Finding the right novel for a Year 7 class can be quite a tricky task. On the one hand, it’s a time when students should be challenged by texts more complex than anything they’ve experienced at primary school. On the other hand, however, the English teacher may find themselves teaching a mixed ability class where reading levels can vary dramatically.

In the past I’ve found myself gravitating to rather slight novels with easily-read prose simply because it causes the least headaches in the classroom. Students faced with texts that are too difficult will probably disengage but we need ‘just right’ texts that are difficult enough to promote student growth whilst remaining accessible enough to promote student interest. In order for a student to invest in their own achievement they must first be able to see that they can achieve.

1 Focus on Reading Phase 2, www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au, 2010

Year 7 Novel Study

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<th>Voice and Value – Blueback</th>
<th>Duration – 10 weeks, Term 3 (Week 1–10)</th>
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**Syllabus Outcomes – a student:**

- **EN4-2A** effectively uses a widening range of processes, skills, strategies and knowledge for responding to and composing texts in different media and technologies
- **EN4-3B** uses and describes forms, features and structures of texts appropriate to a range of purposes, audiences and contexts
- **EN4-7D** demonstrates understanding of how texts can express aspects of their broadening world and their relationships within it

**Core Question – How does narrative voice affect the ‘value’ of a text?**

- How is point of view used to convey a narrative?
- In what way are contemporary issues represented in texts?
- How do we determine the value of a text?

**Learning Across the Curriculum**

- Literacy
- Sustainability
- Critical and Creative Thinking
- Civics and Citizenship
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<th>Text Requirements</th>
<th>Targeted Skills – Students:</th>
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<td>• Structure their own responses appropriate to purpose</td>
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<td>• Make connections between texts and their world</td>
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### Assessment and Mode

(Writing) Exposition piece on why the class novel should be awarded ‘Book of the Year.’ (15%)

The assessment task is a general one used by our faculty to apply to any novels studied by Year 7 classes, with criteria that encompass the use of grammar, punctuation and spelling conventions, as well as consideration of audience, text structure, persuasive devices, and ideas when trying to convince the reader of the value of the text.

### Starting Out

Straight out of the gate, I make it clear to the students they will be getting assessed on their ability to write about their appreciation of the novel *Blueback*. Here are some driving questions that they should start thinking about almost immediately when considering their novel:

- Whose point of view is used to tell the story?
- What ideas and issues are used by the writer?
- To what extent do these ideas and issues make the story more enjoyable, relevant or interesting for the reader?
- How can you (the student) use structured writing to express your own feelings about the story in a way that encourages agreement?

A great starting point is to have students identify some of their favourite texts and give some reasons as to why they love them. This can then be funnelled into a more structured form by getting the whole class to engage with a set text. The one that I like to use is the short film *Paperman*, and I follow it with a diagnostic test that allows me to start looking at the level to which my Year 7s are able to engage with the questions above.

### The ‘Meat’ of the Fish

It’s very tempting to jump into a novel like *Blueback* and drill right down into the use of figurative language, characterisation, etc., but it’s very much about striking the right balance, something that fosters a love of reading. There are two things I do to move the class through the whole novel:

**Reading Aloud:** It can be challenging to hear and gauge the reading ability of 25-30 students in a relatively manageable amount of time, and I have found some success in reading aloud as it ensures that all students in a mixed ability class are able to access the entire novel.

Here’s my method for whole-class reading:

a. Nominate a student by name, ask them to read aloud from the beginning of the section.

b. When they get to the end of a paragraph, or a page, or a few sentences (depending on how well they can read), nominate the next student to read by saying their name. You will need to be actively reading along to make this work.

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c. If any student interrupts or talks, then start back at the beginning of the section. I usually make this interrupter the next reader.

d. If any student doesn’t know where to read from when you nominate them (because they haven’t been reading along), then also start back at the beginning of the section.

e. Don’t be afraid to sometimes ask the same students to read. This is necessary as it lets the ones who have already read know that they need to pay attention.

This system can be a little painful to get started, but after you have returned to the beginning of the chapter about four or five times (cue: whole class groans of annoyance) then the students start to really get the rules and you won’t have to do it much again. It’s a neat approach because it means that everyone has to be reading along in order for it work, and it avoids the problem of some students disengaging after they’ve been asked to read aloud just the once.

