telling a story entirely in dialogue
- Reflecting and making sense of something later

Themes

A theme is an idea that runs through a book. It is often illustrated in the actions of the characters or the events that take place. There are a number of these in *Thunder Road*. Some of them are major, others are touched upon lightly only once.

Loyalty

How far can this be tested? How important is it in relationships? What is it based on?

Love

There are various kinds of love in *Thunder Road*. See if you can identify these and define them.

Honesty

Is 'honest' telling the truth? Is it obeying the law? Is it being true to your friends? Is it being true to yourself?

Respect

What are the things we should respect? The law? Our elders or bosses? Other people's property? Is respect a right, or should it be earned?

Rivalry

There is rivalry in nearly every act of human behaviour. Do you agree? It is in our work, our sport, our relationships, the way we dress and the way we drive. Is there anything wrong with this? Where should the limits come?

Trust

This is tied closely to loyalty. How far can you trust another human being? How far *should* you trust someone else?

Appearances

We are an appearance driven society. The way we dress, the cars we drive, the things we do and the things we say all help project an image to others of how we want to be seen. Why do we do this? Who does this in *Thunder Road* and why?

Social Class

New Zealand used to pride itself on being the classless society: a land where "Jack is as good as his master". Do you think this is an accurate view of New Zealand society (as portrayed in the novel)?

What aspects of class distinction are there in *Thunder Road*?

Truth

The truth is an illusion.

The truth is something we must all strive for.

The truth is my version of the world.

Which of these statements do you agree with and why?

Value

Once Devon begins to make real money from selling drugs he seems to lose hold of the things he values. Early in the book he loves his little car, by the end he seems to have contempt for all cars. Why does this happen?

Race/Ethnicity

Race relations are never far from what is happening in *Thunder Road*. Devon rejects his past and his culture ... so does Trace but for different reasons. What evidence is there that Devon has had to bury his past?

Old and new

Trace admires old motorbikes and clings to them even in the face of defeat. Why? What are the values of old technology that he admires? How does this reflect on his personality? How is he different from Devon in this regard?

Revenge

The desire for payback is deeply ingrained in all of us. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Martin Luther King claimed the logical outcome of this philosophy is a nation of blind people. When Trace's grief turns to revenge it is the words of Ra that ring in his head and the mystical properties of the taonga he has been given. Do you agree with his final attitude to revenge? Why?

Karma

One reaps what one sows. One gets what one deserves. To what extent does this principle operate in *Thunder Road*?

Yin and Yang

This theme embodies the idea that good and evil always co-exist simultaneously ... that there is never one without the other. Do you agree, and why?

Innocence and experience

Like purity and corruption this theme surfaces time and time again. The whole novel can be seen as Trace's journey from innocence to experience and possibly reveals – in a veiled, fragmented way – Devon's own version, which has damaged him to the point of corruption and cynicism. Discuss the evidence.

Dressing up/clothes

There is a saying from Hamlet, "A tailor made him..." which refers to someone (Osric) who assembles his whole persona from the clothes he wears. Think about clothes, dressing up and the importance of this activity to teenagers.

The importance of names

We are given names but we often choose other ones for ourselves that we feel suit us better. Many people in *Thunder Road* have other names. Trace has three. People in the novel change names to cover their identity, to cover their past, to reject their family, to re-invent themselves. Look at the characters' names in *Thunder Road*. Who has changed their name and for what reason?

What are ...

- cool names
- dodgy names
- nerdy names
- staunch names
- the names that people tend to get rid of at the first opportunity?

Close Reading

Here are a number of quotes. Use these as possible points of reference for a close reading of the novel. Use as many or as few of them as you wish.

Be sure to mention things like ...

- What is happening in the story?
- What does the quote reveal about the character?
- Does the quote foreshadow anything that happens later?
- Is the quote part of a theme that runs through the book?

p. 9

When I was little my father used to say, "Trace, there is a right and a wrong way of doing anything".

I could live with that.

