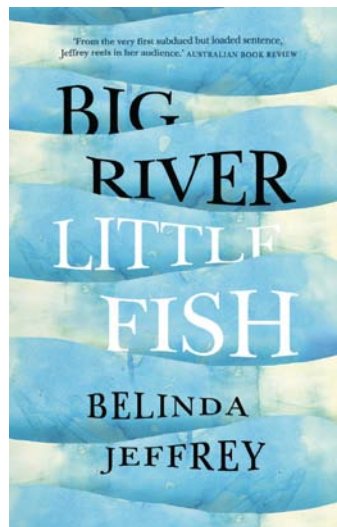


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BIG RIVER, LITTLE FISH

Belinda Jeffrey



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising secondary teacher

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SYNOPSIS

Set in South Australia during the Murray River flood of the 1950s, *Big River, Little Fish* gives an interesting insight into the life of a teenage boy who does not fit the stereotypical mould. Tom's life is seemingly simple to an outsider, yet it is extremely complicated on the inside. Tragically, his biological mother died at childbirth and, after the war, his father, Oliver, was lost at the bottom of a bottle and failed to take on the responsibilities of bringing up a child. Consequently, Tom was raised by Ted and Marge in a loving family.

Unfortunately, many secrets from Tom's past are kept hidden by those around him, supposedly for his own good; however, this lack of access to his past makes it difficult for him to advance into the future. Tom's sense of belonging is twisted because many questions constantly occupy his thoughts. When his biological father, Oliver, finally returns to the township, it becomes a catalyst for change and growth in Tom as he forges an identity for himself.

To make things more challenging, on top of this difficult family background and search for identity, Tom has other ongoing problems that plague his life. No matter how long he stares at a page, he cannot read or write. Even with tuition, he makes no progress and is chastised by his teacher, eventually dropping out of school. When the small riverside town is engulfed by the swelling river, Tom shows that he has abilities outside the classroom that can contribute to the greater good, making him a worthwhile member of the community and boosting his self-esteem.

Overall, *Big River, Little Fish* explores many poignant issues. It will certainly stimulate lengthy classroom discussions on identity, community, education and the treatment of Aboriginal people. The setting of the story gives a distinctly Australian feel to the novel, which makes it particularly relevant to Australian students.

THEMES**Community**

- The Swan Reach community is very tight-knit.
- When the flood waters rise, the community comes together and works to save the town.
- Privacy in the community is limited as town gossip has no boundaries.

Family/Belonging

- Even though Tom has a loving family in Ted and Marge, he still craves a connection with his biological parents.

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- Tom feels somewhat alienated from the community because of his learning difficulties.
- Tom's father, Oliver, has never settled down until he returns to Swan Reach to establish a relationship with Tom.
- Tom is attracted to the lonely souls that live down on the riverbank.
- Hannah is a figment of Tom's imagination to help him come to terms with his life and his place in the community.

Education

- Tom has undiagnosed learning difficulties that leave him detached from the classroom and his peers.
- Ms Pinny, one of his teachers, chastises Tom and victimises him in front of the other students.
- Tom is an extremely gifted mechanic, showing that written literacies are not the only skills that can make someone successful.
- Marge does not admit that Tom has a learning problem and forces him to take tutorial lessons. She also fails to acknowledge that mechanics is a worthwhile pursuit.

Treatment of Aboriginal people

- Tom's biological mother was victimised for having a relationship with Murray Black, an Aboriginal, before she met Tom's biological father, Oliver.
- Murray Black wanders from farm to farm getting work, but is never trusted or made part of the community completely.
- Even though Murray and his Aboriginal friends help battle the floodwaters, their standing in the community does not change.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION (written by the author)

Big River, Little Fish is set on the Murray River in South Australia at Big Bend, half way between the towns of Swan Reach and Nildottie, where my father has a shack. The beauty of the landscape with its rich colours and history and its varied flora and fauna, made a lasting impression on me. I found myself writing a story about a character called Tom who lived there sometime in the past, but I didn't know what period of history the story was set in until I discovered information about the 1956 flood in the Swan Reach Museum. There have been many floods along the Murray, but the 1956 flood was the biggest in two centuries and is considered South Australia's greatest natural disaster to this day. With this piece of information, I knew the story I needed to write.

