



TEACHERS' RESOURCES

RECOMMENDED FOR

Upper primary and lower secondary
(ages 9–12; years 4 to 7)

CONTENTS

1. Plot summary	1
2. About the author	2
3. Author activity	2
4. Common themes	2
5. Writing style	5
6. Plot and narrative	7
7. Character development	8
8. Author's style	9
9. Further reading	10

KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- **Learning areas:** English
- **General capabilities:** : Literacy, personal and social capability

THEMES

- Poverty
- Family life and the role of women
- Masculinity and the treatment of sexuality
- Growing up
- Moral issues
- Friendship
- The meaning of music and song
- The meaning of love
- Australianness

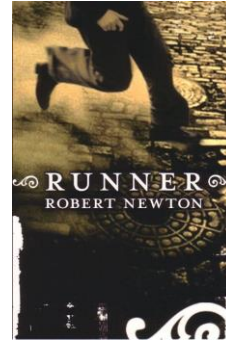
PREPARED BY

Penguin Random House Australia

These notes may be reproduced free of charge for use and study within schools but they may not be reproduced (either in whole or in part) and offered for commercial sale.

Visit penguin.com.au/teachers to find out how our fantastic Penguin Random House Australia books can be used in the classroom, sign up to the teachers' newsletter and follow us on [@penguinteachers](https://twitter.com/penguinteachers).

Copyright © Penguin Random House Australia 2019



Runner The Black Dog Gang When We Were Two Robert Newtown

SUMMARY

Runner, published 2005, set in Richmond and Fitzroy, Melbourne, in 1919; against the background of the gangster operations of Squizzy Taylor.

The Black Dog Gang, published 2007, set in The Rocks area, Sydney, in 1900; against the background of the Bubonic Plague, which swept Sydney in that year.

When We Were Two, published 2011, set along the highways between Gunnedah in rural NSW and Port Macquarie, coastal NSW, in 1916; against the background of World War 1.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Newton works as a firefighter with the Metropolitan Fire Brigade. His first novel, *My Name is Will Thompson*, was published in 2001. Since then he has written seven other novels for young people, including *Runner*, *The Black Dog Gang* (shortlisted for the NSW Premier's Literary Awards) and *When We Were Two* (winner of a Prime Minister's Literary Award for Young Adult Fiction). He lives on the Mornington Peninsula with his wife and three daughters.

INTRODUCTION

These three novels read and taught as a unit provide an unsurpassed opportunity for capable adolescent readers, particularly boys, to explore not only major themes related to growing up—masculinity, family life and friendship; but to investigate how writers write and develop their themes and their skills over time and novelistic endeavours. The novels are commonly gripping and easy to read. At the same time they explore a time in Australian history when Australians were developing a sense of who they were as a nation and they offer readers three closely mapped historic settings—iconic in their Australianness—against which the protagonists journey into adulthood.

The quality of Robert Newton's substantial talents as a writer for young people has been recognised in recent years. In 2012 *When We Were Two* won the Prime Minister's Literary Award for Young Adult Fiction and in the same year was an Honour Book in the Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year Awards. *The Black Dog Gang* was shortlisted for the 2008 NSW Premier's Literary Awards – Ethel Turner prize.

The unit of study proposed in these notes is consistent with both the Australian History (for Year 9) and English (for years 8-10) curriculums as indicated in parentheses.

WARNING: The two later novels explore some aspects of adult sexuality coming into contact with adolescent lives, and parents should be advised accordingly.

AUTHOR ACTIVITY

Early in their reading of the novels, readers should be encouraged to explore what they know of the author's approach to writing and life with a view to discovering how they play out in his novels. There are some published interviews, which are helpful (see Further Reading) and four earlier well-received non-historical novels. For instance, he says in one interview that his childhood has influenced his writing:

'We moved around a lot as a family. By the time I was twelve I'd been to eight schools. I suppose that sort of restless lifestyle taught me a few important lessons in life. It taught me about friendship and what it's like to be an outsider.' (Robert Newton at bookedout.com.au).

Somewhere else the author's childhood love of sport is noted. Could he have drawn on that in his novels? How? (*Runner* for example with its emphasis on sport as a way out of trouble and on the character traits of courage, dedication and single mindedness for its athletic young hero.)

Each of the three novels show great sympathy for people who are outsiders. Ask students to each choose a sympathetic character from each novel who might be seen as an outsider (not the chief protagonist) and discuss why they are an outsider and why and how the author encourages us to like them and sympathise with their plight. (Suggestions: Daisy Moloney in *Runner*; Gordie McAllister in *The Black Dog Gang*; and Ah Ling in *When We Were Two*.)

An extended creative writing task could be to write a short story themselves featuring an outsider as a hero (ACELT1644). This would provide an opportunity for discussions about how short stories are written; how to choose characters and settings, how to begin and end, how to make the reader do some guessing, some exercises in further reading, and the production and editing of a number of drafts.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Older, more capable readers might be given the opportunity to consider what characteristics separate it from children's writing on the one hand and adult writing on the other. What could be the justification for such a category of literature? Research the arguments for and against. How well do Newton's three novels fit the genre?

