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GALACTIC ADVENTURES: FIRST KIDS IN SPACE

by Tristan Bancks



Teachers' Notes

Written by a Practising Teacher Librarian
in context with the Australian Curriculum (English)

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SYNOPSIS:

Dash Campbell has just been granted the opportunity of a lifetime – the chance to be one of the first kids to ever leave the planet and journey into space. Selected as one of five children to undergo a strict training regime at the Galactic Adventures Spaceport, if successful, he will live his dreams and travel to outer space.

But Dash faces many obstacles during his month at space school. Gruelling physical challenges as well as psychological barriers require him to push through his deepest fears. The knowledge that some forty years earlier, a space craft containing three children attempting the same feat exploded shortly after takeoff doesn't help much either.

Galactic Adventures: First Kids in Space is an action-packed adventure story that provides an insight into the fascinating world of astronauts, space travel and the hardcore training programs required by such missions.

THEMES:

Family:

- Dash has a unique family structure – he lives alone with his stepdad after his mother left Dash at an early age.
- Dash has a solid relationship with his stepdad, Karl.
- Karl's sense of responsibility and duty towards Dash are unwavering.
- Dash's sense of abandonment surfaces during the book.

Friendship:

- Dash forms close friendships with three of the other four participants in the space program.
- He develops a particularly close bond with one of the girls, Yada.
- Dash has smuggled his pet rat, Marv, to the Spaceport. Marv is Dash's confidant and security blanket. He is Dash's only 'family' at the school.
- Dash has a strained relationship with the fifth member of the group, Zarif. There is an underlying sense of competition between them. This is resolved towards the end of the novel.
- Yada gets caught exploding a model rocket. She doesn't divulge Dash's involvement in the prank to prevent him from being expelled.

Space Travel:

- Astronauts undergo gruelling training regimes before leaving the Earth's atmosphere. Many of these aspects are included in the children's preparations for their mission.
- The ethics and issues behind civilian space travel are raised in the text.

Courage vs Fear:

- Dash has to conquer many fears before successfully completing the program.
- While his courage at times falters, Dash is able to overcome insecurities and fears to fulfil his dream.
- Yada, Scott and Rafaella are also victim to various fears, affecting their chances of flying to outer space.
- Zarif seems to be fearless; his steely resolve and determination are unstoppable
- Dash is fearful that his mother left because of him

- ‘There is nothing to fear but fear itself’ (pg. 29).
- As quoted in the opening pages of the book (advice given to a young Native American at time of initiation):

*As you go the way of life,
you will see a great chasm.
Jump.
It is not as wide as you think.*

Perseverance:

- Dash manages to conquer his ultimate fears by pushing through them.
- Although the training is tough, he is determined to succeed.
- Dash has to overcome his fear of falling and of failing.

Honesty:

- Dash at first doesn’t admit to his involvement in the rocket explosion.
- He confesses in order to avoid the sky dive.
- Once on the ground, he doesn’t take the issue any further.

WRITING STYLE:

Galactic Adventures: First Kids in Space is written in first person, present tense. Adventure with a touch of mystery, this fast-paced narrative has a believable, contemporary voice well suited to its middle-reader audience. The characters are realistic and their faults and attributes well depicted. The text is descriptive and accessible.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION:

When I was seven years old I built a spaceship with my friend, Luke. It was made out of odds and ends from around the house and we planned to attach an outboard motor to get us into space. One of my strongest memories of childhood was, on my first day of year six, watching the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster on TV. Then, as an adult, one of the greatest days of my life was visiting the Kennedy Space Centre in Florida – it was so filled with hope and possibility. The first book I ever wrote was about Space Stations. And, then, when I saw the short animation for Virgin’s civilian space travel program on YouTube, I knew that I needed to write a story about civilian space travel and the first kids in space. I’ve always been fascinated by space travel and I can’t wait for the day that I am looking back at Earth from high, high above. Then my journey will be complete. Or maybe it will be just the beginning.