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STUDY NOTES

- The Murray River is the backdrop to the story and the lifeblood of Swan Reach. Why do you think the characters refer to the river as Old Mother? What effect does it have on the story? What is the term for giving human qualities to a non-living thing, like the river?
- What are some of the main factors that differentiate Swan Reach from a large city? Would you prefer city or small-town life? As a class, give a list of positive and negative points about living in a small town or a big city.
- The lack of anonymity in a small town means that the past is always close at hand through someone's memory. Do you think Tom would have had as much difficulty moving on in his life if he lived in a big city?
- In small groups, research the 1956 flood from the perspective of one group of people affected by this natural disaster (e.g. townsfolk, farmers, small businesses and children) and share your findings with the rest of the class.
- The township bands together to help save the farms, homes and shops on the riverbank. Do you think communities would do the same now or would they rely on government assistance?
- Tom is drawn to helping the people who live isolated lives on the riverbank. Why do you think he befriends them? Is he like them? Could he turn out like them? Give reasons for your opinion.
- On page 160, Tom says: "No it's not. You ever met a fifteen-year-old like me?" Generally, how do you think Tom feels? Do you think he is mature for his age or immature? Give evidence to support your opinion.
- Do you think the return of Tom's biological father to Swan Reach was a catalyst for Tom's growth as a person? Do you think Tom will develop into a better person now Oliver has arrived?
- Tom's adoptive parents, Ted and Marge, are loving parents who supported Tom throughout his life. Do you feel sorry for them when Oliver returns? Is it true that 'blood is thicker than water'?
- Who do you see as Tom's 'real' father: Ted or Oliver? Explain your answer.
- Why do you think Tom created the fictitious Hannah? Do you think it is weird for a teenager to have an imaginary friend? Do you think he may not have

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needed Hannah if certain things in his life, such as the limited information about his mother and father, had been different? How would you treat someone if they had an imaginary friend?

- Did you predict that Hannah was fictitious? Did you pick up any clues throughout the story? In hindsight, what are some clues given in the book?
- Would Tom's learning difficulties have been better supported in modern education? Was it right for Miss Pinny to victimise Tom in front of the other students? Is this behaviour acceptable?
- Even though Tom has extreme difficulty reading and writing, he is exceptionally talented when working with machinery. Do you think society places too much emphasis on written literacy? Is it important to foster the gifts of those who do not have abilities in reading and writing?
- Marge is intent on Tom achieving at school. What effect does this have on Tom's self-esteem? Should she have acknowledged his abilities with machinery?
- 'Failing in school means you'll fail in life'. Respond to this statement. Think about opportunities after school.
- Assess yourself using 'Multiple Intelligences'. Find out what intelligence is your strongest, and what is your weakest. How should the education system cater for people with different strengths, like Tom?
- Mrs Guthrie felt uncomfortable attending the town dance being pregnant. Some people commented that it was inappropriate considering she did not have a partner. Do you think these same beliefs about pregnant women exist today? Do some research on the public's acceptance of pregnancy in the 19th and 20th century. How much have attitudes towards women changed?
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has only recently been acknowledged as a real issue for war veterans. During the 1950s, PTSD was unknown. Oliver struggles with alcoholism after the war. Why do you think he developed alcoholism? What is PTSD and what links are there between PTSD and alcoholism?

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- Tom's biological mother, Lil, was ostracised by the community when they were aware that she was in a relationship with Murray Black. What effect did this have on her life? Would she have died if attitudes were different?
- Why do you think the author has named the Aboriginal character Murray Black?
- Murray Black does seasonal work for the townspeople of Swan Reach and helps to fight the floodwaters however, he is never properly acknowledged. How do you feel about this? Have things changed?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Belinda Jeffrey is the author of much acclaimed first novel *Brown Skin Blue* which was written after going on a croc jumping tour in the Northern Territory. Her short story, 'The Hallelujah Roof,' was published in the *One Book, Many Brisbanes* anthology. Belinda lives in Brisbane with her husband and two boys.