COMMON THEMES

Should be brainstormed and explored in a class discussion.

Poverty

While the well-to-do filled their grand houses with music, Ma and I, along with half the neighbourhood, made do with the piercing screams of hungry babies (*Runner*, p21).

In the first two novels, *Runner* and *The Black Dog Gang*, urban poverty is the constant background circumstance that drives and explains the events surrounding—and the character development of—the protagonists and their friends and families. It is a level of poverty totally alien to most young Australian



readers who will benefit from projects to look at and explain what happened to families with no breadwinners or access only to occasional employment at times in Australian history when there were no poverty safety nets. They can be helped to understand a daily struggle to survive and the pressure under which most of the adults in the stories live, which in turn will help young readers to understand many of their actions (ACDSEHogo). In the third novel, *When We Were Two*, poverty is not so clearly the driver of character and action although it is clear that none of the characters has access to substantial resources. A level of poverty which enables food to be regularly provided or commonly shared, but shelter education, and regular employment less securely, might be seen by modern young Australians as severe deprivation, but it seems likely to the characters of *When We Were Two* that it was a part of ordinary rural life not worth commenting on.

Suggested projects: Life in the Rocks area of Sydney in 1900, with different students researching and reporting on kinds and levels of employment, housing, education facilities, public transport, income levels, crime, health and alcohol abuse—their reports followed by a class discussion on how these were the result or cause of people being grindingly poor (ACDSEHogo); or students writing a step by step plot analysis of how the poverty or wealth of the characters influences the action and decisions taken in *Runner*. In *Runner*, unlike Frankie in *The Black Dog Gang*, Charlie is strongly aware of the differences between rich and poor and galvanised by them. In Frankie's world everyone is poor and some are desperate.

Family life and the role of women

While no women play a major part in the action of any of these novels, their influences and their presence or absence are major motivators for the male characters. In all three novels mothers keep the families together and set the moral rules. They can endure much to do so.

In *Runner*, Charlie takes on the role of protector to his newly widowed mother, by breaching her rules of right behavior (which ones? ...going to school, lying, working for a crook instead of aiming for respectable work) and trying to take the family out of poverty his way. He wants only to make her happy.

In a flash, Ma was beside me smiling, and for a few seconds I felt like the luckiest boy alive. (Runner, p 31).

When his mother is forced by the odious Mr. Peacock to sleep with him in exchange for wood for the fire, Charlie is at first confused and angered by her apparent breach of the family's behavior standards. When she is being beaten and Charlie smashes in Mr. Peacock's head with a cricket bat, it is Dolly, Squizzy Taylor's

mistress, who scolds Squizzy and ensures Charlie is protected. But Charlie's Mum has a breakdown and Charlie has to make decisions without her guidance.

A woman shopkeeper boxes his ears, his concern for and romantic interest in Alice makes him realise the moral dimensions of being Squizzy's stand over man, Daisy Moloney tells him to do something good with his money (p117). It is women who form the recognisable faces in the mould on Charlie's wall, too, and they are hectoring him, telling him what he is doing wrong. (p 66). Are women and girls the keepers of the rules and men and boys the benders? If that is true in *Runner*, does it also apply to *The Black Dog Gang* and *When We Were Two*? Explain why you think so, quoting the sections of the books that support your argument. This can be a classroom discussion and students could be asked to prepare their thoughts for it by rereading the books and writing down some notes to remind themselves (ACELT 1639 and ACELT 1812).

Masculinity and the treatment of sexuality

What are the qualities of a good man? The class could have a discussion about the things Robert Newton thinks make a good man and the extent they agree with him. He has very clear views on this and they are clearly demonstrable through his three books as his three protagonists make the decisions that take them to responsible adulthood. Does the historic setting have an influence on what is good and bad masculine behaviour (ACELT 1639)?

Ask students to find an example in each book of the following masculine qualities:

Firstly, they are tolerant, sometimes loving, even admiring of people who are different, recognizing their good qualities and protecting them as best they can from the bullying and bad behaviour of others.

Family values are very important to them. They love and support their brothers and sisters and long for a good family life.

They are adventurous and often brave, sometimes taking unwise risks to meet their objectives. Sometimes their courage is physical courage and sometimes it is simply the courage to admit they are wrong and to try to make up for mistakes.

They have great senses of humour and can sometimes get themselves out of a tight spot simply by making people laugh.

They make mistakes but they take responsibility for them, learn, and move on.