When I was about 13 or 14 it had changed to, "Trace, there's my way, and the wrong way".

p. 20

'Ah, the glass dome.'

p. 25

We clicked. Held nothing back, there was no point. I've always been a bit of a fatalist. If it's meant to happen, it'll happen. Devon showed up in my life at just the right time. He was what I needed, and as it turned out, I was what he needed too.

pp 27–28

Richard: 'Remember Mr Bartram in history last year? "Selwood the significant cognitive shift I am waiting for is when you learn to move from the particular to the general."'

Jason: 'I can't see Mr Bartram working in a hardware shop sorting *galvanised* latches obviously.'

p. 29

It was a bit like that with Devon. The only things that mattered were the things we were doing right then. The past and the future took care of themselves.

p. 30

Devon had this idea. It goes like this. Young guys like me and him, we're held back. First by our parents, then by schools, and finally, when we leave home,

the rest of the world makes it clear early on that we are crap. Most of time you just accept it, you think it's the way things are. But every now and then you get this little flash, where you see that it's all a game ... none of it matters. My run-in with the foreman on the building site was one of those, Devon says. The really important thing is what happens next. If you roll over and take it, then you're dead already. The brainwashing has worked. The rules are made up by the winners, just to keep them on top. You have to bend the rules, otherwise it's just a lifetime of kissing arse. If you can bust through the glass dome, then you're a free guy. When I walked off the building site, Devon says ... that's what I did. My first step towards becoming a free guy. Cool!

p. 32

'A D.C.? It's a daddy's car. There's no respect in that. No one will race him except other kids like him.'

p. 47

She listened attentively while I invented an exciting evening. It sounded hollow and I felt stink about it, but what can you do? I didn't want to seem like a loser, with no life.

pp 51–52

'Which do you like, Trace?'

There was this one that looked as if it had been painted by some dude who was whacked out of his skull. It was of a room, but the walls and furniture were all over the place at crazy angles.

'That one.'

'Good choice. It's a Clairmont.'

'So what?' I thought.

'Are you interested in the fine arts, Trace?'

'I don't know. I've never thought about it.'

She cleared her throat, 'So what are your interests?'

I thought about it for a moment and then I said 'I guess the art I like is done by mechanics, or body-work guys. I like the look of a car or bike that's been worked, that means the business, that looks like it's breaking the sound barrier when it's standing still.'

p. 55

In summary:

Today's youth don't know how lucky they are.

In the old days a good kick up the arse fixed most things.

The world's going to hell in a hand cart.

p. 62

He raised his finger as though teaching a lesson. 'Never lie unnecessarily, remember. "The truth shall set you free".'

'If you're not careful the truth will lock you up.'

p. 63

'You're not tough enough to hang with the richies ... specially try-hard doctor richies.'

p. 68

Riding that big old British cruiser had blown away the shame and the failure that had been sticking to me like a bad smell ever since Karen's place. All that really mattered was keeping in the power band and choosing the right line for the corner. A lesson for me, I thought.

p. 69

'Why does he call you Jig, Devon?'

'Nickname. Short for Jiggaboo.'

'Jiggaboo?'

'Yeah, you know, nigger.'

'No.'

'Rebel, and the guys he hangs about with hate blacks, eh. It's like one of their articles of faith. See a black by himself and they'll smash him. No questions asked.'

'You mean Maori?'

'Yeah. What do you think I meant? Nee grow?' he said with big emphasis.

'So he thinks you're Maori?'

'Maybe, he's not sure ... so it's just Jig ... to remind me ... like I have a question mark hanging over me.'

'Are you?'

'My people are from Spain. Santos. That's a Spanish name, eh?'

'Oh. I assumed you were Maori, I guess.'

