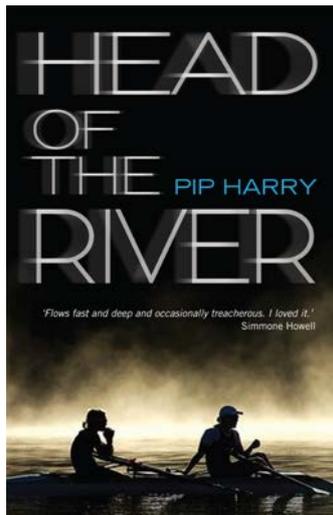


UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

HEAD OF THE RIVER

Pip Harry



Teachers' Notes

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

ISBN: 978 0 7022 5326 3 / AUS \$19.95

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Synopsis | 2 |
| Themes | 2 |
| Relationships | 2 |
| Rowing | 2 |
| Self-esteem and self-image | 2 |
| Drugs in sport | 2 |
| Leadership | 2 |
| Writing Style | 3 |
| Study Notes | 3 |
| Author Motivation | 6 |
| About the Author | 6 |

These notes may be reproduced free of charge for use and study within schools
but they may not be reproduced (either in whole or in part) and offered for commercial sale.

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

SYNOPSIS

Twins Cristian and Leni have rowing scholarships at Harley Grammar, placing them in a world full of prestige, money and high expectations. Their parents are 'rowing royalty', both having competed at the Olympics in the sport that consumes the entire Popescu family.

But will the pressure of competing at an elite level become too much? And how do Cristian and Leni balance study, relationships and an intense training regime in preparation for the Head of the River?

Head of the River is a raw and honest exploration into the world of school sport at an elite level; the pressures associated with familial, school and social expectations; and the lengths that some will go to in order to gain acceptance.

THEMES

Relationships:

- Cristian and Leni have a strong bond and support each other through good times and bad.
- Leni is goal-focussed and a perfectionist, which can sometimes impede her ability to become close with others around her.
- Both Leni and Cristian struggle as they try to navigate the complications of boyfriend/girlfriend relationships.
- Although they are close with their parents, there is significant pressure on both Cristian and Leni to succeed at rowing.

Rowing:

- The sport of rowing underpins the text: the close-knit rowing community, teamwork, discipline, training and competition drive the story.

Self-esteem and self-image:

- When Cristian gains weight and loses fitness, he is dropped from the firsts. His eating habits and self-esteem suffer as a result.

Drugs in sport:

- Desperate to regain their spots in the first eight, Cristian and Adam resort to performance enhancing drugs. The adverse consequences of this decision is a major theme of the text.
- School sport does not currently engage in drug testing. The question of whether this should occur is raised in *Head of the River*.

Leadership:

- Leni becomes Captain of Boats but is still learning about true leadership.

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

WRITING STYLE

Head of the River is told through the dual narratives of Cristian and Leni. Using first person, present tense, their voices are truthful and authentic. The narrative has grit, and is engaging and unquestionably realistic. Young adult readers will immediately identify with the emotions, doubts, fears and achievements faced by both Cristian and Leni. Their love and mutual support for one another during times of triumph and adversity is simply beautiful.

STUDY NOTES

- The opening line of *Head of the River* is very simple, yet extremely powerful: ‘Assembly is like a funeral.’ (p1) The paragraphs that follow offer a frank and honest recount of the assembly with flashbacks to the Head of the River incident that has traumatised the school community. Discuss the author’s style and ability to cut straight to the core of this scene. What techniques have been used to draw the reader into the text so quickly?
- *Head of the River* is a circular narrative; it starts almost at the end before backtracking to the months leading up to the Head of the River. Why is this an effective way in which to structure a story? Discuss that readers may ‘almost forget’ the beginning as they are drawn further into the text. Re-read the first chapter after reaching the conclusion of the novel. How does this help to tie the threads of *Head of the River* together?
- Reflect on the effectiveness of Cristian’s description of a lifeless body having CPR performed on it by paramedics on p3 and Leni’s on p6. Compare their depictions of this same scene.
- Take note of the figurative language used by the author, discussing its effectiveness in the text. Examples include:
 - But this year the rowing team is blown like dandelion fluff all over the room (p2)
 - I’m wrestling in a tangle of anxiety (p5)
 - I thought I’d be swimming in relief (p5)
 - Secretly, I’ve been collecting facts about Sam, like a bowerbird filling its nest with shiny things (p13)
 - I was little-girl-on-a-pony excited (p20)
 - Especially if you’ve been plucked from the wall like a creeping vine (p21)
 - It stings the raw skin like the kiss of a dozen bull ants (p23)
 - His hands are tough and leathery with blister over blister over blister. Like bark rings on a tree (p24)
 - The skin on my hands was tearing apart like tissue paper (p26)
 - Panting for the liquid like a dog (p27)