They are interested in and respectful of girls and women and they know how important they are to creating a happy life. They are open to getting to know them better outside the family, but they also know



when they are getting in over their heads with deviant adult behaviour (Mr. Peacock in the *Runner* is odious, criminal and damaging, but Mrs. Donegan in *The Black Dog Gang* is lonely and making a mistake—and our protagonists treat them accordingly. In *When We Were Two*, Dan quickly realises that the sexuality of Archibald Greeves presents a threat to Eddie's safety and acts quickly and decisively to save him. But in each of the three books there is a nice girl to attract our hero's attention and allow him hope for a happy future: Alice, Megan Johnson and Grace).

But friendship is the glue of their lives. Friends offer the opportunity for adventure, but they also test the bounds of loyalty, and along the way teach them things about themselves and the way others live and think, while offering companionship, support and fun. In *When We Were Two*, Dan has no peers to befriend, but he does have the opportunity to watch strong adult friendships between men form and grow as he himself grows a friendship with Dinger; and as his love for Eddie, who is not only his brother but his lifelong companion and needy friend, also grows. In *Runner* and *The Black Dog Gang*, friendships are the core of the story—between Charlie and Nostrils Heath in *Runner* and between Frankie and Mickey Collins in *The Black Dog Gang*.

What other characteristics do good men have?

Growing up

Each of these boys—Frankie, Charlie and Dan, are growing up, changing from child into man. Is there one significant thing that happens to each of them that helps them to learn something and to change—or are there several? Try to explain at least one of these events for each boy. What does he learn that he will remember all his life and which will help explain what kind of a man he becomes? At the end of each book what do you think each boy knows about himself that he didn't know clearly at the beginning? How is it linked to that significant event?

Moral issues -a group discussion.

Each book deals with moral issues: that is, what is a good way to behave in difficult circumstances and what is a poor way to behave? From characters and incidents in each book we can see some of the poor ways and good ways to behave. What does Robert Newton think is good behaviour? What is bad? Give examples of both from each book. How do you know what he thinks? Talk about whether you agree with him (ACELT1812).

Sometimes we can all agree on extremely bad or good behavior, like murder or unprovoked violence or charity to others. It is the behaviour in the middle that is difficult to agree on. For instance, sexual behaviour

outside of marriage is sometimes condemned and sometimes not. Drunkenness is sometimes condemned and sometimes not. Loyalty to a mate can be good or bad depending on the circumstances. Theft is usually condemned...but was it alright for Dan to steal Greeves' cart and horse? Can a starving person steal food? Is it ok not to bath? Are there circumstances where bad behaviour can be forgiven, or good behaviour seen to be irrelevant or silly? In the first twenty years of the twentieth century, when these stories are set, some people were much less tolerant than they are now, but also more tolerant in some things. Can you detect any different moral values in these stories from how people behave today? A class discussion will offer students opportunity to note different points of view (ACELT 1565).

Sometimes what you think is wrong or right depends on what your parents taught you, or your life experience, or whether you are poor or not, whether you are the sinner or the sinned against. But when we are reading a book, the author has great power to help us see his and his character's side of the story and even change our minds. Has Robert Newton had that effect on you (ACELT 1744)? If yes, how?

Friendship

One of the signs of growing up is that we begin to try to think differently from our parents. We become less dependent on them for all sorts of things even though we still love them and need them and their guidance. Friends become much more important in helping us shape the grown-ups we are to become, because they help us see ourselves differently from the way our parents see us. They present us with experiences to learn from what we can't get with family, and thus they can be exciting and risky too.

So, great friendships are at the core of each of these books about growing up. *The Black Dog Gang* is about the friendship between a gang of boys but it is also very importantly about the friendship between Frankie and Mickey. It is about the beginning, the middle and also the ending of a friendship—but we know that the experience of having Mickey as his friend will be part of Frankie's life forever. Why is Mickey so important to Frankie? What is Mickey able to show Frankie that he cannot learn from others? What does Frankie do for Mickey? It isn't at all one way. What events put pressure on the friendship? Does the friendship end? Why or why not? Some students may like to ask similar questions of the friendship between Nostrils and Charlie in *Runner*.

And the gang: what helps the Black Dog gang stay together, what do they have in common (the blood oath, common enemies or problems, sense of humour, shared project, common poverty, common school



experiences)? To what extent is the friendship between members of the gang different from the friendship between Mickey and Frankie? Ask the students to be specific, to give examples if they can.

Are friendships important to you? Sometimes friends cause us problems and sometimes they are fun. Write a story about events in a friendship you have had that has been filled with both problems and fun. Disguise the characters and the setting so that no one could guess who they were. Do you think there are some friends you will still care about even when you are old? Why or why not?

The meaning of music and song

In Robert Newton's books, when people are having fun, when families are happy or feeling loving towards each other, music or singing is never far away. Music and songs bring people together, remind them of good times and give them happiness. Find an example in each book where this happens. Now see if you can find an occasion in any Newton book where music makes people unhappy or sad. Music and song is used so frequently in this way that they become symbolic, a shorthand signal to us that our characters are flying high, so the author no longer needs to actually tell us how his characters feel. We know. Discuss whether there are other well-known symbols for happiness and good relationships (eg sunshine, light, floating, warmth, dance) and their opposites. Students may look for the symbols used by other authors to indicate such matters. Or try to create a short story for themselves where the characters' emotions are not spelled out but instead replaced by a description of what is happening in their environment (ACELY1749).