Devon's tone changed. 'Yeah, well I'm not. OK?'

pp 72–73

We stood there for a moment or two. I didn't know what else to say. She seemed to have a few things she wanted to say too, but nothing came. It was tense and embarrassing. I was only one step from her, but the gap seemed as wide as the Grand Canyon. I had this feeling that someone else had stepped into my life when I wasn't looking and messed about with stuff. That I was crap, and a fool. I said goodbye and left.

p. 79

'I fear nothing. I used to fear death, but I had a stroke a few years back and while I was on the operating table, I got a glimpse of the other side.'

'Everything has its price. Fear of death is a primal fear. When I lost that, I also lost the meaning with which death imbues life. It's just a card game to me now.'

pp 80–81

'Good guess. It is the Korean symbol of Yin and Yang. It was the first present I ever gave to you, wasn't it, Devon?'

'The only one, I think.'

'Ungrateful young pup! This symbol represents the relationship ... the duality of good and evil. There is never one without the other. Notice in the middle of the white tadpole there is a little black spot, and in the middle of the black a white...'

'I thought those were the eyes,' said Devon.

We looked at him suspiciously. 'I can never tell when you are being facetious or merely ignorant. No, they remind us that in the centre of any evil endeavour there is always some good, and vice versa. In the middle of any *so-called* good action there is a little bad. Something to muse on, eh boys?'

p. 90

It was more than finding treasure. Some sticky heart of darkness. More than the money. More than the mind-bending power. They represented a promise that everything was going to be different. No longer were we a couple of no-account guys harassed by the cops, given all the bum jobs and tolerated as tame fools. We had position now. We had arrived.

p. 103

'Stupid, stupid bastard!' I yelled, as I bolted after him.

'You were going without me, you prick,' I swore as I slid in the cab.

'It's not your deal, Trace. This is my thing, honest. I shouldn't've told you. This is a one man op ... I just wanted some company.'

'I can't believe you, Devon. We're a team now. You can't just run off, man.'

p. 118

He had found redemption in a nine second burst.

p. 119

He turned to me. 'What fun would there be in a world without rules?'

p. 271

'Listen, Eruera. When the leaves fall from this twig of manuka you will know it is time to put your grief behind you. Time to move on.'

Writing

A. Find an incident from the book that reminds you of a situation you have been in and write a story about it. Be sure that you personalise the details so it tells your story rather than the one it is based on in *Thunder Road*.

Here are some examples that are embedded in the story:

- Making a fool of yourself in front of your girlfriend's/boyfriend's parents
- Being beaten in some public event
- Being in a fight
- Stealing something
- A driving incident
- Getting out of your depth
- Your first job
- Being unfairly treated
- Being talked down to
- Your first girlfriend/boyfriend
- Divided loyalties

• An inspiring friend who opens your eyes to new horizons

- Being expected to smoke dope
- Dodgy mentors
- Being at a tangi

B. Write the lyrics for a song based on Trace's and Devon's friendship.

C. Write a letter that Trace might have left in Devon's coffin at his tangi.

D. Write a diary entry giving Karen's version of events with Trace.

Debate Topics

Choose negative and affirmative teams to debate the statements below:

- Not all crimes are evil.
- Revenge is always amoral or immoral.
- People should stick to their own kind.
- There are no class divisions in the modern world.

Theatre/Drama

Rewrite one of the climax scenes as a video script. (If your school has filming equipment produce your scene.)

Role play Wes justifying his actions and lifestyle in a court of law. (He is being charged with a number of crimes: what might these be?)

Dramatise two of the scenes where Trace and Devon have time alone talking. Choose scenes which illustrate how their friendship changes over the course of the novel.

Role play Devon and Trace walking in on a posh fine arts gallery opening, where they plan to sell some 'product'.

Devise a soundtrack for the film version of the novel. Choose at least five tracks to give the flavour of the characters and pace; explain your choices and how they reflect the themes in the novel.

Visual Responses

Design your own version of the book cover.

Recreate a version of one of the paintings Trace and Devon see in Gail and Martin's house.

Design a poster advertising the movie version of the novel.

Create a work which you feel expresses the overall mood of the novel, or a work which expresses something of either Devon's or Trace's internal worlds.