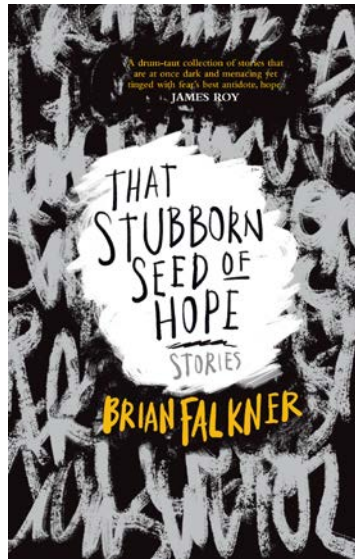


UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

# THAT STUBBORN SEED OF HOPE

Brian Falkner



## Teachers' Notes

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

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**SYNOPSIS**

*That Stubborn Seed of Hope* is a collection of short stories that explores the way in which fear – fear of rejection, fear of dying and fear of helplessness, for example – is countered by a stronger and more powerful entity: hope.

Although imbued with heartbreak and tragedy, these tales reveal the power of endurance, perseverance and hope in overriding hopelessness.

**THEMES**

- Hope
- Fear
- Belonging
- Resilience/Perseverance
- Acceptance/Inclusion

**WRITING STYLE**

*That Stubborn Seed of Hope* is a well-crafted collection of short stories, rich in voice, structure, plot and characterisation. They allow for constructive analysis and reflection, and would serve as suitable models for students engaging in the creative writing process. The stories are suitable for secondary students of all ages, particularly Years 9–10, although there are a few titles that are suitable for Upper Primary. They contain occasional mild coarse language, as well as ethical and moral issues.

**STUDY NOTES*****I am Seventeen***

- After reading *I am Seventeen*, discuss the circular structure of the story; it ends at the same point at which it begins. How does this structure replicate the repetitive nature of Robert's condition?
- At what point did you realise what has happened to Robert? Discuss whether you, like his daughter, Helen, wanted to believe that Robert truly had been trapped in an old man's body?
- Robert expresses his frustrations and experiences through writing. Why is it important that he can express himself in this way? How do you think the doctors and Robert's family would react after reading his writing? Discuss.

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- How is suspense built into *I am Seventeen*? Why is this an important tool to use in the short story genre?
- Reflect on the space that the author has given readers to speculate during the story. Why is it crucial that readers have the opportunity to make their own connections?
- How does the first person point of view engage readers more effectively?
- Imagine that you have awoken in another person's body. How would you convince others of your situation?
- How has the author used repetition to represent the endless cycle of dementia? Why is this such a powerful technique?
- Why does Helen inquire about the accident? How does this relate to her sense of hope?
- In the role of Vera, write about your experiences as Robert deteriorates.

***The Kiss***

- How does the author contrast a society paralysed with fear with the reality of human emotion and desire?
- What would be the consequences of a society in which human touch was banned? Why is contact between people so important?
- What details are included in the story that allude to the changes residents have had to adopt in order to survive the Marburg virus?
- Write a reflection to share how you would cope in a society such as the one depicted in *The Kiss*. What would be the most difficult thing to adapt to? What would it be like to live in a world in which you were terrified of human interaction?
- Create a visual organiser to compare life before and after the virus takes hold.
- What comment is the author making about the impact of social media and television on society when he says, 'Since Marburg the television had become her mother's only friend. That was an epidemic every bit as real as Marburg' (p29)? Why is Samanthah's mum so obsessed with *The Bold and the Beautiful*?
- Why does Samanthah's father build a wall around their house at the outbreak of the epidemic? What does this wall represent?
- Discuss the notion that our society is already one that is paranoid about germs being passed from one person to another. What events or

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experiences of pandemics from history have given rise to such tight controls?

- If you were Samantha and Darren, would you have kissed? Why did they feel 'clissing' was not enough?
- Why has the author included the different perspectives of anti-maskers like Claire Newbourne, virologist Dr James Mahoney and moderator, Melissa Woolley? Discuss whether the themes and opinions expressed in stories are necessarily those of the author.
- Hold your own class debate about the society depicted in *The Kiss*. Has it become a nanny state? Are only developing countries with poor sanitation at risk, and if so, what do developed countries do to support these nations? Does 'scaremongering' exist, as Newbourne proposes? Do you agree that the solution is 'out of proportion to the actual problem' (p40)? Discuss Newbourne's claim that this is a conspiracy created by the government in order for it to control the people.
- In what ways is *The Kiss* similar to and different from George Orwell's *1984*?
- Why, when Samantha finds out about Darren's test results, is she more worried about who else she has infected, rather than her own safety? What does this reveal about her character?
- Discuss which ending you prefer, giving reasons to support your response.

