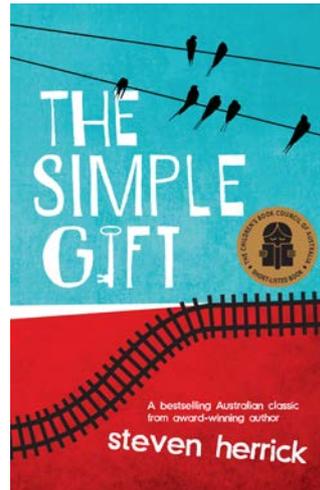


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THE SIMPLE GIFT

Steven Herrick



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian
in context with the Australian curriculum
(English)

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Synopsis	2
Themes	2
Homelessness	2
Identity	2
Class	3
Stereotypes	3
Education	3
Teenage relationships	3
Grief	3
Study Notes	3
Author Motivation	6
About the Author	7

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SYNOPSIS

The Simple Gift is a touching story that centres on a teenager who has not been dealt the best hand in life. Billy, the central protagonist, leaves his broken home and disengages from society, finding himself homeless in a new town, spending his days reading books and sourcing food and income to sustain a meagre lifestyle. The novel follows Billy's personal journey, but also explores the lives of two other main characters: Caitlin, a teenage girl from an affluent family, and Old Bill, a self-professed drunk sleeping in an abandoned train carriage.

The novel directly challenges young readers' assumptions about homelessness and the class divide, making it a powerful teaching tool in the classroom. The three main characters all shine a light on topics that are more often than not deemed taboo in societal conversation. One of the most powerful elements of the novel is the author's ability to humanise characters that are marginalised in the community, giving the homeless a voice that generally goes unheard.

The entire narrative is written in verse, with each chapter a first-person account from Billy, Old Bill or Caitlin. The narrative moves quickly, as the core of the characters' values and beliefs bubble to the surface through their observations and reflections on their own life. Overall, this novel would suit both low-literacy and mainstream students, as it has numerous themes that can be explored at varying levels of complexity.

THEMES**Homelessness**

- Billy and Old Bill are both homeless, but for very different reasons. Their personal circumstances, although dissimilar, have landed them in the same situation.

Identity

- On top of the usual growing pains in the development of a teenager's identity, Billy's anonymity and homelessness makes it harder for him to understand who he is and what he wants out of life.
- Caitlin must balance the expectations of her family with her own desires and search for identity.
- Old Bill has lost himself and must face his past before moving forward.

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Class

- Caitlin and Billy's family backgrounds differ greatly, which makes it hard for Caitlin to negotiate the prejudices that wealth has instilled in her family.

Stereotypes

- Old Bill embodies the stereotype associated with homelessness, but the reader learns things about Old Bill that directly challenge this stereotype.

Education

- There is an underlying message that education is important throughout the novel. Billy's love of books links to this idea.

Teenage relationships

- Billy and Caitlin's relationship grows throughout the novel. There are a number of factors that could derail their relationship that they must overcome.

Grief

- Old Bill's grief has overpowered him, which has made him withdraw from society and into any bottle of alcohol he can get his hands on.

STUDY NOTES**Pre-reading**

- Have you ever read a narrative completely in verse before? How do you think it will be different? Can the essence of characters and their story be communicated effectively to the reader through verse alone?
- Homelessness is a feature of this novel from the first chapter. What are your ideas about the homeless? In a pair or group, brainstorm a list of adjectives that are regularly used to describe the homeless. What is the common theme of these adjectives?
- Do some research into homelessness in Australia. How many people are actually homeless in Australia? Why are they generally homeless? What challenges do they face? What support services are available?