STUDY NOTES:

Before reading, view Virgin Galactic’s Spaceship Two animated launch video on YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=WBo8t0B5NhM

- Discuss the animation. Would you like to be one of the passengers? Have you ever dreamt about going to outer space? What if you had the opportunity to go right now? What feelings and thoughts might you have about flying into outer space? What preparation might be needed?

Chapter 1 begins with a very descriptive explanation of Dash's experience on a centrifuge. Examine the descriptive techniques employed by the author. What makes this description realistic? How did the passage make you feel?

Think about a fast or scary ride that you've been on, or the first time you flew in an aeroplane.

- Use an X chart to brainstorm effective phrases, nouns, verbs and adjectives that will help capture your experience.
- Use a variety of senses to help classify your memories such as sight, sound, feelings and smell.
- Write a descriptive recount of this ride. Try to make your audience feel the same way you did.

In Chapter 2, Dash makes a spacecraft using bits and pieces from around the house (see p10).

- Investigate how rocket propulsion works.
- Make your own spacecraft using collected materials from around the house.
- Make a plan for your vessel. Once finished, test your ship. What changes would you make to your design?
- There are many websites available to help construct a rocket such as <http://spaceplace.nasa.gov/en/kids/rocket.shtml> or www.sciencetoy maker.org (use a search term such as 'science for kids rockets').

Early in the novel, there are a number of protestors campaigning that 'Space is not for kids'.

- After completing the novel, use de Bono's 6 Thinking Hats to evaluate this statement.
- Summarise your thinking into a mind map.
- When finished, write a paragraph that addresses the statement, using effective topic and concluding sentences.
- Alternatively, write a persuasive argument either for or against space travel for kids.
- Construct a PMI chart that outlines the pluses, minuses and interesting aspects of the Galactic Adventures Space Program for children.

Dash's passion for space begins with a one-off experience at his grandfather's place at Woomera.

- What connection does Woomera have with the international space program?
- Have you ever been inspired to follow a dream by an experience you've shared at a friend's or relative's place? Discuss in a written reflection.

Dash's family structure is different from the traditional nuclear family. Discuss the special relationship that Karl and Dash share.

What does Dash mean when he says, 'I'm the only kid without a parent here for the announcement. The others wish they were me, but I wish I was one of them' (p17).

Marv, the rat, fills a void for Dash while he's in the US. Why has Dash smuggled Marv into the Spaceport? What role does Marv play in the novel?

The journalists ask many questions of the five children in Chapter 5.

- Imagine you are a journalist. What questions would you ask the kids?
- What would Dash's answers be to your questions?
- Hold an author's chair where various class members assume the role of the five children, taking turns to answer questions from the class.
- In the role of a journalist, write a newspaper article about this special event.

Dash uses Skype to communicate with his stepdad back home in Australia. The author tells us in his notes that he read many blogs and used many websites to help research material for the novel.

- Set up Skype in different classrooms and re-enact a conversation between Dash and Karl.
- Discuss the role that Web 2.0 technologies play in both the modern world and in contemporary fiction. How can such technologies help authors in their plot development and problem solving?
- Keep a class blog as the novel is read, allowing students to respond to various questions or issues as they read.

What does James Johnston mean when he says, 'there is nothing to fear except fear itself' (pg.29). How might this mantra have helped Dash during his journey to space? Use examples from the book to help explain your answer.

Research 'firsts' in space travel history. Present your research in an information report. Your report could take the form of a Power Point, oral, brochure or poster. Some possible headings might include:

- First craft in space
- First animals in space
- First human in space
- First female in space
- First civilian in space (read their blogs, watch their videos)

Dash faces many obstacles during his time at the spaceport and at home.

- How does he overcome these hardships? Does he do this alone or with help from friends and family?
- What obstacles were faced by the first humans to land on the moon? Investigate these.

Use a range of photographs from the Apollo 11 mission available on <http://history.nasa.gov/ap11ann/kipp-photos/apollo.html> as stimulus for on-demand creative writing tasks

- Peer edit these writing tasks.
- Present a final draft of this task using Microsoft Word.

