



Teachers' Notes
Written by Roger Watts

RUNNER

By Robert Newton

Introduction

Runner is an ideal book for use in the junior to middle secondary English classroom. It is a clever blend of humour, drama and excitement that will appeal to a wide range of students. It has a bit of everything: some love interest, a sporting background, enough threat to maintain suspense without becoming ugly, and a great climax.

The relationships are warm, particularly in Charlie's family, between Charlie and his neighbours and between Charlie and his best friend Norman Heath, and even for a time between Charlie and Squizzy's gang, although the reader is left in no doubt about the foolishness of this relationship. This community gives the book a feel-good quality that is refreshingly distinct from some dark novels published for young people.

The values in this book are strong, for whilst Charlie is misguided for much of the book, he has a good heart and acts from the best of motives, so the reader never loses sympathy for him.

Robert Newton has used dialogue and a strong sense of place to capture Richmond in 1919, and, whilst it has a good old -fashioned feel, the book retains strong appeal for today's teenagers.

Synopsis

Runner is the story of Charlie Feehan, a fifteen-year-old living in Richmond, an inner Melbourne suburb, in 1919. This area, for sometime known as Struggletown, is the scene of great poverty at this time, but it is also the home of one of Melbourne's best-known gangsters, Squizzy Taylor. Damp and cold are two of the area's worst enemies in winter, and when Charlie's father dies in the Spanish Flu epidemic that devastated the world at that time, Charlie finds himself having to grow up rather too fast as he literally tries to fill his father's boots.

With a young brother, Jack, still at the breast, Charlie does his best to fend for his family. He runs through the Richmond streets to keep warm and he turns this ability to good use when he leaves school without his mother's knowledge and works as a runner for Squizzy. To get the job he has to compete in a footrace against a number of other boys. In unexpectedly winning the race he makes an enemy of Barlow and forms a good friendship with Norman "Nostrils" Heath, who turns out to be a star footballer.

For a while, the gangster fulfils a role as a substitute father, and Charlie finds himself intoxicated by the power that is attached to Squizzy's name. When Charlie's Ma becomes the object of the unwanted attentions of Mr Peacock, who minds the wood yard, Charlie realises that the 'free' firewood is available at a price that becomes too high when the man turns violent with his mother. Leaping to her defence, Charlie lays him out with his cricket bat and becomes even more dependent on Squizzy to keep out of trouble. With the assistance of his good friend, Nostrils, Charlie takes on a series of night time illegal liquor runs for Squizzy that draw him even closer into the Melbourne underworld.

It is when he is watching his friend play football that Charlie first becomes attracted to Alice. This game intensifies the rivalry with Barlow on the football field when Nostrils outplays him and, later, Charlie finds him pursuing Alice.

Rivalry is developing in other ways too and Squizzy is intensifying his competition with Snowy Cutmore in Fitzroy. Gradually Charlie begins to see the ugly side of working for Squizzy, when he has to collect money from Alice's father. Unable to complete the job, he substitutes his own money. This will later turn out to be the beginning of his relationship with Alice, but it also incurs Squizzy's wrath.

Seeing the need to look after himself better, Charlie begins training as a boxer with his next-door neighbour, Cecil Redmond. When this doesn't work out he finds his true vocation as a runner and gets ready for the Ballarat Mile foot race.

However, avoiding Barlow becomes increasingly difficult and during one of Squizzy's late night jobs, Barlow's gang waylays Charlie and Nostrils. In a critical moment Nostrils slips and is caught, whilst Charlie is able to escape, but is tormented by having to watch the gang cruelly beat up his friend. Visiting Norman in hospital, Charlie discovers what a true friend he really has.

Finally, with the aid of Mr. Redmond, Charlie makes it to Ballarat, where he competes in the race and gambles all in the hope of providing financial security for his family.