The meaning of love

These are boys just starting to have an interest in girls. They are excited by the promise of a future that might hold a loving relationship with a woman, but they are not yet ready. The students might look at the friendships of our heroes with each of the girls they fall for (Alice, Grace and Megan Johnson) to understand and explain this point. The girls are big players as they symbolise and give hope for the future, rather than being a substantial part of the present action. It is also illustrated by Frankie's run-in with Mrs. Donegan in *The Black Dog Gang*.

The people they love are family. Frankie's family life in *The Black Dog Gang* is pure happiness. His mum and dad love one another and provide an environment for the children full of security, affection, tenderness, celebration and laughter. His sister might annoy him at times but he loves her dearly. In *Runner*, Charlie adores his mother and baby brother Jack and tries to protect them the best way he can after the death of his Dad. In *When We Were Two*, friendship takes a back seat to

love of family, in particular the love between the two brothers as they pursue their hope of an idealised family life—to be renewed with their missing mother.

Ask the students to look for examples that show the love and interdependence within the protagonists' families. Ask them to consider whether these values about love and family in the lives of boys around fifteen or sixteen are still true (ACELT 1633 and 1812).

Australianness

These three novels are excellent demonstrations of what it was like to be Australian at the beginning of the twentieth century, particularly if you were male. It is not a coincidence that this was the time when the ANZAC legend began (ACDSEH097). Try to come up with the set of characteristics Newton sees as exemplifying Australianness at this time in our history (ACELT 1633). Give examples. How did they have fun? What was important to them? How did they cope when things were difficult? How did they behave under stress? As you go, compare them with now. Can you see how Australians at that time embraced a strong spirit of egalitarianism, where people were valued for how they behaved rather than for any birthright or wealth (ACDSEH019)? At the beginning of the twenty first century, nearly a hundred years later, how have we changed (ACELT 1633)? What events could have changed us in the ways you identify (e.g., wars, immigration, the influence of the culture of the United States post WW2, greater wealth, social security safety nets for single mothers, elderly and disabled people and people who are unemployed, changes in technology and communications, better education and health care)?

WRITING STYLE AND LANGUAGE

The use of the vernacular

Some readers may have difficulty with the use of the vernacular in the first two books. It may be appropriate early in the study unit to have a class discussion with the aim of simplifying and sorting any problems perceived. More than any other single characteristic of these books, vernacular helps to set the stories and characters in a time and place. It indicates how language has changed and how language reflects the education and attitudes and values of the characters (ACELA 1551). Vernacular language, particularly historically accurate vernacular language, is horribly difficult for an author to get right (i.e., so that it sounds authentic but is still comprehensible to modern readers). Notice that it occurs only in dialogue. Our first person narrators use perfectly ordinary (i.e. formal) language everywhere else.



What is *vernacular*? It is the standard native language of a country, a specific group of people in a locality or a time. It's the language of everyday speech, including slang. Does it differ from *colloquial* language? Colloquial language is informal conversational language. The two language forms do not necessarily differ, but vernacular is a wider term, covering pronunciation as well. (ACELA 1551) What about *idiom*? An *idiom* is, like *slang* and *jargon*, an example of colloquialism, referring to terms or phrases where the literal meaning makes no sense; it has a figurative meaning only, such as in "knock his lights out".

Students should look for vernacular vocabulary that is no longer used, separating it from language that indicates vernacular pronunciation or grammar. Examples include, in *Runner: the good wife* (p1); blaggard(p9); toff(p11); cripes(p12); keep your trap shut(p20); skint (p26); hang on a jiff(pp 31 and 58); swallowed his manners with his dinner (p37); played for a right mug (p39); hang on to your trousers (p47); too right (p57); flaming heck(pp59 and 70, 73); shindig(p62); what's your caper(p65), blow me down(p61). To show they get the idea, students could conduct a similar search in *The Black Dog Gang* (ACELA 1550).

Much of this was inherited from cockney and Irish migrants and is becoming unfamiliar to us as we inherit a new range of vernaculars from other English speaking nations, much of it under the influence of American popular culture. Ask students to identify some modern vernacular speech (ACELA 1541 and 1550).

Some of the original vernacular vocabulary from the first years of the Twentieth Century is still in use today –clobbered, taking a shine to someone, his lights went out, sprung by a copper, taking a punt etc.

Identifying vernacular pronunciation and grammar should be an easier task. Much pronunciation is indicated by the spelling ("ta" for "to", for example, and "ya" for "you"; dropped "g"s and missing "h"s are others). Because it is unfamiliar, students may find it a barrier to quick comprehension, but it is readily explained. Students could consider how spelling is used here for particular effects, including characterisation and humour, and to represent accents and styles of speech (ACELA 1562).

