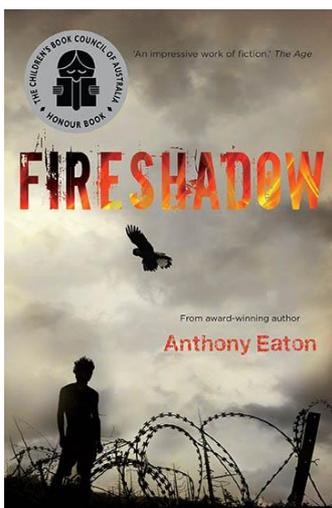


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FIRESHADOW

Anthony Eaton



Teachers' Notes

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

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SYNOPSIS

Believing that his parents hold him responsible for the death of his sister in a car accident, Vinnie runs away to camp in the bush at the site of the World War Two Prison Camp at Marrinup, in Western Australia.

Scarred and disfigured by the burns he received in the accident, Vinnie hides away from people, convinced that he will never again be accepted, but judged by his appearance. Hoping to be alone, Vinnie is disconcerted to share the camp site with Helen and her elderly grandfather, Erich, a former German prisoner-of-war who, in his dying years, has returned to the site of his incarceration.

Vinnie is surprised by Helen and Erich's ready acceptance of him and is soon drawn into Erich's story that holds surprising parallels to his own. Like Vinnie, Erich also ran away from his family, joining the German Army fighting in Libya in the hope of gaining the respect of his father, an officer in the Wehrmacht. But, far from becoming a war hero, Erich is captured and imprisoned in Marrinup for the duration of the war.

Here Erich is assigned to work with Dr Alexander, a man who recognises his talent and looks beyond Erich's nationality, in contrast to many of the soldiers who resent him because of his father's nationalistic principles. Before long, Erich falls in love with the doctor's granddaughter, Alice, resulting in conflict with Thomas, a young prison guard. Determined to undermine and destroy Erich, Thomas is delighted to accuse him of stealing the doctor's scalpels, after which Erich is assigned to hard physical duties away from the hospital – and from Alice.

Unlike many of the other prisoners who complacently wait out the war years, Erich holds fast to his nationalistic principles and pride. But his world is shattered when he discovers that Hitler has killed his father and that their beliefs have been false.

Fireshadow is a powerful story about war, loss, family and facing your fears.

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THEMES

Family

- Vinnie's close relationship with his sister, Katia.
- Vinnie feels abandoned by his family and a failure in their eyes because of Katia's death.
- Vinnie believes Katia has fulfilled her parents' dreams and ambitions by being accepted into medicine, while he is a disappointment, pursuing an apprenticeship at a nursery.
- Alice is raised by her grandfather, foreshadowing Mathilde being raised by her grandparents.
- Erich's desperate attempts to make his father proud of him.
- Erich's devastation in understanding the truth about his father.
- Erich remains devoted to his sister (even at the expense of Alice and their daughter).

Loss and Grief

- Vinnie loses his sister Katia in a car accident.
- Erich loses his parents to the Nazis.
- Günter loses his leg.
- Erich loses Alice – both when he steals the scalpel and again when she dies in childbirth.

Prison

- The physical prison of Marrinup.
- The prison created by the inescapable forest.
- The mental imprisonment suffered by both Erich and Vinnie.

Fire

- Fire is shown to be both a destructive force and a cleansing agent.

Personal growth and change

- Katia's death destroys the old Vinnie and creates a new one.
- Vinnie wants to let go of his past and start anew.
- Erich clings to his past while at Marrinup.
- Both Vinnie and Erich are changed by their time at Marrinup.

War

- The attitude of the Australians to the Nazis.
- The locations of the warfare.
- The different approaches by the German and Australian soldiers.
- The enemy may not be much different from you.
- War (or conflict) occurs in many forms – between countries; between individuals; between cultures; within an individual.

Cultural attitudes

- Thomas's hatred of Erich because of his father's role.
- The Australian soldiers' attitudes towards the Germans.

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- Günter and Francesca's experiences in Australia.
- Alice's fears of admitting the father of her child was a German.
- The scandal of Alice being an unmarried mother.

Courage

- Vinnie feels like a coward for not rescuing Katia.
- Erich's courage at surviving his internment.
- Thomas's lack of courage.
- Erich's courage to pursue a career in medicine.
- Erich's courage in apologising to Alice.
- Alice's courage to face her pregnancy.
- Erich's courage in returning to Australia.
- Günter and Francesca's courage in moving to Australia.
- Vinnie's courage to return to his life.

WRITING STYLE

Fireshadow is divided into four parts. Part one tells both Vinnie and the elderly Erich's stories. Part two focuses on young Erich's time at Marrinup and his relationship with Alice. Part three follows Alice as she returns to her parents and prepares for the birth of their baby. The final part again merges Vinnie and Erich's stories and brings resolution for both characters.