Characters

Charlie Feehan

The central character, Charlie Feehan, is a gutsy young fellow who finds himself growing up just a little too fast when his father dies. *'When the undertakers came to wheel my father's lifeless body out to the hearse, it was as if they took my childhood with them'* (p.28). His father had been *'a talker, a chewer of ears. Whenever there was company around he was at his best'* (p.38) and Charlie has inherited a fair amount of his father's ability, even if his imagination and his tongue can outrun his ability, as he finds out when he plays football with Nostrils (p.41) or brags of his boxing training (p.88). The art of *'finkin and footwork'* (p.83) is what he will need to carry him through these difficult times.

It is a challenge just to find enough food to put on the table and to keep the house warm, and so Charlie helps out by rabbiting in Yarra Park and collecting firewood scraps from the Fitzroy wood yard. At night he runs to keep warm. He *'took to the streets like a drunk takes to the bottle'* (p.3). He has very little interest in school, so when he gets the opportunity to try out for a job with Squizzy Taylor he puts his running skill to good use. This race shows his determination, a quality that Squizzy was quick to recognize and support, but there is a fair amount of naivety that goes with it that is a risk for Charlie.

Family always comes first for Charlie, and the reader admires the way he supports his mother and young brother, even if it means lying to them about working for Squizzy. Charlie has to grow up fast when he sees how Peacock takes advantage of his mother. *'That night (he) turned sixteen years old'* (p.68). Initially, he is ashamed when he first sees them together, but he soon leaps to her defence when Peacock attacks her. This brings him closer to Squizzy for a while, who perhaps he sees as something of a father figure. For a while he becomes distant from his mother during the period of her illness, as he finds it difficult to negotiate her neurotic behaviour. Things don't stay like this for long, as Charlie goes about the business of growing up and closing the gap between imagination and reality.

Norman Heath

Nicknamed Nostrils because of his big nose, Norman is the friend Charlie needs. There is an immediate respect and attraction between the boys. When Charlie is tired of well-meaning neighbours, Nostrils is *'something fresh'* (p.19). During the course of the book he will teach Charlie the meaning of friendship. He is an honest voice, able to see through Charlie's illusions. He is loyal and has a great sense of humour. Even though their relationship is built upon a lie, as Charlie *'didn't have the heart to tell him that it should have been him on Squizzy Taylor's payroll'* (p.20), their friendship will survive even greater challenges.

When they first meet up with the Barlow Boys in Barkly Gardens and take to their heels, *'Nostrils did something (Charlie) will never forget. He waited'*.

The scene is a precursor of the one in Fitzroy Gardens when Barlow kneecaps Nostrils. During this second incident, Charlie's *'limbs refused to budge... and it was shame that paralysed'* him. Despite this and the terrible pain Nostrils is in, his first words are for Charlie, and he even manages to keep his sense of humour: *'Don't worry ...Charlie ...I showed 'em... a thing... or two.'*

Nostril's fate will bring about Charlie's self-knowledge and provide inspiration for Charlie in the race. *'A dose of Norman Heath - there was no better medicine for raising one's spirits'* (p.166).

Cecil Redmond

'In the seedy streets of Richmond, you would not find two finer neighbours than the Redmonds' (p.1). Cecil can always be found looking at the sky ready to pass on a few well chosen comments about the weather. Beyond this, his great love was the Richmond Football Club. When Charlie struggles to be the *'man a the 'ouse,'* Mr. Redmond is there to offer boxing training, although it doesn't turn out to be quite what Charlie expected, and when it fails to live up to Charlie's grandiose daydreams, he is there to offer more unconventional advice on running training for the Ballarat Mile Race.

It seems that Charlie's close acquaintances may live in the slums, but they have big hearts and big imaginations, so it comes as no surprise when the reader discovers that Cecil's *'bit o' runnin'* was from the school bully and he is not quite the experienced trainer Charlie thought him to be.

Squizzy Taylor

Men like Squizzy loom large in the history of places like Richmond and it is easy to form too pleasant an impression of them. For a while Charlie is taken in. When he first meets the gangster Charlie *'found him not in the least bit unsightly. However on the canvas, he looked like a weasel, cunning and beady eyed'* (p.9).