Create a poster promoting space tourism. Use online material from Virgin Galactic to assist.

Scott asks, 'Who's gonna be our Neil Armstrong?' What does he mean by this?

- Discuss the ramifications, if any, for Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins when Neil Armstrong was chosen to be the first man to step foot on the moon. How might this have affected Neil Armstrong himself?
- For older/extension students, teach internet search skills to locate biographies of Apollo astronauts. How did these astronauts cope with the media attention before and after their missions? (There are excellent resources available for children such as: www.notablebiographies.com/An-Ba/Armstrong-Neil.html).

The Space Station is called Utopia. What does Utopia mean? Why do you think this name was used?

Research how astronauts really do train and prepare for outer-space missions? What is involved?

The Greek philosopher Epictetus once said, 'It is impossible for a person to learn what he thinks he already knows.' How is this quote reflected in the gruelling training regime and the leadership of Palatnik?

Discuss the comment that Yada makes when she says, 'Fall down seven times, stand up eight' (p134).

- Why did Yada suggest making the rocket in the first place?

Dash only admits to his involvement in the rocket prank when trying to avoid the skydive.

- Why did he confess then? Do you think Dash should have owned up about his involvement in the prank earlier? Why didn't he bring it up again after successfully making the jump?
- Evaluate Dash's decisions during this chapter.

After bailing out of the original flight, Dash feels he wants to, 'escape like my mum did, leave no trace' (p158).

- Discuss the impact that the abandonment of Dash's mum has had on his outlook and resilience during this scene.

Dash is not sure whether he really is seeing Robert White's ghost or whether this is a figment of his imagination. What does Robert's ghost represent?

Astronauts have to be prepared for survival in case of unplanned mishaps during their mission. In groups, play a simulated survival game. Examples are available online at sites such as at: www.sitesalive.com/oil/tg/private/oiltgsurvival.html

Tristan Bancks has included a range of information, including relevant websites, at the back of the text. Include this section in your reading of the novel.

- Construct a timeline of the history of human space travel from Yuri Gagarin to the current revolution in private industry-led space travel.
- Make some predictions about what the future in space travel might hold.
- Visit Nasa's website for children at <http://www.nasa.gov/audience/forstudents/k-4/index>

Look at information, wikis, footage and images from the International Space Station on the Nasa website www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/station/living/index

- What is life like on a space station? How do every day activities like brushing your teeth, eating, going to the toilet and exercising differ on a space station? What do people eat in space? It is also possible to apply for a live hook-up between your school and the International Space Station.

Investigate why humans have to train on equipment like centrifuges, zero-gravity jets, vestibular chairs and so on to prepare for space.

- Why are there so many medical tests? Why is so much fitness training required before go into outer space?
- Look at the gruelling space training programme at Russia's Star City, which used to be a highly secretive base during the Cold War.

Create a book trailer for *Galactic Adventures: First Kids in Space* using Microsoft Photo Story.

There have been accidents and disasters throughout the history of space travel.

- If age appropriate, investigate disasters such as the Challenger 7 in 1986 and Columbia in 2003 in light of the fears and concerns that are raised in *Galactic Adventures: First Kids in Space*. Tributes and footage are available online: www.youtube.com/watch?v=xWfOjCWKFLY&feature=related

View movies such as *The Dish* (PG) or *Apollo 13* (PG) and compare with *Galactic Adventures: First Kids in Space*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Tristan Bancks tells stories for the page and screen. He has a background as an actor and film-maker in Australia and the UK. His short films have won a number of awards and have screened widely in festivals and on TV. Tristan has written several books for kids and teens, including the explosive Mac Slater, Coolhunter series (Random House) released in Australia and the US, and his illustrated series, *Nit Boy* (Laguna Bay Publishing), about everybody's favourite mini-beasts. *Nit Boy* is currently being developed for television. Tristan's young adult novel, *It's yr life* (Random House) was co-written via email between Byron Bay and L.A. with actress / author, Tempany Deckert. Tristan is saving for his ticket to space. He loves telling inspiring, fast-moving stories for young people.

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