Chapter Summaries: This isn’t particularly unique but I like to do this as a modelled, guided, independent-styled activity in addition to a couple of comprehension questions after every chapter. The first time I model how it’s done, creating a couple of dot points on the board about the main parts of the chapter and then working them into a three-sentence paragraph. Students copy this summary into their book and highlight the entire paragraph with a highlighter. The second and third times we then do this together as a whole class, discussing what constitutes a ‘main’ plot point and then coming up with some sentences. After this, students take turns telling me their own summaries and I get them to write them up on the board; students who are struggling with the skill of summarising can therefore copy the work of their peers. It’s important that they highlight each of the chapter summaries in their books so that the summaries are easy to find again towards the end of the unit.

Digesting the Themes

You will note from the unit outline that I’ve boiled my novel study down into three topics: Growing Up, Sustainability, and Citizenship. These issues will arise quite organically with the use of general comprehension questions, and I’ve found them to be an effective way of making the novel relevant to students in terms of how they can connect the themes to their own lives.

- **Growing Up:** The protagonist, Abel, grows from a child into a man with his own family over the course of the novel’s 16 chapters. The first time this change usually becomes noticeable to the students is when he goes off to boarding school and there are a few mentions of years going by. It’s quite fun to see this time jump dawn on the students as it isn’t something they normally expect to encounter when reading and it helps to re-position their impressions of the narrative because it takes the focus off the day-to-day plot of each of the earlier chapters. Higher ability students will quickly grasp that this reflects the idea of ‘growing up,’ that Tim Winton’s story is really about Abel getting older and learning about his place in his community, and this can be used to prompt discussion or ‘connecting’ activities where students talk about their own experiences in getting older and what this means in terms of how they interact with both other people and big issues.

- **Sustainability:** Tim Winton’s theme of ecological sustainability is probably one of the more obvious aspects of *Blueback,* and it is something that is represented by Abel and his mother’s approach to abalone collection, their production of foodstuffs, the fish Blueback’s changing role in the community, and the arrival of the businessmen with their plans to develop Longboat Bay for tourism. This is, of course, also an ideal point for English teachers to deal with the ‘Sustainability’ dot point from the *Learning Across the Curriculum.*

- **Citizenship:** Likewise, the cross-KLA dot point on ‘Civics and Citizenship’ fits in really well with the way Winton explores Abel’s connection to Longboat Bay and the significance this community plays in his concept of self. Most students can quite readily understand the importance of place in their lives; establishing the things that make Abel a good citizen can help students reflect on their own citizenship in wider society. An effective way to examine this is for students to use a Venn Diagram to compare Abel’s life with their own, or Abel’s life with that of a ‘model citizen’ (on the board as a whole class).
TIM WINTON’S BLUEBACK AND STAGE 4 STUDENTS

Reflecting on the Fish

As the assessment task is something that asks students to take a holistic view of their novel, it’s a good idea to practise this a little beforehand with some reflection questions that ask students to look back over the themes of the novel and make some judgements of their own.

Reflecting on Blueback

a. What have you learned about sustainability in this unit?
b. Make a list of environmentally conscious things that you currently do.
c. What are some things about your life that you have changed/wanted to change?
d. Create a list of ten things that happened in Abel’s life, in order.
e. In what way were Abel and his mother good members of their community?

Assessment

The actual assessment task requires each student to persuade their audience in regards to the value of their text. The thesis has been provided for them; the students must convince their teacher why Blueback should win a hypothetical ‘Book of the Year’ award, and from here we should be able to coax a student-led exposition about the positive aspects of Tim Winton’s novel.

Relevant areas that students can draw upon to build their case include: the use of Abel’s point of view to tell the story, the novel’s themes, the use of figuration and characterisation to drive the story, and so on. These are things that will have been examined throughout the unit. The assessment question is such that it allows a big enough scope for students to use any or all of the knowledge they have accumulated about the novel up until this point.

Fishy Fun

I also like to end the unit on a fun note that lets students remember the text positively (and not necessarily something that’s just associated with assessment). Students are assigned a chapter number and are then asked to copy their chapter summary onto a blank scaffold (this is why they need to have these highlighted in their exercise books). On the scaffold, above their summary, they need to create an image that represents the chapter. This visualisation fits into the Super Six comprehension strategies, and is also great practice for representation tasks that students will be asked to grapple with in future grades.

I also have fairly selfish reasons for getting students to do this activity: I like to have mementos of my Year 7 classes that I can display in my classroom. Provided that I ensure at least one chapter summary is created for each chapter – this is very achievable when you have a class of 20+ students and only 16 chapters to cover – I will end up with a nice graphic representation of the entire plot of Blueback. In 2014, my Year 7s created a very fetching block of images that I now have stapled into one of my cupboard doors and in 2015 I took the idea a little further to have the students create my first class set of bunting that I could display above the windows and door. It looks fabulous!

More free resources on this unit (and others) can be found at lukebartolo.blogspot.com