Charlie admires him, and this opinion is improved when Squizzy fixes the race so Charlie wins. He *'was one of them'* (p17). Squizzy can fix Charlie's absence from school, and fix up Mr Peacock, but as the rivalry with Fitzroy gang leader, Snowy Cutmore intensifies Squizzy's other side emerges. He is frequently drunk, short tempered and vindictive. *'Suddenly, as quick as someone flicking a switch, Squizzy turned nasty'* (p.168), and very nearly shoots Charlie in anger.

Charlie is released and is now able to run for himself, not for Squizzy.

Setting

The novel is located in Richmond and Fitzroy, working class inner city suburbs of Melbourne, as Charlie runs errands for Squizzy.

'The streets of Richmond were like the pages in a book. They told a story...This story was full of hardship'. Newton captures the mood of the strugglers who live there with their colloquial language, and he captures the sensations of living in an industrial area, "*...On one particular day (Nostrils) detected seventeen different stenches in the air'*. The children played in *'a playground full of blood and guts, of horse manure, empty tins and rats'*.

Scenes are played out in the book in streets that are recognisable today.

But life is not without its simple pleasures: a hot bath, a warm fire, or a dance to the only record played on a borrowed gramophone.

Themes

Grief

Charlie's Dad is with him throughout this story. He is there in the holey boots Charlie runs in, and despite wearing Squizzy's new replacements for a while, when Charlie really grows up he goes back to wearing the boots he could never bring himself to throw away. Charlie often recalls his father's advice, e.g. about the true test of character (p.110) and to find himself a girl who can dance (p.127).

After his father's death, Charlie *'got so confused sometimes (he) didn't know who it was (he) was supposed to be'* (p. 28).

He really hasn't had time to grieve as he has been so busy growing up and trying to support his mother, and he hasn't really been able to talk about his father's death despite the many well-wishers who would help him, only Nostrils comes close to doing so (p.40).

Friendship

There are several critical moments in Charlie's friendship with Nostrils when Charlie's behaviour is put under the spotlight. Their friendship began with a lie and is brought to crisis point when Charlie leaves Nostrils to be beaten up by Barlow. It is not until after the race that the debt is repaid.

Chance

There are a number of crucial moments when things hang in the balance for Charlie, e.g. When Nostrils slips running away from Barlow (p.147), and when Squizzy nearly shoots Charlie when the boy quits (p.169).

Humour

Charlie's voice brings the book to life, particularly when he indulges his flights of fantasy, or in his relationship with the duck. What he believed to be a Harriet turns out to be a Harry, so no luck with the egg laying, but the bird always seems to have one over on him until Charlie, the expert boxer, indulges in a contest with the bird.

‘...a bad tempered ball of feathers jumped from his pen and craned his head high.

Struth!

Quickly I raised myself up to match him and shouted.

“I’m warning ya, Harry. Don’t even think about it. How was I ta know you were a boy?” (p. 124)

Student Activities

Plotting the events of the Story

Find a map of Richmond.

As you read the story plot Charlie's runs on the map.

- Read p.11-15 - the description of the race.
- Read p.140-145 - the liquor run.



Maps may be found at http://www.street-directory.com.au/aus_new/index.cgi

or

- Produce a poster that tells the story of Runner.
- Using a Street Directory, sketch out the main streets between Richmond, the City and Fitzroy.
- As you read the book, mark in the places of importance.

My father's boots.

We first see Charlie's boots when he turns up to race for Squizzy (p.6-8).

- How are the boots used in this story to tell us about Charlie's state of mind?
- Find the times when he changes shoes. What is significant about these changes?
- see p.46 when Dolly offers new boots.
- see p.188 when Cecil gives him the running spikes.
- Why does Charlie run barefoot? (p.198)

'Are you big enough to fill your father's boots?'

- What does this expression mean in common use?
- Write a description of a father figure in your life, in which you outline the qualities you admire and which you would like to possess?

Sparring with the Duck

Consider Charlie's relationship with the duck Harriet/Harry. See p.32, 39, 124, and 156.