The use of dialogue

Newton's characters spring to life through dialogue. Through what they say we get to know them. The exchanges are funny, clever, sad, affectionate, brutish or hostile and they create an energy between people that no 'he-said-she-said' indirect speech can create. Dialogue also makes readers work harder to get behind the character's motivation. We have no narrator

between them and us, telling us how they feel. We can only know from what they say. To illuminate this, students could be asked to select a dialogue scene in any of the novels and turn it into a play or a film scene. They should work in pairs and as they go discuss what the dialogue reveals about the person talking or the relationship between the two people involved. They can try to say the same things in different ways, including using modern vernacular, if they wish, to see what works best. If they then act a scene out, they may realise that when you put yourself in someone's place, strong emotional connections can be established (ACELA 1544 and 1553).

The use of dialogue reaches an extraordinary level in *When We Were Two*. The dialogue scenes with Eddie work to slowly reveal how Eddie thinks and the depth and nature of his relationship with Dan. Without Eddie speaking for himself through direct speech we would know much less of him. Knowing and loving Eddie is a key to the success of this novel. So to a great extent of dialogue with Eddie compensates for the single perspective that first person narration gives (ACELA 1553). It is worth noting that Newton uses much less vernacular speech in *When We Were Two*, perhaps not to distract from the underlying tragedy that is unfolding.

The use of wit and irony

Australians often see themselves as laconic (speaking tersely, concisely, briefly), humorous people who take an ironic take on disaster and trouble. Students have an opportunity to understand irony through the earlier two of these novels, and relate it to the sense of Australian character that is being developed by Newton.

Irony in reference to language involves using words that mean the opposite of what you really mean, in order to amuse; when we refer to ironic situations, we mean those that have developed amusingly in opposite ways to our expectations. Students could be asked to find examples of both ironic language and ironic situations in *Runner* and *The Black Dog Gang* (ACELA 1542).

There is much less irony and idiom in *When We Were Two*, but plenty of humorous and laconic dialogue when it is between adults. (Irony is a sophisticated use of language that is also culturally specific; Eddie's character would not have been able to understand it, just as new speakers of English have great difficulty with both idiom and irony)

All three novels burst with humorous dialogue, much of a peculiarly Australian character. There is much teasing and wit which not only makes the novels enjoyable and easy to read, but says a lot about the Australian character in a range of circumstances.



Students should choose a section of dialogue in each book that they have particularly enjoyed for its humour. The class could talk about what made them laugh and why. Notice if there is broad agreement or not on what is funny. Note the element of the unexpected in humour, and quick wittedness as well as a focus on subject matter that may be taboo in polite company (ACELA 1542).

Poetic language

Newton can write quite beautifully, using language to powerful emotional and scene-setting effect. The class could have a discussion about poetic language, its musicality and use of techniques like rhythm, personification, repetition, allusion, alliteration, euphony, figure and metaphor to create particularly concise communications of meaning to readers through emotional connection (ACELA 1561). On PP14-15 of *The Black Dog Gang*, Frankie himself talks about poetic language and what it means to him:

'After only a few lines I was swept away by the rhythm of the words. I thought it the cleverest thing how the black ink could be made to dance about on the page. Sometimes, if you listened hard enough, you could almost hear a tune.

I loved that. I loved how a string of words took you in, how they were forever changing pace. Sometimes they rolled gently along for two lines or three. And sometimes they came at you with a 'bat bat bat' like the soldiers' rifles when they let fire up at Dawes Point.'

Here is a poetic passage from each novel:

1. Runner (p4) beginning "over the following months.." to "...eager to learn" (communicating the hypnotic rhythm of running and the inevitability of the attraction of the streets);
2. The Black Dog Gang (p145-6) beginning "After five or six steps..." to "into the water below"(communicating the rhythm of the action, the tension, the horror, the sensation of the world slowing down);
3. When We Were Two (p26) conveying the sensation of sleepy peace drifting into unconsciousness).

Ask the class to analyse them from a poetic point of view under the headings above (ACELY1749 and ACELA 1561). Ask them to notice that there is nothing about vernacular language that prohibits it from being poetic.

Discuss the importance in these novels of good emotional communications through the medium of poetic language. (We remember things most clearly when we have an emotional connection to an event and non-rhyming poetry is about emotion; poetic

language is able to control to some extent the kind of emotion being experienced by its readers, so the reader may be manipulated to experience whatever the author wants them to feel). To demonstrate, ask them to think about what their clearest memories are and whether they are simply events in the past - or events that meant a great deal to them emotionally, like losing your mum in the supermarket, or getting a family pet. Then contrast a rhyming piece of doggerel (i.e. story-telling that is easy to remember—and may be funny—but without emotional content) with a piece of poetry on a similar topic or theme.