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The novel

- Describe Billy's emotions as he leaves his home. What sort of life did Billy have? Did Billy's home life contribute to his negative feelings about school?
- On p6, Billy explains his love of reading. Do you associate someone who loves to read with someone who hates school? Use experiences from your own life to respond.
- Pages 15 and 16 are a reflection on an event in Billy's life that gives the reader a better understanding of his family. How does this make you feel about Billy's father? Do you think Billy's father would be upset that Billy left home and willingly became homeless?
- Billy is reading a book on p23. What is the book and what happens in it? What are Billy's beliefs about survival, whether in the book he is reading or in his own life? Is this a sustainable life philosophy?
- The reality of Billy being homeless comes to the foreground for the reader on p26. How do you think you would feel having to find a place to sleep for the night in an unfamiliar environment? Billy ends up finding a reasonably comfortable place to rest his head. Is this always the case for homeless people?
- On p32, Billy has cleverly worked out a system to get free food at McDonald's. If you worked there and saw someone doing this, would you report it or would you keep it to yourself as Caitlin does? Explain why.
- When Caitlin is introduced into the narrative, her privileged upbringing and private school education is immediately brought to the reader's attention. Why do you think that the author has chosen someone like Caitlin as another main character? How do you think Caitlin and Billy will interact throughout the novel?
- On p43, Caitlin states 'homeless, and proud of it' about Billy. Is Billy proud to be homeless? Can anyone be proud to be homeless?
- Does Old Bill fit the homeless stereotype? What is the significance of the author's choice of names for Billy and Old Bill?
- Billy begins to worry about his future on p54. Has the reality of his homelessness started to set in?

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- Caitlin may be privileged, but does she appear to value her family's wealth or is she searching for something else in her life? Use evidence from the novel to support your response.
- As Billy and Caitlin's relationship develops, what challenges do you predict they may face in the future? Would a relationship like this develop if they were 10 or 20 years older?
- Read Judith Wright's poem *Metho Drinker* and compare its message to Old Bill and the life he leads. Are there any similarities?
- Old Bill notes on p76 that when he works it will sober him up. How important is work to somebody's identity and lifestyle?
- As the novel progresses, the reader gains an understanding of Old Bill's past and the fact that he has been grieving for many years. Dr Elisabeth Kubler-Ross explained grief as a set of five stages to help people understand their emotions (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K%C3%BCbler-Ross_model). Track Old Bill's progress through the stages of grieving. Is he stuck within a stage?
- On p114, Caitlin visits Billy and runs away. Why does she do this? Explain how Caitlin must have felt at that moment. How would you feel in the same situation?
- Caitlin reflects on a quote Billy made from *The Grapes of Wrath*, 'the honour of poverty'. What do you think this means? Is there honour in poverty?
- Old Bill begins to re-engage with the world towards the end of the novel. Why do you think he has begun to change his behaviour? Is there hope for people like Old Bill?
- Why do you think Old Bill can't go into the house? Will he ever be ready to return to the house? What does he need to do first?
- 'Education is the key to improving the life of everyone.' Do you agree with this statement? Does the novel support or contradict this statement? Explain your ideas using evidence from the novel.

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Post-reading

- After reading *The Simple Gift*, do your ideas about a novel written in verse match how you feel now? Did the narrative flow well? Did you get a strong understanding of the characters and their motivations?
- Does your list of adjectives used to describe the homeless match Billy and Old Bill? If not, how do you think stereotyping of a group of people in the community affects their ability to improve their circumstances? Can you add more adjectives to the list now?
- Why do you think that the author used these three characters in his novel? What function does each character have? How does each character challenge readers' assumptions about people?
- In groups, set up a number of debates, with a positive and negative team for each, which address the topics:
 - Homelessness is a person's choice.
 - Education is a tool for improvement in life.
 - Alcoholism is a problem that hides other problems.
- From reading the novel, what do you think 'the simple gift' is? Use evidence from the novel to explain your response.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Steven says:

In writing *The Simple Gift*, I wanted to explore the relationship between a young man and an old man. As adults, we seem to believe that the idea of 'being an influence' works only one way – we adults can influence young people for the better. In the book, I wanted to show it working the other way – that is, a young Billy really being the positive influence, in fact the catalyst, for Old Bill rejoining the world.

I know my two sons are a wonderful positive influence on my own life. It seems to me that the world of young people is becoming increasingly marginalised by mainstream media. As adults, we need to accept, encourage, and indeed, embrace the world of young people. Let's see the relationship as a priceless two-way street.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven Herrick was born in Brisbane, the youngest of seven children. At school his favourite subject was soccer, and he dreamed of football glory while he worked at various jobs. For the past thirty years he's been a full-time writer and regularly performs his work in schools throughout the world. Steven lives in the Blue Mountains with his partner Cathie, a belly dance teacher. They have two adult sons, Jack and Joe.

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