***Sins and Griefs***

- What can we tell about Tom and Rich and their attitudes towards the Christian Youth Camp from the opening paragraphs of *Sins and Griefs*?
- Rich feels invisible and alienated. Why is this amplified in the setting of a Christian Youth Camp?
- Why does Rich say that he and Tom are 'Broken pieces of the jigsaw, making an awkward little puzzle of our own' (p68)?
- Discuss the symbolism of Rich burying Tom's cigarette butt deep. What else is Rich burying deep?
- Why does Rich describe Madison Woodes as the worst kind of beautiful people – 'The kind you can't dislike' (p71)?
- When the search party starts looking for Rich, why does he find it difficult to end the search by calling out to his rescuers?

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- Why is Rich filled with 'despair and self-hatred' (p83)? What could he do to challenge these thoughts?
- When feeling desperate, Rich begins to pray, despite his cynicism about the camp and the people there. Why does he pray?
- Why does Rich want to be rescued? What is he really hoping will happen?
- In what ways is telling himself he's a 'talker, not a doer' damaging to Rich? How could this unhelpful thought be challenged?
- Why do Rich and Tom attend the Christian Youth Camp if they feel so alienated there?
- What role does Tom play in the story? Why does he give Rich a cynical smile as he drives away by with Madison by his side?
- What advice would you give Rich to help him feel less isolated and more included?
- Write a reflection that shares a time when you felt like an outsider, including whether this made you act in ways you might not have acted otherwise.
- Rich doesn't think that being one of the 'beautiful people' will last. Discuss whether or not you agree with Rich, giving reasons to support your ideas.

***Strawberry Lou***

- Discuss the way in which the opening sentence in *Strawberry Lou* instantly engages the reader.
- Why does Ricky feel a little embarrassed by the lives he and his family lead? How is their life different from everyone else's?
- Ricky says that his family were 'never rich, but we never went without a meal' (p56). In what ways do you think his family are richer than the average family as a result of their circumstances?
- Reread Ricky's description of Lou on p57 and discuss the language features used by the author. Write a description of someone in your family, sharing their qualities and things that you love most about them.
- Lou's friends looked past her birthmark and 'just saw Lou' (p57). What can you learn about friendship from *Strawberry Lou*?
- Describe the relationship between Ricky and Lou, giving examples from the text to support your response.

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- The narrator makes a point of being precise with language; he describes Lou as serene, not placid, although when she is lying in her coffin he describes her as placid. Discuss the importance of using precise language. Create a word wall and add new vocabulary to the wall to help master this skill.
- Why does Ricky say 'I wished they made helmets we could wear on our hearts' (p63)?
- Write the letter from Lou to Ricky. Why do you think the reader doesn't get to see this letter?
- Discuss the significance of the students in Lou's class coming to school the next day with their faces painted. What does this reveal about the power of Ricky's actions?
- Discuss the circular structure of *Strawberry Lou*. How does this differ from a traditional linear structure? Why is this a powerful way to tell this story?
- What elements of this story are relatable to real life? Why is it important that readers connect with stories and characters to help them navigate their way through real life?
- In what ways is this story about acceptance and friendship, rather than about death?

**Shooting Stars**

- Reread the paragraph about memories on p93. Why do memories play such a significant role in *Shooting Stars*? What role do memories play in your life?
- The narrator is remembering her brother when they were children. Why, even though the narrator is now an adult, does this story still succeed in connecting with younger readers?
- Matty is writing a novel, but he doesn't want anyone to read it as 'he didn't want to let out the steam while the kettle was still boiling' (p99). What does he mean by this?
- Describe the relationship between Janey and her little brother, Matty. How do we know how she feels about Matty and his uniqueness? Use evidence from the text to support your thinking.
- Discuss the way in which the author has used figurative language to describe the cancer that attacks Matty's brain, for example: 'Cancer is an

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aggressive weed with deep roots ... just when you think it is gone forever the first serpentine shoot slithers out of the soil' (p103).

- Why is the impact of the cancer on Matty's giftedness such a powerful thread in this story?
- Matty's novel is what is left of him after the cancer affects his brain. Why can't he finish his book? Why does Janey feel that she 'couldn't lift a pencil to it' (p103)?
- If you were Matty, would you prefer to live but with less capacity to do what you've always been able to do, or to die? Which ending do you prefer? Discuss with a friend.
- Write a story that revolves around one of your childhood memories.

**Smile**

- Why does the author go into detail about the type of care that Grant needs in the hospital? How does this help readers to empathise with his situation?
- Discuss whether or not Grant's accident was really the fault of his brother. How does this influence Benny's actions?
- How damaging to both boys is their father's comment that Grant got the looks while Benny got the brains?
- Discuss whether clinging to life in whatever form it exists is worth it. What role does hope play in keeping Grant alive?
- How does Benny show the importance of risk-taking, perseverance and hope? What evidence is there from the past of the importance of perseverance when dealing with trauma?
- Why does Grant want Benny to kill him? If you were Benny, what would you do? Discuss the ethical issues facing both characters in this story.
- Write this story from Grant's point of view.
- View the 'Game Changers' episode of SBS's *Insight* program, highlighting Dr Jordan Nguyen work in assisting people with disabilities through the use of neuroscience, robotics and artificial intelligence. How does this story help you relate to the issues in *Smile*?

