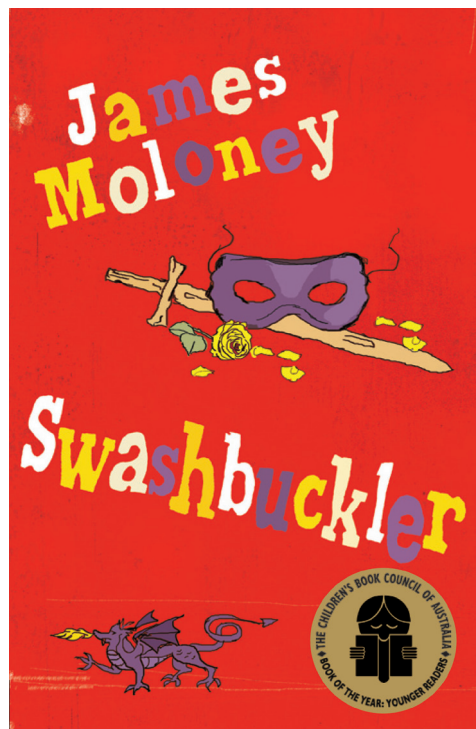


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# Swashbuckler

by James Moloney



## Teachers' Notes

Written by a Practising Teacher Librarian  
(Middle School)

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**SYNOPSIS:**

Peter, along with his mother and two younger sisters, are forced to move house after his father gambles away everything that they own. Bitter and angry, Peter finds it impossible to forgive and accept his father back into his life. In fact, in Peter's mind, he has no father.

To make matters worse, Peter is cornered on his first day at Park Ridge school by the school's most notorious bullies. He is rescued by classmate Anton, a self proclaimed 'swashbuckler', who speaks in character and dresses in costume. Most kids at school think Anton has gone completely mad. However, this colourful facade hides the painful fact that Anton's father is dying from cancer.

*Swashbuckler* is a story about friendship, courage and resilience in which both Anton and Peter discover much about themselves and their families.

**THEMES:**

Friendship:

- Peter and Anton form an unusual friendship based on the notions of rescue and salvation.
- Peter convinces Anton to visit his dying father in hospital; he does this by harnessing Anton's obsession with crusading against the enemy and rescuing helpless victims.
- Anton helps Peter to recognise his father's gambling addiction as an illness and to separate his feelings for his dad from his anger at the addiction.

Bullying:

- Peter is bullied by Rex and Tony who he nicknames Buzzard Breath and Brains.
- Anton frames Rex and Tony for an offence at school. The bullies get suspended from school as a result.

Family/Relationships:

- Peter is angry with his father for gambling away his family's belongings.
- Peter assumes the role of patriarch in his estranged family unit.
- Peter can't understand why his mother and sisters are so excited to see his father.
- Anton refuses to visit his dying father in hospital.
- Anton is angry with his father for succumbing to cancer.
- Anton's father is very understanding and is relieved to finally receive a visit and the chance of sharing a final goodbye.
- Peter finally forgives his father and acknowledges his illness.

Fear/Grief:

- Peter is fearful that his father will squander their lottery winnings.
- Anton is afraid of his father's sickly appearance; he thinks of his father as a dragon with scaly, shrivelled skin and stinking breath.
- Anton is fearful of the cancer but also of his father dying.
- People react differently to grief.

Heroes/Rescue:

- Peter is able to help Anton face his fears through the notion of rescue.
- Anton helps Peter to rescue his father from his gambling addiction.
- The idea of heroes rescuing those in need is a central theme.

Gambling:

- Peter's father is addicted to gambling.
- Peter has to separate his hatred for his father's gambling addiction from his feelings for his father.
- Scratch-its are also a form of gambling, but Peter and his mother buy one every week.
- Gambling can lead to heartache and loss.

**WRITING STYLE:**

*Swashbuckler* is written in first person, past tense. Peter is the narrator. Through his eyes, we meet Anton, a boy who dresses in costume and speaks and acts as a sword-wielding musketeer.

The writing style is an effective blend of humorous where it can be and sensitive when it needs to be. The dialogue of Anton when in role as a crusading hero is both engaging and entertaining.

**STUDY NOTES:**

Before reading, discuss the cover of the book.

- What might a swashbuckler be?
- What do the illustrations on the front cover reveal about the title?

In the opening chapter, we meet Peter, Anton, Rex and Tony.

- After reading this chapter, jot down the traits of each character. Use these notes as a discussion point for developing rich characters in students' own writing. Have students develop a character or two by carefully considering how they might speak, dress, behave etc.
- Predict what may happen to these characters throughout the story.
- Anton is mysterious and unique. Why do you think he acts and speaks in this way?

As the novel is read, keep a class blog responding to the key events as they unfold. Free websites such as [www.wordpress.org](http://www.wordpress.org) provide good blogging tools.

Select a passage of the novel to recreate in the form of a graphic comic strip.

