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# A BRIDGE TO WISEMAN'S COVE

## James Moloney



### Teachers' Notes

Written by James Moloney

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**OVERVIEW**

Carl Matt is an awkward, lumpy fifteen-year-old who just wants to be loved. Sarah, Carl and Harley's father all walked out on the family and their mother, Kerry, often finds them too difficult to cope with. When his mother walks out on the family, apparently for good, nineteen-year-old Sarah, terrified of the responsibility of raising the two boys, heads to Europe, packing the boys off to stay with their Aunt Beryl in Wattle Beach.

Beryl is less than delighted at the idea of taking in the boys, until she realises that she can keep their social services payments. However, far from filling the role of their mother, she shows the boys no love and even attempts to keep Harley chained to the house to prevent him stealing and misbehaving.

Carl is miserable in Wattle Beach. His size and awkwardness make him feel self-conscious and unable to make friends at school. Even the townspeople of Wattle Beach regard the boys with suspicion, believing all the Matt clan to be useless no-hopers. All Carl wants is a family and the security of knowing that he is loved.

When, at sixteen, Carl stops receiving any social security benefits, Beryl forces him to leave school. He finds work with Skip and Joy Duncan who run a rusty run-down barge from Wattle Bay to the nearby island. When Carl first starts to work for them the business is losing money, largely because of competition from a rival barge company. Before long however, Carl, revelling in finally belonging to something, shows initiative and helps to bring trade to the struggling business. He even begins to find the courage to stand up to his uncaring, manipulative Aunt Beryl.

But, just as Carl begins to experience happiness, family secrets come back to haunt him and again bring his world crashing down around him.

Finally the truth is revealed and Carl is forced to confront many of his demons. Gradually he begins to let down his defences and allow others in, finally accepting himself as a loved and valued member of the community.

**THEMES AND QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

The novel lends itself well to an examination of many relevant themes and issues including:

**Family**

**Love**

**Belonging**

**Body Image**

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**Rites of Passage**  
**Symbolism: the osprey**  
**Preconceptions**

**Family**

Carl Matt wants nothing more than to be a part of a family, something he has never experienced.

He is acutely aware of the fact that everyone else seems to have what he never has.

*Carl floated in a sea of families where everyone, it seemed, walked, spoke and laughed with at least one other – a daughter, a father, a mate. (p23)*

For all that she is related to the boys, Aunt Beryl does not welcome them as family. She is only interested in letting the boys stay so that she can obtain their social security payments.

Because of his own upbringing, Carl has little understanding of how families work. He is horrified when Skip tells Joy about Beryl chaining Harley up.

*Skip already told her.*

*He shouldn't have.*

*Carl, they're a family. That's what families do. Talk about things. (p147)*

- What is a family? (Does it have to be a nuclear family – mother, father and children?)
- Do you have to be related to people to feel a part of a family?
- Why are families so important to many people?
- What would you miss out on if you weren't part of a family group?
- Are there any disadvantages in being part of a family?

**Love**

Carl Matt is crippled by the belief that his mother doesn't love him. Carl himself is a gentle person with a lot of love to give.

He goes to Nugent's store every afternoon to meet the bus, hoping that his mother will get off it.

He buys reflectors for Harley's bike and a coffee plunger for Beryl, even though he receives and expects nothing in return.

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He constantly looks out for Harley and tries to protect him.

When Harley is suspended from school for fighting with Liam Wilson, Beryl says he is Carl's responsibility. To enable Carl to keep working on the barge, Joy takes Harley back to her house.

*Carl searched back through his memory for a time when anyone considered Harley in need of care rather than watching. Nothing turned up. (p107)*

Joy helps Harley to bake a cake which he proudly offers to all of the passengers.

*It's not the cake. It's Joy. She's the only person who's been good to him since we came here. (p132)*

Joy is amazed at the type of life Carl and Harley have had. *I didn't think there'd be a kid in the world who didn't know what to do with the beaters from a cake mix. (p140)*

In contrast, when Beryl is in charge, Harley rides off on his bike and spray paints the town. She hits him across the face. When Carl returns home to find Harley chained up like a dog, he says "What are we going to do, Harley? Mum's gone, Sarah's gone, everyone hates us." (p119)

Throughout the novel Carl is haunted by Beryl's comment *Who'll love you if your own mother doesn't?* (p112)

Carl says of Harley *He's miserable and hurt. He's not a wild creature, just a little boy.* (p115).

- Is Harley a bad child, or just a young boy who needs to be shown some love and attention? Consider the different ways in which he behaves when he is with Aunt Beryl and Joy Duncan.
- Can loving someone help them become a better person?

Maddie Duncan feels unloved by her gruff, distant father. She is in an unsatisfactory relationship with Nathan in the misconception that it is love.

Justine tells Carl that Maddie needs friends rather than a boyfriend.

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Maddie has the family Carl craves, so why is she seeking love?  
Justine tells Carl to *stop going on like there's something weird about you.*

*Maddie's just trying to work out who really loves her, same as everyone else on the planet. (p184)*

- Is Carl any different from anyone else in his need to be loved?

Joy is angry with her son Graham for dying. *It was because I had all this love and he was gone, like he rejected it. (p281)*

- Is there any truth in the phrase "love hurts"?

### Belonging

When Carl arrives in Wattle Beach he doesn't fit in as he is neither a local nor a visitor. He watches the other teens from a safe distance, but he never joins in.

When he goes to work on the Duncan's barge, A Bridge to Wiseman's Cove, for the first time in his life he feels as if he belongs.