Example: *You Are Old, Father William* (from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Ch. 5), contrasted with E.E. Cummings' *Old Age Sticks* (ACELT 1642 and 1637)(ACELA 1562).

Person and tense

Notice that all three novels are written in the first person. That is, a character in the book tells the story from his point of view. We can get very close to a narrator. We are told how he feels, what he does, what he observes around him. We get to know the other characters through his eyes. This is a big advantage if the writer wants our sympathy to be with the character telling the story, but a disadvantage to the extent that we can't be present at events he isn't present at; we must work out from what he tells us what is happening to others and how they feel about it. So, for example, we don't get to know exactly what happened between Squizzy and Dolly in *Runner*—Dolly just disappears from the story. On the other hand, in stories where friendship is a central theme, first person storytelling can take you deeply into the relationship, as in the story of Frankie and Mickey in *The Black Dog Gang*, and Eddie and Dan in *When We Were Two*.

Note that while the two earlier novels are told in the past tense, *When We Were Two* is told mostly in the present tense. Newton has made a deliberate decision in each novel. What difference does it make? Try it out for yourself. Write a short, third person description of a recent event in your life, first in the simple present tense, then in the simple past. Try present continuous tense as well. Read them to someone and ask them what difference it makes. Discuss what you discover in class (ACELT 1815 and 1774).

PLOT AND NARRATIVE

The personal journey through adventure, risk and loss common to the three novels becomes a physical journey in the third book. All three stories are told in the sequence in which events occurred. Students need to be aware of the stages in a conventional narrative in which we are firstly introduced to our characters and setting and then the circumstances are established by



which the sympathetic characters are to face a challenge of some kind. There is usually tension—creating obstacles in the way of meeting the challenge, sometimes apparently insurmountable, rising to a climax or resolution of plot action. After the climax, loose ends are tied up, mysteries and misunderstandings resolved, and our characters look forward to a future that has been altered in some significant way by the events that have been related in the story.

Ask the students to map the stages of the narrative for each novel, noting significant obstacles or tension—creating events.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Novels that focus on plot (e.g. adventure fiction and whodunits) generally do not concern themselves too much with how the events of that plot change the lives of the characters or indeed change the way that characters view the world or themselves. The characters are there simply as instruments of the storyline and the author spends little time on helping us get to know them or enabling us to imagine how they might behave or think in other life situations.

But Robert Newton's novels are character-based. We get to know one or two characters in depth in each novel. From the challenges faced by the characters and how they deal with them we learn a little about ourselves and about the complexities of living. Drawing a person not by how they look but how they think and how they behave in the novel's circumstances is a complex authorial task. We must feel we know them. Its success can sometimes be answered by asking the question: do we know how this character will behave in wider circumstances than this storyline? The other task a writer has in drawing characters, is making characters sympathetic (likeable) or not. We must care about what happens to at least one major character before we will be bothered to finish a book, so a good book must have a hero or a protagonist.

Tell us a little about the characters of each of the main protagonists in the three books. What do they have in common? What are their personal character strengths? Do they have any weaknesses you become aware of? What threats do they face? Do you like them? Why or why not? At the end of each novel, how has the protagonist been changed by the events in the book (ACELT 1774)? To what extent and why have you also changed your views about the protagonist as the story progressed (ACELT 1771)?

What about some of the other characters? Choose two for each book. What is it about their personalities that influence the protagonist in some way? Notice how

fathers (even dead or absent ones) are important in shaping the boys' characters. Write a paragraph about the influence of fathers in each book.

THE INTERTWINING OF EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY AUSTRALIAN HISTORY WITH THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN AUSTRALIAN CHARACTER AND IDENTITY

The settings

Students will gain a more resonant understanding of these novels if they understand a little of the historic setting. The novels can be followed with reference to contemporary and modern maps. Note that Fitzroy in Melbourne and the Rocks area in Sydney are both closely identified with the early development of those cities, particularly with reference to historic events and people. They are both significant parts of our "race memory" as Australians. There are many fictional and non-fictional references available for interested students to pursue. Both cities conduct guided history tours of the areas if you are able to arrange a class visit.

The historical ties to the fiction (ACELT1626)

In *When We Were Two* the boys' journey takes place against the dark backdrop of World War 1. Most of the men leaving their families and homes to volunteer (ACDSEH021) will die thousands of miles from home in vile circumstances. Those who survive will do so because they have been wounded or gassed too severely to be returned to the trenches; and the rest of their lives will be marked by this dark shadow. Knowing this gives readers a deeper insight into their comradeship and decency and the irony of their hopes and pleasures. Students should be asked to research what happened in 1918 to Australian soldiers in the trenches of France. They should look at the battles fought, how they were fought, and the number and kind of injuries (ACDSEH095). Rural communities in Australia had often created the kind of young men who fought, with their bravery and independence. Every small community lost boys and grieved for them, each erecting a cenotaph to honour and remember them. Play Peter Sculthorpe's *Small Town*. It is musically reminiscent of the scarring WW 1 inflicted on rural Australia (ACDSEH097).