- What do these scenes add to the enjoyment of the book?

Saturday Night

Read the description of Saturday night - such simple pleasures! See p.34

- How have things changed today?
- Write a descriptive piece about Saturday night.

Writing Dialogue

Dialogue contributes a great deal to the atmosphere of this book.

Look at the way Newton writes conversation in this book. Read p.109-110.

'With the transaction complete, Barlow took the pies and stepped towards the door.

"By the way," he said. "If ya change yer mind 'bout goin' to the flicks, ya know where ta find me."

After the door closed, Alice dropped the coins into the register.

"Thanks fer that," I said. "I take it yer not all that keen on Jimmy Barlow."

"He's a tosser. He thinks he can push people round just because he's done a bit a boxin'."

"Ya don't like boxin'?"

"I hate it."

- Discuss with your teacher the techniques Robert Newton uses to capture the sound of speech in this community at this time.

Note the use of:

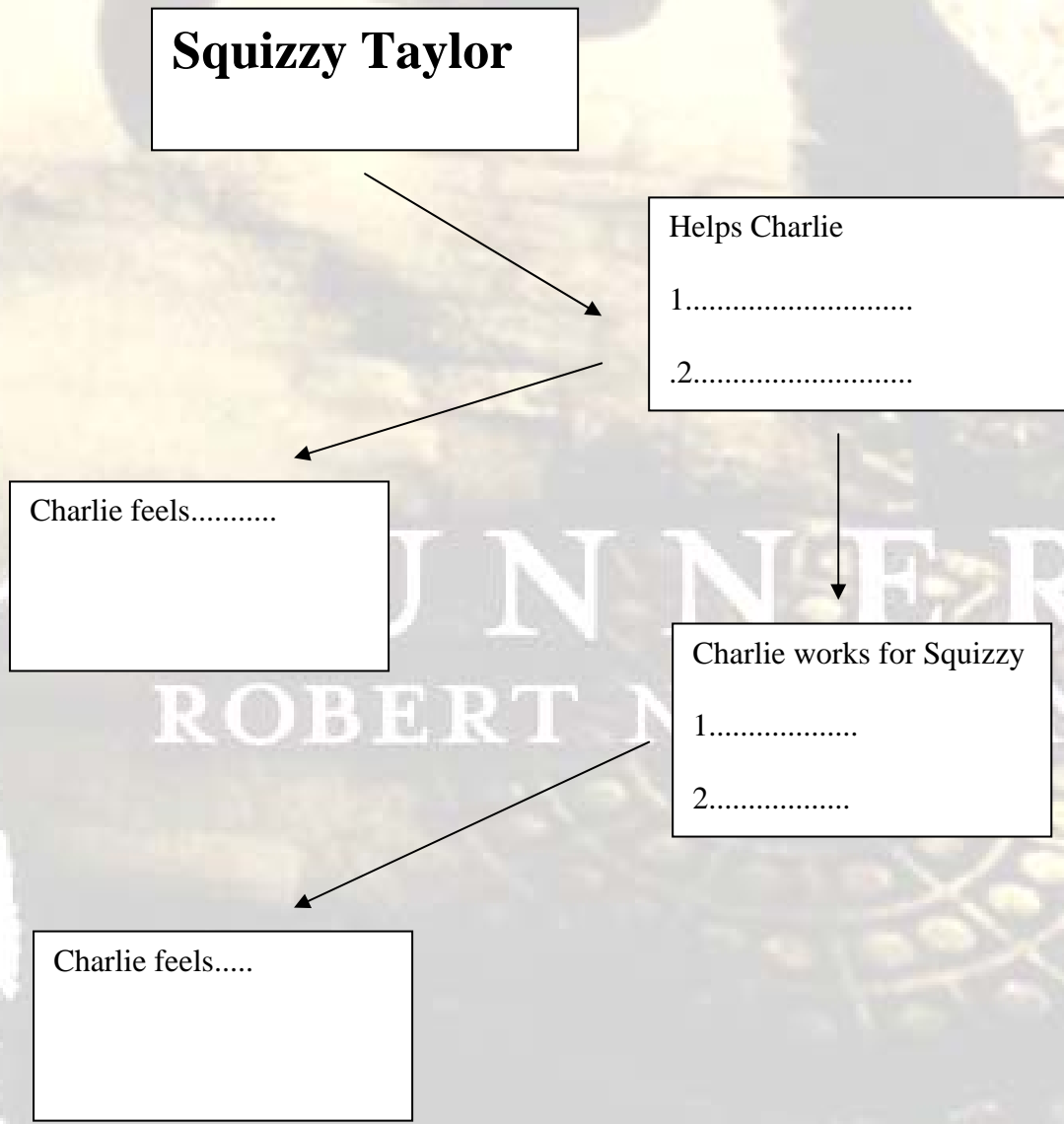
- He said/she said - or lack of it! How does this affect the reader?
- How is it clear who is talking?
- Slang
- Abbreviations - how is punctuation used to show missing letters?