- Investigate the graphic novel format, especially those featuring heroes.
- Use descriptions from the novel along with books on drawing cartoon characters to help formulate caricatures of Rex, Tony, Anton and Peter.
- Websites such as <http://www.bitstrips.com/> allow students to create comic strips.
- Alternatively, consider creating a short Claymation production of this scene by modelling the characters with plasticine. Use digital cameras to take shots of the models and put together in Windows Movie Maker.

The book refers to a range of literary characters such as:

- Saramouche,
- Beowulf,
- The Count of Monte Cristo,
- The Scarlet Pimpernel and
- Robin Hood.

Choose one of these characters on which to complete a portfolio. This portfolio could include a range of research tasks and texts such as:

- A profile detailing the origins of this character, their traits, deeds etc.
- A newspaper article about this character (this could be from a contemporary perspective or from a newspaper of the time).
- An expository passage comparing this character with a more modern literary hero such as Harry Potter, Edsel Grizzler, Percy Jackson etc.
- A narrative written about the character.
- A letter written by the character to a known audience.
- A poster advertising this character to a modern audience.

A major theme of *Swashbuckler* centres on separating feelings for someone from a dislike of their behaviour.

- Unpack this idea further by having a class discussion about a time they made a misjudgement or mistake but were forgiven by family or friends, (this may work better as a journal piece depending on the incident). How did they feel before this forgiveness was granted? After?
- Why does it take so long for Peter to forgive his father? Can you understand why Peter feels the way he does?
- Reflect on a time when you felt angered or disappointed with a friend or family member's behaviour. How did this make you feel? How long did it take you to forgive them?
- Why does Anton's father say of anger that, 'after a while you have to let it all go ... it takes courage to accept that' (p124)?



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Both Anton’s and Peter’s fathers are imprisoned by illness – cancer and an addiction to gambling. How are these illnesses similar? How are they different?

Anton describes his father as a dragon because of his shrivelled skin and stinking breath. Peter convinces Anton that the cancer is the dragon, not his father. What does Peter mean by this?

Peter realises that the only way to get through to Anton is by using the notion of heroes. Use the theme of heroes on which to base a research task.

- Select someone you consider to be a hero. This may be someone famous or someone you know personally.
- Create a hypothesis for what classifies someone as a ‘hero’. Test this hypothesis by applying your definition to a range of ‘heroes’. Analyse your data to prove or disprove your thesis. Does your thesis need modifying?
- Present your findings to the class in an oral presentation using PowerPoint.

Bullies feature at the start of the novel.

- What motivates bullies?
- What strategies are best used against bullies?
- Do you agree with Anton’s strategy of framing Rex and Tony for the rose garden episode?

Create a table that shows a comparison between Anton’s swashbuckling language and what he really means (see below)

Anton says ...	Anton means ...
In truth, Sir, me thinks the answer be three-and-twenty (p40)	The answer is twenty-three, Mr Cotton.
Cease and desist... Stand fast and release your prisoner (p5)	Stop doing that. Let him go.
Gadzooks, man. This is my mode of speech. If thou dost not find it to thy liking...’ (p43)	Good grief, Peter. This is how I speak. If you don’t like it...
etc.	

- Try creating your own swashbuckling language.
- Write an additional chapter suitable for inclusion in Swashbuckler, replicating the ‘voices’ of Peter and Anton.

- Observe novels such as *How to Speak Dragonese* by Cressida Cowell in which Dragonese is translated into English.

Reread the description of Anton's bedroom on p76/77 and create a diorama of Anton's room.

Create an illustrated story map that shows a detailed understanding of the plotline of *Swashbuckler*.

In a small group, select a scene from the book to dramatise.

- Rewrite this scene as a play script.
- Design costumes and props for the dramatisation.

Create a piece of artwork to represent the feelings that Anton has towards his father's illness.

Children respond in different ways to obstacles in their family lives.

- Examine websites and organisations designed to help children through difficult time, such as Kids Helpline: <http://www.kidshelp.com.au/kids/>
- Invite a school counsellor or chaplain to speak to students about strategies for coping with feelings of grief, anger and loss.
- Have students create a simple webpage that gives information about these strategies or contact details for helpful organisations.
- Compare *Swashbuckler* with picture books that deal with grief and loss such as *Harry and Hopper* or *Old Pig* by Margaret Wild, Gary Crew's *Lucy's Bay* or *The Sound of the Sea* by Jacqueline Harvey.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

James Moloney is one of Australia's best known children's writers. His books range across the age groups from seven to seventeen year-olds. *Swashbuckler*, which won the CBCA Book of the Year Award in 1996, and its sequel, *Buzzard Breath and Brains*, are among his favourites. Moloney's much-loved *Dougy*, *Gracey* and *Angela* series was re-released by UQP in 2010.

A teacher-librarian in his earlier career, James now writes every day in a shed at the bottom of his garden in Brisbane. He shares his home with his wonderful wife, Kate, and occasionally with his three adult children who always seem to turn up around dinner time.