The Black Dog Gang: Others might look at life in The Rocks area of Sydney at the turn of the twentieth century, noting its relationships with the sea and ships and the kinds of employment to be found. The Rocks was a kind of gritty gateway to the city from world of maritime trade. There are contemporaneous



documents available on Ragged Schools, one of which was actually located in the Rocks. The 1901 Black Death epidemic, caused by filth and rats from ships, was centred there and Newton has based his ideas on the actual bounties paid for rats.

Runner: Still others might report on life in inner Melbourne in Squizzy Taylor's time. There are numerous references students might locate to describe Squizzy's hold on the Melbourne Underworld at the time.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE AUTHOR'S STYLE ACROSS THE THREE BOOKS

As they write, authors change their ideas and develop as writers. These three books are each separated by a couple of years and to some extent they demonstrate the journey Newton has made: the increasing mastery of his craft.

Much of the preceding work has examined what the novels have in common. Students could now be invited to do an analysis of the changes in the structure and styles over the three novels, as well as considering the impact of each novel on them personally. A class discussion could ensue under the headings of setting, theme, characterisation, structure, and language. First, asking students to identify what constitutes merit in these areas, then measuring the three books against those class standards (ACELT 1634 and 1636).

Runner (2005) is in many respects the simplest of the books. We have a likeable hero who early in the story makes a decision to turn his love for running into employment with Squizzy Taylor, the notorious stand over man and gangster. Running is his way of coping. His father has just died from the Spanish Flu epidemic that swept the world in 1919 and his mother, baby brother and he live in grinding poverty where there is never enough food and the family cannot get warm in winter. Charlie faces two major tests in the book. He fails to defend his friend Nostrils while the local bully Jimmy Barlow beats him up so badly he is hospitalized; and he participates in standing over local business people to collect money for Squizzy. His talent for running and his infatuation with the daughter of one of those businessmen give him new chances to redeem himself and face a brighter future. The novel is wonderfully written, relying on witty and clever dialogue to illuminate the characters and move the action along. Charlie's mistakes are balanced by growing maturity, self-awareness and a sense of shame, and the story ends conventionally and happily.

The Black Dog Gang (2007) is the story of friendship between two very different boys, Mickey and Frankie.

Frankie is bookish, a thinker and a dreamer with a strong family life while Mickey is practical and strong. However, Mickey is being cruelly bullied and abused by his brutish father and his strong spirit is gradually being broken while Frankie looks on helplessly. The boys form the Black Dog Gang to catch rats for which a bounty has been announced, against the background of an outbreak of bubonic plague. When they realise that it would be easier to breed rats than catch them, the seeds are sown for an incipient tragedy in Frankie's family. Maggie, Frankie's sister catches the plague from a pet rat given to her by Frankie. Frankie has to take the responsibility for the fear and grief his family suffers, but Maggie ultimately survives. When Mickey's Dad is killed down at the docks, Mickey disappears out of Frankie's life and Frankie is left to imagine a new life for him as a stowaway on a grand ship.

This novel is again characterized by wonderful, witty dialogue between the boys. In fact, the twins Aidan and Bernard are almost never described other than by the dialogue between them. But the emotional links between Frankie and Mickey are subtly and powerfully developed as is the representation of Frankie's growing sexual awareness. Although Mickey's dad is a drunken sadistic brute there are other, more subtle forces at work to support injustice and violence. The figures of Hardcastle, Bluey Lonergan and Johnno Johnson merit some discussion, especially as they are painted in more complex shades, compared to the figure of Barlow in the earlier novel. In this novel, unlike its predecessor, the world is a difficult place to understand and for some things there are no solutions. Young readers are challenged to consider a grown up world of impossible choices, where nothing is as simple as it seems, even a happy family life.

In the third novel, *When We Were Two* (2011), readers are presented with a journey from Gunnedah to Port Macquarie in coastal NSW, taken by sixteen year old Dan and his young brother Eddie in an effort to leave their brutal father and find their mother who left them many years before. On the way they meet people who help them or threaten to derail their journey and Dan learns much about himself and his relationship with his brother as he responds to each situation. Finally they join up with a rag tag group of young men who are also making their way to Port Macquarie to join up to fight in the closing phases of WW1. The journey ends shockingly and un sentimentally for Dan in Port Macquarie and he is left alone in the world but for the group of young volunteers he has befriended. It is clear that he too will join up.