The narrative cleverly weaves the stories of the two young men drawing unexpected parallels between their lives. It is at once a beautifully literary and yet readily accessible text that has significant impact on its readers.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

I was inspired to write *Fireshadow* after a camping trip to the Dwellingup forests, southwest of Perth in Western Australia, where we stumbled across the remains of an abandoned World War Two prisoner-of-war (POW) camp. I was amazed to learn that, during the Second World War, huge numbers of German and Italian soldiers had been kept as POW's here in Australia. Right away, I knew that I wanted to explore this unusual little piece of Australian history in a novel. My great-grandfather was held as a POW by the Germans during World War One, and I'd always been interested in the impact that the devastating experience of being a POW would have on the rest of a person's life. At the time I was also working as a high school teacher, and the thought of these young soldiers, many of them not much older than the guys I was teaching, being captured and sent to such a strange and foreign place as the West Australian Jarrah forests was a really evocative one.

The more I researched, the more amazing stories I came to learn about these prisoners and the lives they led, and all of it slowly came together over a three-year period to become *Fireshadow*.

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STUDY NOTES

- Consider the opening words of the novel: *Old spirits walked here. Ghosts as old as time* (p1). What mood or atmosphere is established in these words? How might a bush feel full of old spirits?
- Imagine that you had to create a soundtrack for these opening pages. What sounds would you have and why?
- Consider the phrase *this was no sterile silence – here was not so much absence of sound as lack of noise* (p3). What does this mean? What is the difference between an absence of sound and a lack of noise?
- How does the description of the bush compare or contrast with the image of a hospital? Vinnie remarks on the quietness of both, but in what ways are they different? What might be their similarities?
- Consider Mathilde's relief at being in Erich's house after all her time in the hospital (p284). How does this reflect Vinnie's feelings at the start of the novel? Why did the author make this connection?
- Keep a journal as you read. Make notes about your reaction to Vinnie and Erich's characters as they tell their stories. In particular, make note of any similarities between the two.
- Consider how the narrative changes when it becomes Erich's story. Make a list of the contrasts in mood, atmosphere and language between Vinnie's story and Erich's time at the camp.
- How do the military terms (latrines, reveille etc), help to establish a war setting? Make a list of any other military terms as you read Erich's story.
- Consider how the Australian soldiers at Marrinup treated the German prisoners. What relationship does Erich form with Stutt? How is this different from the treatment meted out at European Prisoner of war camps? What does this reveal about the Australian soldiers? In what ways would it have been an insult for Erich to be imprisoned there?
- The author chooses not to reveal too many facts, but to gradually provide clues about Vinnie's situation, slowly allowing the reader to piece it all together. Did you find this an effective writing style?
- What do you think happened to Vinnie's sister Katia? Given that Vinnie and his parents hold him responsible how do you think the accident occurred? How does the reality of Katia's death position you to feel about Vinnie's situation and his relationship with his parents?
- What is the impact of the author stating Vinnie's father's accusation so directly? How does this position the reader to feel about Vinnie?
- Vinnie describes his scarring as his personal mark of Cain (p6). What does this phrase mean? What does this reveal about Vinnie's reaction to Katia's accident? *This was a creature whose very image was a reminder*

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of all the old Vinnie had despised – fear, cowardice, shame (p26). How has Katia's death made Vinnie a different person?

- Provide two images of Vinnie, one before the accident and another after the accident. Around these visual images write words that describe his character or personality before and after.
- Vinnie left a note for his parents before he left home. What do you think the note says? Write the note Vinnie leaves his parents.
- The question of courage is touched upon throughout this story. Is Vinnie a coward for getting out of the car wreckage and abandoning his sister (p17)? Would he have gained anything by staying there?
- Consider the different ways in which Vinnie and Erich react to their situations. Vinnie wants to run from his past, while Erich wants to cling to all that is known and familiar. How does tragedy affect people in different ways? Consider a time when you suffered a loss. How did you react? Write a personal reflection on this situation.
- Thomas was injured during training and never served overseas. What might the fact that he was shot in the foot reveal about him? *There's no bully worse than a coward. No man more dangerous than one with damaged pride* (p80). In what way can Thomas be seen to be a typical bully? Why does he hate Erich so much?
- Why does Günter wish to die after having his leg amputated (p58)? Were his fears realised? How does his story help both Erich and Vinnie?
- Mathilde tells Erich *I won't have you rescue me at the expense of your own life. I couldn't live with that* (p277). What is the significance of this for Vinnie?
- Why does the author include the scene in which Vinnie almost drowns? What does Katia do in this situation (p273)?
- Do you agree with Dr Alexander that *Perhaps you need to go through a tragedy in order to really understand one* (p90). What tragedy did the doctor face? How might this have made him understand Erich? How might Dr Alexander and Erich's personal tragedies have made them better doctors?
- What role does Dr Alexander play in Erich's life? How does Erich later fulfil the same role for Vinnie?
- How might the experiences of their fathers have motivated many boys to enlist in World War Two? Is this surprising? Would you expect the sons of soldiers to want to fight or to be too aware of the dangers of war?
- How can both Erich and Vinnie be seen to be shaped by their fathers? What does this tell us about adolescent boys' search for self-identity? Are girls shaped by their fathers in the same way? (Consider the different relationships Mathilde and Katia enjoyed with their fathers from those experienced by their brothers). Do girls suffer the same issues with their mothers?