[www.sbs.com.au/news/insight/article/2017/02/27/new-technology-allows-woman-cerebral-palsy-play-music-her-eyes?cx\\_navSource=related-side-cx#cxrecs\\_s](http://www.sbs.com.au/news/insight/article/2017/02/27/new-technology-allows-woman-cerebral-palsy-play-music-her-eyes?cx_navSource=related-side-cx#cxrecs_s)

**Lockdown**

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- Why is the general theme of this story such a common thread in stories about isolation and exclusion? What is the purpose of such stories?
- Why is a student like Daniel susceptible to such extreme reactions? What could be done to help students like Daniel feel less alienated and more connected?
- In what ways is this story about inclusion and acceptance, rather than about bullying and violence? What can you learn about yourself and others from *Lockdown*?
- Why does it take Gary so long to realise that he is a bully? What do you think might happen to his thinking once he realises this?
- Why has the author chosen to tell this story from the perspective of the bully, rather than the target? Why does it take a lockdown for Gary to realise this about himself?
- Why does it help Gary to hug Lucy?
- Gary is very particular about the use of correct punctuation and grammar. Discuss his examples of commas and Neil Armstrong's speech on p141. What does this attention to detail reveal about Gary's character?
- *Lockdown* is open-ended. Write the next 200–300 words of this story.
- Why do you think the author has included a story about a school shooting in a collection aimed at schools?
- Discuss your school's lockdown procedures. Where is your safe place?

***The Local***

- Discuss Jake's voice in *The Local*. How has the author created a 'western' feel to this story through the use of language, setting and storytelling techniques?
- *The Local* is what's known as a 'Shaggy Dog' story – a story with a high level of build-up, only to be resolved in an anti-climactic way. Share other 'Shaggy Dog' stories that you know, or try writing one of your own.
- Discuss how you felt when the information you were expecting as the story built to its climax was not revealed. Do you like this technique or not? Why?
- Write a newspaper article about the incident at the bridge for the local paper – the *Mercury*.



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***Santa's Little Helper***

- In *Santa's Little Helper*, Steve is cynical about Christmas, especially the greed he associates with it. How does Viola change Steve's outlook and therefore offer him hope?
- Why does Steve think it's a lie that Christmas is a time of peace and joy? Why does he hate Christmas so much?
- What is the author's purpose in including a story like *Santa's Little Helper* in this collection?

***Stop Reading, You Die***

- How does the author use suspense to entice the audience to keep reading?
- How does the setting of the Fremantle Prison help add a sense of fear and foreboding to this story?
- What role do books and stories play in the life of the narrator?
- How has the narrator used the reader to solve her problem?

**General Notes**

- After reading *That Stubborn Seed of Hope*, discuss the author's introductory notes in light of the quote at the start of the text from children's author, Katherine Paterson: *I cannot, will not, withhold from my young readers the harsh realities ... but neither will I neglect to plant that stubborn seed of hope ...*  
How has Brain Falkner reflected Paterson's sentiments through his stories?
- Unpack the generic features of short stories. How are short stories different from regular narratives? What are common features of the stories in *That Stubborn Seed of Hope*? Discuss the way in which the plot, especially the complication, as well as the time-frame, setting and characters, are minimised in order to allow the story to be told successfully within the reduced word limit.
- Which is your favourite story? Why is this your favourite? Discuss.
- How important are stories and writing to the characters in *That Stubborn Seed of Hope*? Why is the ability to express oneself so powerful?

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- Which stories in the collection use suspense to drive the narrative? How do they achieve this?
- Discuss the importance of planning – particularly the twists/endings – when writing short stories.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Brian Falkner loves telling stories, either in his books, or standing in front of an audience. He is the award-winning, bestselling author of seventeen books for children and young adults, including *Northwood* and *The Real Thing*. His 2015 novel *Battlesaurus: Rampage at Waterloo* won the New Zealand Children's Book Award for Young Adults and was shortlisted in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards.

His action-adventure sci-fi novels *The Tomorrow Code* and *Brainjack* were both shortlisted for the New Zealand Post Book Awards, with *Brainjack* winning the Children's Choice Award (Young Adult). *Brainjack* also won the 2010 Sir Julius Vogel Award, Best Young Adult Novel. His books have been published in over twelve countries in seven different languages. *That Stubborn Seed of Hope* is his first short story collection.

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