When We Were Two is a masterful, poignant story, both simple and complex; and ultimately heartbreaking. We fall in love with Eddie, his innocence and spirit. As all journey stories are, it is a metaphor for life, and Eddie



is a metaphor for life's innocence and joy. Dan is the traveller who must overcome all kinds of obstacles but at journey's end we know there is yet another journey ahead of him that he must face - wearied and wiser, but having lost his childhood faith in the world and its goodness. *When We Were Two* casts aside some of the stylistic and narrative complexities of the earlier two novels to concentrate on a single plot line. The relationship between the brothers is again cast in dialogue, which shines in its authenticity and focuses the reader's attention on its participants.

Dialogue is the heart of the characterisation because Eddie needs much to be explained to him and it is these exchanges that form the novel's core, both of character and plot. Newton has abandoned his reliance on vernacular speech and past tense narration. Past tense narration occurs only when characters tell a story about what happened in the past, within the primary narrative. This story is told mostly in formal language and it has great dramatic immediacy in the present tense. Although it is formally designated in the young adult genre, because of the age of its protagonists, this is a novel that stands its ground in adult fiction.

Ask students to compare this journey with another recent prize winning journey novel, the apocalyptic *The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy.

ANALYSING PERSONAL RESPONSES

Some or any of these questions could be canvassed in a class debate (ACELT 1640). Students should previously have written individual responses to them.

How did you respond to these novels (ACELT 1627 and 1634):

- Did you care about any of the characters? In what ways?
- Did you suspend disbelief (i.e. for the time you were reading it were you able to believe that the story could be true)?
- Were you emotionally involved when disasters happened?
- Did you wish you could know the characters personally?
- Did you delight in their conversations and their wit?
- When they got into trouble through mistakes they made did you feel sympathy or irritation?
- Did you understand why they took some actions and not others?
- Across the three novels consider which character affected you most? Can you explain why? What

stylistic means did the author use to make this character so alive for you? Consider also what you have in common in terms of age, gender, love of reading or sport, approach to friendship, sense of humour, etc. This is called identification with a character. Is that also an element?

- Note that you know more about the protagonists than you do of other characters. Are there other characters that you would have liked to know more of or like better? Why?
- Across the three novels, describe how good and evil gradually become painted in much more complex ways.
- Was there a common theme across the novels or did it differ? Identify each theme.
- To what extent do these books represent themes of universal interest to human beings? Justify your view.

FURTHER READING AND EXPLORATION

- Knight, F. Literature to Support the Australian Curriculum: Annotated Lists of Fiction and Poetry <http://www.readplus.com.au>

About Newton and his books:

- www.penguin.com.au/contributors/3768/robert-newton

Biographic notes:

- www.bookedout.com.au/find-a-speaker/author/robert-newton

Individual book reviews can be found at:

- www.goodreads.com

Writing short stories:

- www.wikihow.com/write-a-short-story

Young adult fiction as a genre:

- www.terribleminds.com/ramble/.../25-things-you-should-know-about-young-adult-fiction/
- <https://natlib.govt.nz/schools/reading-engagement/childrens-and-youth-literature>

Simple and comprehensible definitions of slang, vernacular, colloquialism, idiom, metaphor, figure of speech:

- www.dictionary.com

Meanings of laconic and irony:

- www.brandonrobshaw.wordpress.com/2011/09/03/laconic/



- www.dictionary.reference.com/browse/irony
- www.dailywritingtips.com/what-is-irony-with-examples

Music:

Small Town by Peter Sculthorpe is a short piece clearly recalling the local centotaph that can be accessed for free at www.last.fm/music/Peter+Sculthorpe/_/Small+Town

The Rocks:

- www.therocks.com

Richmond and Fitzroy:

- www.melbournwalks.com.au/squizzy-taylor-tour
- Hardy, Frank, 1950. *Power Without Glory*
- Hugh Anderson, 2011. *The Rise and Fall of Squizzy Taylor: A Larrikin Crook*. Pier 9.
- Chris Grierson, 2012. *Touch the Black : The Life and Death of Squizzy Taylor*, Hunter.
- *Notorious: The Real Squizzy Taylor*. Shortbooks. Sydney Morning Herald August 2013. (Easy reading)



ORDER FORM

TITLE	AUTHOR	ISBN	SCHOOL YEAR	RRP	QTY	TOTAL
<i>Runner</i>	Robert Newton	9780143302070	4-7	\$19.99		
<i>The Black Dog Gang</i>	Robert Newton	9780143302148	4-7	\$17.99		
<i>When We Were Two</i>	Robert Newton	9780143566830	4-7	\$17.99		
TOTAL						

PLEASE NOTE THAT PRICES ARE RECOMMENDED RETAIL ONLY AND MAY HAVE CHANGED SINCE THE TIME OF PRINTING.
PRICES ARE GST INCLUSIVE.

NAME: _____ SCHOOL: _____ ADDRESS: _____ STATE: _____ POSTCODE: _____ TEL: _____ EMAIL: _____ ACCOUNT NO.: _____ PURCHASE ORDER NO.: _____	PLEASE SEND ORDER FORMS TO YOUR LOCAL EDUCATION SUPPLIER.
--	---