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- In what way does Erich *carry his family with him everywhere* (p108)? Do you agree that family is a significant influence on people's lives? Consider your own family. What aspects of your family have shaped you to become the person you are today (consider your attitudes, behaviours, experiences, birth order etc)?
- Erich has a nightmare in which his father is the enemy soldier (p118). What is the significance of this dream?
- Alice tells Erich *That's why you need to think of your family. That's why you need to keep yourself human. Because otherwise, if you don't, then you really are a soldier, nothing more, and I think that would be terrible. You might as well be a slave* (p103). Do you agree that soldiers need to dehumanise themselves in order to survive? Why might this be the case? How does Erich's character change once he allows himself to talk about his family?
- How does the power of family provide a positive motivation for different characters in the story?
- Erich believes he cannot have a relationship with Alice as *she is the enemy*. Günter tells him to *see past war. See real people* (p69). What does he mean by this? In what ways can this advice be applied throughout the novel?
- Erich has a dream in which his father tells him *You must always look hard to find your true enemies, because chances are they will be just like you* (p174). What does he mean by this? What does this suggest about war? How does this statement relate to the other types of war or conflict identified (social, racial and internal)?
- What relationship does Alice have with her parents? Why is her father so unwell? What is post-traumatic stress disorder? How can her father be seen to demonstrate the effects of this condition? Why would soldiers suffer from this condition?
- Consider the references to birds throughout the novel. What images do we have of birds? Birds are often used as a symbol of freedom. How can this be seen in the novel?
- What is the significance of the discovery and loss of the baby bird? Why does its death have such a significant impact on the men?
- Dr Alexander says of fire *... the destruction is often appalling. But the fire also brings life. Clears away the dead wood, makes room for new trees and plants. It's a paradox, Erich. A terrible but purifying force* (p165). How can fire be seen to be both a negative, destructive force and a cleanser throughout the novel?
- How is water used symbolically in Alice's story? Her baby is conceived during a storm; she gets soaked to the skin. *Alice steps into the deluge. Unlike last time it is warm, blood-like. She is instantly soaked, her nightdress clinging to her and the water cascading around the bulge of*

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her belly... (p270). Mathilde is born during a storm. Günter and Francesca spend time at the beach. How can the motifs of fire and water be seen to hold similarities?

- Why would Günter and Francesca move to Australia after the war? Research conditions in post war Europe and explain why Australia would have been appealing to European migrants.
- Consider how Günter and Francesca are treated in Australia. In what way can this be seen to be ironic, given the Australian soldiers' acceptance of the German prisoners? What is surprising about the friendship that forms between Günter and Alice's father? What might this suggest about racial prejudices? How does their relationship depict the changing post-war cultural attitudes in Australia?
- How is Alice treated by others in society when they discover she is pregnant? Why would they have reacted like this? What does this reveal about attitudes to unmarried mothers? In what way is pregnant Alice seen to share the same social status as the migrants? Anna is a war widow. What would her status in society have been?
- Make a list of the parallels you can find between the characters and events in Erich and Vinnie's stories. What is surprising about the number of similarities? What statement might the author be making about human nature?
- What do you think will happen when Vinnie returns to his parents? Write the epilogue to this story.
- Why does Erich force Vinnie to decide whether or not Katia's death was his fault (p291)? How does Erich's conversation with his sister mirror this situation (p292)?
- What is the symbolism of the scalpel left to Erich by Dr Alexander? How does the doctor's letter help both Erich and Vinnie to heal?
- Consider how the different characters are created through their dialogue. Think of the differences between Günter's heavy accent, Erich's clipped and proper speech, Alice's easy dialogue, and Stutt's laid-back manner. Create your own character and write a short piece of dialogue that tells your reader about this character. Have other students make a list of all the facts they can guess about your character based on this piece of dialogue.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anthony Eaton has been writing professionally for children, young adults, and adults since the late 1990s. To date he has published eleven award-winning novels, completed his PhD in creative writing, and somehow managed to avoid having a nervous breakdown. He lives in Canberra with his wife, son, a slightly deranged kelpie cross named Chelsea, and five chickens.

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