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

- Watching the lights from the city bounce off the surface in streaks of gold, pink and blue (p30)
 - They make me feel like a wrestler on a tightrope (p37)
 - The pit of my stomach swirls with unease (p56)
 - I feel murderously cranky (p59)
 - My lungs are stretched so thin they feel like burning paper (p178)
- Why is Leni going out with Adam? What complications has this added to her life?
 - What does Leni mean when she says, 'I love this tired feeling' after a hard training session (p17)? What chemicals are released during exercise to help get this feeling of satisfaction?
 - Imagine you are either Cristian or Leni. Write a letter to your parents telling them how you're feeling about the pressures of rowing and why. What would you write in a letter that you may not want to say in person?
 - What does Leni mean when she says of her relationship with Adam that, 'it was like he was a piece of Duplo and I was a piece of Lego' (p21).
 - Cristian comments that his mum, 'has a way of looking into my soul and seeing the black spots in it' (p22). Reflect on this idea. Is there someone in your life who can do this? Discuss.
 - Discuss the nature of true friendship as seen through the bond between Leni and Audrey.
 - Discuss the importance of having the right coach. Use examples from the text to support your ideas.
 - Make your own inspiration board with photos, pictures, quotes, words and phrases that inspire you to reach your goals.
 - Create a graphic organiser that shares your ideas on the role that parents play in *Head of the River*.
 - Create character profiles of Cristian and Leni. How are they similar and different? What are your favourite attributes of the twins? What do you dislike about them? What traits do you have in common with them?
 - Why does Cristian see 'food as a friend I turn to when I'm down' (57)?
 - Re-read Lance Armstrong's quote on p73. Discuss the irony of this quote given Lance Armstrong's conviction of drug use. Hold a class discussion about the issue of drugs in sport.
 - Laura offers some great advice to Leni, especially about the learning that comes from failure. She also reminds Leni that, 'rowing is what you do, not who you are' (p86). What is Laura getting at when talking to Leni in this way? How can you apply this advice to your own life?
 - Compare Rudyard Kipling's poem *If* with Pip Harry's *Head of the River*.
 - Why does Vas really want his children to row? What is it he loves so much about the sport? Has sport played a special role in your life?

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

- Have you ever felt pressured by your parents to do certain things? Share with a friend.
- Why does Leni think she's like a matryoshka doll? (p119)
- It's not just sportspeople who feel like Leni and Cristian at times. Choose a famous person who has also felt the pressure of failure and the success of perseverance. In small groups, share these stories. How can they be an inspiration to you? Use Thomas Edison's quote on p157 to help trigger this discussion.
- Why does Leni feel 'small' when she wears her rowing captain rugby top? (p165)
- Why does Leni blame her dad for her ergo time at the rowing camp? Why does he tell her not to become a rower who always looks for excuses?
- Rachel describes Penny as a 'glass half full' person. What does she mean by this? Are you a 'glass half full' or a 'glass half empty' sort of person? Discuss the implications of this way of thinking.
- What is it that Cristian most misses about rowing with the firsts? When is it that Leni realises what she's been missing out on when rowing?
- With a partner, list what you perceive as attributes of a good leader. Discuss with another group. What common understandings about leadership do you share?
- What does Jodie mean when she says, 'sometimes you have to figure out what you don't want, before you can figure out what you do' (p263)?
- How does Rachel help Leni to develop as a friend and leader?
- What role does Sam play in *Head of the River*? Why has Pip Harry deliberately written him out of the story at the end?
- Write a response to Adam's death in *Head of the River*. Did this shock or surprise you? Were you saddened by this?
- In light of Cristian's body image issues, research and discuss the importance of healthy eating and self-esteem. Invite a counsellor or doctor to speak with students about strategies to use when facing such issues.
- Research the side-effects of steroids and other performance enhancing drugs. Create an information brochure about this subject.
- Choose one of the following ways in which to portray the major themes and events of *Head of the River*:
 - A music composition
 - A sound track suitable for a movie version of the text
 - A poster to advertise the novel
 - A book trailer
 - An art composition
 - A newspaper article
 - A poem

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

- Hold a class debate on the following topic: That all school sports should include mandatory drug testing.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION FROM PIP HARRY

My father was a national and world champion oarsman, so I grew up around rowing boats and rowers. Melbourne's Yarra River was my second home. When I was 16 and filling in for a sick rower at the last minute, I fell hopelessly in love with the sport, turning my back on an earlier talent for swimming. At school I rowed in several first eights, was Captain of Boats, and ended up contesting 6 Head of the River regattas, both as a coach of schoolgirl crews and a rower. I was challenged and inspired by rowing in a way that's shaped me as an adult. But the Head of the River was a tough event and I never took out the title!

I wanted to write a novel for young adults about competition, legacy, desire, and winning or losing, so rowing was a natural choice for me. I know first-hand how consuming and exhausting the many months of training and competing can be, and how huge the build-up and expectation is for Head of the River results, both from parents and schools and from the young athletes themselves. I was also writing at a time when performance enhancing drug use had escalated – cyclist Lance Armstrong had admitted his guilt, and the AFL and rugby codes were under investigation. I set out to explore how this tarnishing of our beloved sporting heroes might affect teenagers involved in high level school sport and the ease and lure of PEDs for teenage athletes. As yet there isn't formal drug testing in school sport in Australia, I wanted to raise the question – should there be?

I hope this book immerses readers in the world of school rowing in a way that's not been done before in YA fiction. I want them to feel blisters on their palms, burning lungs and legs, the splash of river water on their faces and the intense thrill of competition.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pip Harry is a freelance journalist who has worked on magazines for many years, including chasing celebrities as Entertainment Editor for *NW* and Deputy Editor for *TV Week* before turning herself into a yoga-loving frequent flyer as Health and Travel Editor for *Woman's Day*. She's the co-founder of relationships website realitychick.com.au, and has had short stories published in *UTS Writer's Anthology* and *Wet Ink*. Pip lives in Sydney with her partner and their daughter.

This is her second novel. Her first, *I'll Tell You Mine*, was published in 2011.

www.pipharry.com