- Try telling a simple story using mainly dialogue and without using lots of "he/she said."
- Experiment with dialects to differentiate between speakers.

Relationship with Squizzy

Plot Charlie's relationship with Squizzy. You might use a flow chart to show this diagrammatically.

A flow-charting software program can be used, or you may draw your diagram freehand.



and so on...

Use your own design.

The Cecil Redmond Coaching Academy

Read about Charlie's attempts to learn boxing and to train as a runner with Cecil.

Cecil's System could be described like this:

Step 1 Skipping - to the accompaniment of nursery rhymes

Step 2 Finkin' and footwork

Step 3 Have dog - chase rabbit - chase dog

- What do you think about Cecil's coaching methods?
- Discuss with your teacher effective ways to write an instructional text.
- Research an activity in which you have some expertise.
- Give instructions to the class in how to effectively and safely increase performance in this activity.
- Either write a brochure, or give a talk, or use a PowerPoint presentation.

Choices

There are times when Charlie makes critical decisions. These are '*moments that define who you are*' (p.146). As he does so, time in the novel seems to stand still.

'Heads or Tails.

Yes or no.

Stay or go.' (p.147 and p.169)

- Read p.146-152 and p.168-170
- What do these choices reveal about Charlie?
- Do they show different sides of his character?
- Has Charlie changed in the time between these two decisions?
- If so how?
- Is Charlie too hard on himself in relation to his first decision?
- Could he have done anything different?
- Is Charlie remarkably brave or silly in relation to his second decision?
- Justify your answers.

Creative Writing

Think about a time you made an important choice, one you might have regretted, or one you were pleased about. Tell the story in a way that highlights the importance of the choice.

Mrs Feehan

Read p.77-79.

- What is wrong with Mrs. Feehan after the fight with Peacock?

'The bruises, after all, would heal. It was something else - something that no amount of white powder could fix.

Ma had lost her smile.' (p.78)

Ma's behaviour has changed quite dramatically, and it is several months before she gets better. The Redmonds refer to it as '*a condition*' (p.80), some people might call it a "breakdown".

This often happens when people have experienced a threatening event. In school, bullying can bring this about.

Today it is more likely to be called an "adjustment disorder", or if it is more severe "obsessive compulsive disorder", or "post traumatic stress disorder".

- Use a medical encyclopaedia or the Internet to find out about these disorders.

Some sites to help are:

http://www.medicalglossary.org/mental_disorders_neurotic_disorders_definitions.htm

<http://www.ahealthyme.com/article/gale/100084999>

<http://www.bullyonline.org/stress/ptsd.htm>

Further Reading

Blood Ties by Rosemary Hayes

Flash Jack by Maureen McCarthy

Going Off by Colin Bowles

Johnny Hart's Heroes by Dave Metzthen

Camel Rider by Prue Mason

Gaz series by Warren Flynn

Goat Boy by Peter McFarlane

Mao's Last Dancer, Young Readers Edition by Li Cunxin (non-fiction)

Struggletown by Janet McCalman (non-fiction)