Consider the significance of each of the following passages from the novel:

*"It's sort of my hat. I don't want you to pay for it." Skip knew men well enough. He slipped the note back into his pocket. Stared at Carl. Saw what he hadn't thought to find. Not in someone called Matt. (p91)*

*Carl slumped against the hull, shivering in the evening breeze. He was exhausted but happier than he'd been since he arrived in Wattle Beach, happier than he'd been since his mother disappeared.(p99)*

*Though his breath had returned, he kept his mouth shut to keep in the relief. And his heart which felt so light it might well float straight up his throat and out with his words. (p100)*

*He couldn't explain to the boy how he loved working on the barge, how alive he felt between its rusting sides. (p127)*

*You and Skip both. You're a pair. I don't suppose he's told you how important you are to us. We need you. The barge has stopped losing money these last few weeks – it's all because of you and the rinsing off you do. (p 141)*

- Why do people need to feel that they belong to something?

### Body Image

Carl is big and awkward and very aware of his body.

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He is too self-conscious to swim, afraid of what others might say.

*He wore a t-shirt as a paltry ruse against public humiliation. (p44)*

In contrast, Justine is quite comfortable in her own skin.

When Carl removes his t-shirt and swims with the girls it is a huge turning point for him (p195)

- Do you think the other teens in the novel are as conscious of Carl's size?
- Consider the effects of body image on a teenager. How can it affect a person's self-esteem?

### Rites of Passage

During the course of the novel the self-conscious, awkward Carl matures and begins to stand up for himself. Consider the changes in Carl throughout the novel.

When Carl first arrives in Wattle Beach he is miserable and lonely. *Alone in the park, Carl wished he was a concrete statue, set there for the birds to sit on. No thoughts, no cares, no pain, just years of weathering in the sun and rain until there was nothing left. (p29)*

He is extremely naïve and hands over all of his money to Beryl. Then, once he starts working, in an effort to have her keep him and Harley, he gives her all of his pay.

Gradually, Carl learns to stand up for himself and his brother. When Beryl chains Harley up, Carl finds the courage to confront her at the bowls club where she has been all day playing the pokies. *If you'd stayed with him, kept an eye on him, if you cared about him, he wouldn't get into trouble. (p122)*

Carl is amazed by Justine's confidence. She is big and awkward like him, but happy and contented, and able to poke fun at herself.

*How did she let her feelings come so quickly to the surface?(p148)*

Carl refuses to go to the island with the others when they go to release the osprey.

*Joy couldn't understand that it was better to be by yourself than embarrassed by what you were. (p177)*

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When he rubs the sunscreen on Justine's back, Carl has *never touched anyone like that before.* (p196)

Carl refuses to work for Bruce. He doesn't approve of his corrupt methods of doing business.

Carl protects Maddie by standing up to Nathan at Justine's party.

The others regard him as a hero. *No-one's ever told him off like that.* (p215)

*He had never been at peace with the touch of another as he was that night. He was awash with it, afloat and drifting happily.* (p221)

*You're coming alive. You've been playing dead all this time and now you can't keep yourself down any longer.* (p224)

Each time Carl starts to get a little more self-confident another secret is revealed and he slips back into his self-doubts.

- Track the development of Carl's personality through the novel. This may best be done as a line graph showing the rises and falls in his confidence and the events that caused this.

### **Symbolism: The Osprey**

Joy keeps the injured bird safe until it is healed and ready to be released back into the world.

When Carl joins Joy and the others in setting the osprey free he feels an overwhelming sense of elation and freedom.

Joy remarks "Wasn't it brilliant. It must be great to be free again, like that. I almost know how the bird feels." (p193)

- The need for 'freedom' is a reoccurring theme in this novel. Make a list of the ways in which it is shown in each of the characters.

### **Preconceptions**

Carl suffers from the behaviour of his family – "the curse of the Matts".

Everyone assumes that because he is a Matt he will cause problems. Even Skip Duncan doesn't want to employ Carl once he realises who he is.

*I lost so much that day 'cause of your grandfather. 'Cause of you Matts. Why should I care what happens to any of you? Bloody Matts. Rotten to the core. Every one I've ever laid eyes on.* (p157)

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- Are the Matts “rotten to the core”? Beryl feels that her family also suffered as a result of the accident. Do you agree that the Matts deserve any sympathy?
- What damage can it cause to have preconceived ideas of people?
- Can you identify any groups or people in society about which you or others may have preconceived ideas? What impact does this have on the way you view them and treat them?
- Consider the ‘pygmalion effect’ (people rise to the levels of expectations others have for them). Can you think of any circumstances where this may come into play? What impact does it have?

**Further reading:** Another novel that explores this topic in depth is Ivan Southall’s *Josh*, also published by UQP

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Sydney, James Moloney grew up and was educated in Brisbane. He completed teacher training at Griffith University and also holds diplomas in Teacher Librarianship and Computer Education. He has taught in a number of Queensland State Schools as both a classroom teacher and a librarian. His experiences as a young teacher in western Queensland have had a profound effect on his writing, especially in his early novels.

James now writes full-time and has written over twenty books for children and Young Adults. His first novel, *Crossfire*, was listed as a Notable Book in the CBCA awards in 1993. His short novel *Swashbuckler* won the Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year Award in 1996 and in the following year, *A Bridge to Wiseman's Cove* was named Book of the Year in the CBCA's Older Readers category. His other titles have appeared regularly on shortlists for literary prizes and children's choice awards ever since.

James says: *'I like to get inside the head of today's adolescents, to connect with the passion they have for life and understand what they care about. The challenge then is to express it in a story. That challenge keeps me young. I love it.'*